

West Asia Watch

Trends & Analysis



**West Asia
Centre**



INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE
STUDIES & ANALYSES

रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

Editor:
Dr Meena Singh Roy

Editorial Coordinator
Dr Prasanta Kumar Pradhan

Editorial Team:
Dr Prasanta Kumar Pradhan
Dr Adil Rasheed
Dr Md Muddassir Quamar

Copy Editor:
Vivek Kaushik

West Asia Centre

**Institute for Defence Studies and
Analyses**

**No. 1, Development Enclave,
Rao Tula Ram Marg, Delhi Cantt,
New Delhi – 110 010**

Tel. (91-11)2671 7983,

Fax: (91-11)2615 4191

Website: <http://www.idsa.in>

- **Editorial**
- **Key Developments in the West Asian Region**
Editorial Team
- **Conflict Zones: Syria, Yemen and Libya**
Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, Nagapushpa Devendra and Paulami Sanyal
- **Israel-Arab Relations: More Intractable than Ever**
Adil Rasheed and Jatin Kumar
- **External Powers and WANA: The US, Russia and China**
Meena Singh Roy and Md. Muddassir Quamar
- **India and the West Asian Region: Expanding Cooperation and Managing Challenges**
Meena Singh Roy and Lakshmi Priya
- **The West Asian Region: In Search of Peace and Stability**
Editorial Team

EDITORIAL

West Asia in 2019: Trends and Analysis

The geopolitical situation in the West Asian region continued to remain in a flux during 2019 as well. A critical analysis of the key developments that unfolded during the year indicates that the devastating civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen continue to deteriorate amidst growing sectarian, ethnic and tribal divisions. The region witnessed the worst humanitarian crisis as a result of violence in Yemen. A power struggle among the key regional stakeholders has complicated the regional security situation. The increasing tensions between Iran and United States as well as the attacks on the oil infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and the killing of Qassem Soleimani in early January 2020, raised fears of escalation. Surprisingly, the efforts of the UN and other international agencies have been ineffective, as parties to the conflict remain obdurate in their approach.

The competing interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran intensified leading to greater uncertainty in the region, complicating the already deteriorating regional security situation. Turkey, Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria and Morocco were exposed to multiple political, economic and security challenges. Taking advantage of the prevailing chaos, several terrorist and extremist groups have entrenched themselves in the region. Violence perpetrated by the militia, terrorist organizations and other armed groups has been a hindrance in the way of achieving any results by means of dialogue. A wave of public protests in Iran, Lebanon and Iraq reveals the poor governance and growing discontent amongst the people given the deteriorating economic situation in these countries. In the midst of such a grim situation, the prospects of peace and stability remain elusive.

What is worrisome to see, is the ongoing uncertainty that has undermined West Asia and North Africa's economic progress. The region's economic growth is now almost half of what it was before the Arab unrest began in 2011. Today, WANA has one of the world's highest unemployment rates as well as the slowest GDP per capita growth. The economic projections of this region continue to remain grim.

In the light of these developments, India followed the policy of robust expansion and deepening of its engagement with the WANA region through its active diplomacy under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi.

The current Special Issue captures the key trends of 2019. The write-ups provide an in-depth analysis of the major developments in the WANA region, covering various dimensions of the problems, challenges and future trends. In addition, the role of the great powers – Russia, the US, China and the EU – is examined. The Issue also looks at India's engagement with the region in the light of current challenges of great significance that are still unfolding in the region.

Key Developments in the West Asian Region

Editorial Team

Iran

In 2019, Iran celebrated the 40th anniversary of Islamic Revolution. Broadly speaking, Iran witnessed severe challenges both internal and external. Even though the external issues dominated the discourse, the domestic challenges were equally consequential. US-Iran tensions increased significantly, leading to a situation of war in the Persian Gulf. The Trump administration continued with its maximum pressure policy on Iran. In response to the US policy, Iran continued its defence strategy throughout 2019 of using its proxy networks in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Syria. In December 2019, Iran-backed Iraqi militias attacked the US embassy in Iraq. Saudi Arabia blamed Iran for using its proxy in Yemen for attack on its oil installation and also on tankers in the Persian Gulf. Regionally, the Saudi-Iran rivalry created a new situation in Yemen and escalated tensions.

Internal Developments and Iran's Responses

Internally, Iran confronted the agitation and protests amidst the mounting sanctions from the US, which were driven primarily by the hike in fuel prices. The protests were similar to those in December 2018, as the similar grievances were raised, such as increasing prices of food and fuel and economic hardships identified by

traders and masses alike. However, the November protests were marked by the presence of violence, with protestors setting fire to, looting, and vandalizing public institutions, including banks, gas stations, and even department stores. The major part of the protests took place after November 15, after the hiked-fuel prices came into effect. The plan provisioned for a rationing scheme and a slashing of fuel subsidies, causing the prices to rise exponentially. The proposed plan was agreed to by the Supreme Council of Economic Coordination, which comprises President Hassan Rouhani, judiciary chief Ebrahim Raisi, and the Speaker of Parliament, Ali Larijani. The National Iranian Oil Products Distribution Company (NIOPDC) issued a statement, which led to a phenomenal increase of 50 per cent in the price of a litre of gasoline to 15,000 Rials (from an earlier 10,000 Rials). This was complemented by a monthly limit of 60 litres of fuel. Above it, additional purchases would cost 30,000 Rials per litre. The state-affiliated media *Mehr News Agency* reported, citing a security agency report, around 100 banks and 57 shops were set ablaze or pillaged. The protests remained widespread in Khuzestan, Tehran, Fars, and Kerman provinces. The government was quick to draw a distinction between the civil protestors and violent rioters/hooligans. By Iranian accounts, the looting and vandalizing were

carried out by miscreants, fuelled and coordinated by foreign forces. As a result, the Iranian security forces and authorities were forced to shut down the internet and respond with brutal force against the rioters. However, the violent protests were followed by anti-protest rallies in cities of Yazd, Karaj, Kermanshah, Tehran, Zanzan, Arak, Ardabil and Tabriz. The protests erupted again in January 2020, after General Staff of Iran Armed Forces acknowledged shooting down of the Ukrainian airliner by mistake, killing all 176 aboard (including 82 Iranians). Afterwards, the major cities observed massive protests, which primarily comprised students and were largely instigated in universities, before spreading to cities like Tehran and Isfahan. A few major slogans during the protests were “Clerics get lost!” and “Death to the liars.” Given the severity of the protests, there were widespread discussions concerning the casualties and injuries. There was large a variance in numbers of reported causalities. Amnesty International reported at least 304 killings in mid-December, which the authorities denied and accused Amnesty International of spreading misinformation. A special report by *Reuters* placed the number as high as 1,500 deaths, citing three unnamed Iranian interior ministry officials. The authorities are yet to come out with the figures of the death toll. Moreover, in February, a terrorist attack killed 27 and wounded 13 members of Iran's elite Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) near Zahedan in Sistan-Baluchistan Province, in South-eastern Iran. The responsibility was claimed by

the Sunni Muslim separatist group, Jaish Al Adl. In other developments, in October, Iran allowed the entry of women into the stadium for the FIFA World Cup qualifier match, the first time since 1979.

On the economic front, the challenges were extreme as the Iranian economy suffered most since the Trump administration reintroduced sanctions. That said, it would appear that Iran's economy is going to wriggle out of the pressure of re-imposed sanctions, since the country has started adjusting to new sanctions. The Global Economic Prospects report by the World Bank, published in January 2020, estimates a -8.7 per cent contraction in the Iranian economy. Additionally, the report forecasts the Iranian GDP to grow at zero per cent in 2020 and at one per cent in 2021, illustrating a recovery and adjustment to the sanctions regime. In the international market, the Rial fluctuated around 42,000 against the US dollar. The Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU) forecasts the Rial to depreciate even further touching around 55,000 in 2020. In mid-2019, the inflation climbed to more than 50 per cent, which later decreased to 30 per cent in late 2019. The Iranian Statistical Centre (ISC), on the other hand, provided the national inflation rate observed in May-June as 37.6 per cent, which scaled to 40.0 per cent in November-December.

Confronted with internal challenges, the country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei responded in the speech delivered on November 19,

2019, in a meeting with a number of producers, entrepreneurs and economic activists by offering a strategy to manage the impact of sanctions on Iranian economy. He said that “...our main strategy is to immunize the economy against the sanctions. The main strategy is to become invulnerable and in fact to arm the Revolution with the weapon of domestic production and domestic willpower...one of the blessings of this action – moving towards domestic dynamism – is that the country will stop being ‘conditionalized’. One of the worst things to do in the country is to ‘conditionalize’ the economy.”

According to the Supreme Leader, Iran needs to take advantage of its strengths which are mainly its young population relying on its own resources, ending the country’s dependence on oil and focus on increased and continued development of Iran’s scientific and technological achievements. In addition, he noted that the country’s power is not confined to its military power but its strong economy; therefore, in order to manage its current economic challenges the country should focus on the above-mentioned capabilities. In short, his message to his countrymen can be captured in following statement: “There are two main issues at hand: one is that we should not allow the population to decrease. We should not allow the young population to decrease. We should increase the birth rate. And the second is that we should create permanent wealth for the country. These two actions should be done.”

Nuclear Deal and External Ties

One of the key issues central to Tehran’s external and internal policy was the Nuclear Deal, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In 2019, the JCPOA was one of the major casualties in deteriorating Iran-US relations. The US withdrawal and Trump administration’s increasing sanctions on Iran and the EU’s inability to save the nuclear deal resulted in Tehran gradually scaling back on its commitment to the JCPOA. On May 8, Tehran cited Articles 26 and 36 of the agreement and reduced its limitations on heavy water and uranium production. Tehran believed that Europe had not adhered to its compliance requirements to the JCPOA under pressure from the US; a 60-day deadline was issued to its European counterparts to fulfil their commitments under the JCPOA, particularly in the banking and oil sector. On July 7, after the end of deadline, in the second-step, Iran exceeded the agreed-upon limits of uranium enrichment of 3.67 per cent to 4.5 per cent, which was still short of the 90 per cent purity required for nuclear weapons. Foreign Minister Javad Zarif assured that these incremental breaches of the JCPOA were reversible. On September 8, Iran undertook the third step, again with a 60-day deadline; further reducing its commitments when the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) began feeding gas into its IR-6 centrifuge machines. Furthermore, the AEOI began advance research and development (R&D) in all kinds of

centrifuges and enrichment facilities. Finally, as the fourth step, in November, Rouhani announced the injection of gas into 1044 centrifuges. At the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant (FFEP), Iran injected uranium hexafluoride and started uranium enrichment at the existing centrifuges. In January 2020, the Iranian cabinet announced that it would not exercise restrictions in any operational areas, including enrichment capacities, enrichment percentage, development and research, heavy water production and volume of enriched material. The key scale-back was on limitation on the number of centrifuges and enrichment levels surpassed those that existed before signing the JCPOA. Nevertheless, the announcement stressed that cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) would continue “as before.” In response, the Europeans made several offers to expand and operationalize INSTEX – a special purpose vehicle (SPV) – to help Iran continue trade with Europeans. However, INSTEX would only enable transactions for humanitarian purposes and medicines rather than oil, which Tehran so dearly desired. In September, France announced a proposal to offer Iran about US\$15 billion in credit lines, which was rejected by Iran. In response, to complete scale-back of commitment in January 2020 (except IAEA inspection), the E3 (UK, France and Germany) triggered the dispute resolution mechanism of the JCPOA, enabling further collapse of the Nuclear Deal.

Iran and its External Dimension

On the external front, Iran’s relations with the US guided its policies in the region and beyond. Washington pursued its “maximum pressure” policy against Iran, resulting in rise of rhetorical exchanges between the two nations, particularly on Twitter. The year was marked by posturing and brinkmanship, not seen since decades between two nation-states. In April 2019, the US Department of State branded the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). In response, the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), the apex decision-making body on security and foreign policy issues in Iran, designated the US’ Central Command (CENTCOM) as a terrorist organization.

Iran’s relations with Europe suffered in 2019, largely due to the fallout of the JCPOA. Perhaps the inability to find a reliable ally in Europe pushed Iran towards Asian giants, including Japan and China. Though the various visits by PM Shinzo Abe and President Rouhani signalled a pivot towards the East, the tangible outcomes of these relationships remained limited, amid fears of sanctions. The joint naval exercise called “Marine Security Belt” with China and Russia appeared an optimistic development for Iran. The naval drill appeared to be a counterweight to the US led-coalition of nations, formally known as International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), which seeks to escort vessels and monitor the waters of the region.

In the Persian Gulf, the year remained tumultuous with a series of events resulting in an increased threat environment not seen since the Tanker War of the 1980s. The year witnessed a restrained Tanker War starting in May, when four commercial ships were damaged near the port of Fujairah in the Gulf of Oman. Two of these ships belonged to Saudi Aramco, one to the UAE and one to Norway. The UAE regarded the incident as a "sabotage attack," whereas the US blamed Iranian "proxy" elements for the attack. Later in May, the US deployed 1,500 additional troops in the Persian Gulf region as a "protective" measure against Iran. Again, in June, two oil tankers caught fire after allegedly being attacked by limpet mines in the Gulf of Oman. The incident contributed to escalation as Washington blamed Tehran. The constant deterioration of relations with the US reached new heights of escalation, particularly with the striking down of a US surveillance drone by the IRGC in the Strait of Hormuz. By Iranian accounts, the drone violated Iran's territorial sovereignty by entering Iranian airspace, which Washington emphatically denied, stating that the drone was shot down when it was in international airspace. Regardless, there was conflicting information provided by Iran and the US concerning the drone's location. Despite the increasing threat of military retaliation, President Trump claimed to withdraw a retaliatory military strike on Iran citing the disproportionality of the strike. Later, in July, the US claimed a defensive strike against an Iranian

drone in the Persian Gulf, which was denied by Iran.

From July onwards, in a tit-for-tat move, Iran and the UK remain engaged in a diplomatic crisis. On July 4, a Panama-flagged Iranian tanker *Grace 1* was seized by British authorities in Gibraltar, on the suspicion that the vessel was carrying oil to Syria, breaching EU sanctions against the Bashar al Assad-led Syrian regime. Iran denied the charges demanding the release of the ship. On July 20, IRGC Naval Forces raided and captured a British-flagged tanker *Stena Impero* citing damage caused by the *Stena Impero* to an Iranian vessel. *Grace 1* (later *Adrian Darya 1*) was released from Gibraltar in mid-August, whereas the British tanker *Stena Impero* was released in late September.

In its effort to bring peace and stability, Iran proposed the Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE). President Hassan Rouhani, during the UNGA address announced HOPE – a regional arrangement – aimed “to preserve security, peace, stability and progress in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz.” Based on principles of non-aggression and non-interference in the region, the coalition intended to promote freedom of navigation and free movement of oil in the region. The proposed peace plan did very little to convince its regional rivals, as they continue to blame Iran for its interference in their countries' internal affairs and its hegemonic designs in the region. The Iran-Saudi rivalry which manifested itself through the contestation in Yemen also became

pronounced during the year with attacks on Aramco facilities. In September, a missile hit the Aramco facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais, sending oil prices soaring to a session high of US\$ 71.95 a barrel as the markets opened. Even though the Houthis in Yemen took responsibility for the attack, Riyadh alleged a clear Iranian involvement. The brewing conflict reached a flashpoint when two suspected rockets hit an Iranian oil tanker in the Red Sea, off the coast of the Saudi city of Jeddah.

One of the most notable state visits to Iran was made by President Bashar Al Assad, which highlighted the influence that Tehran possessed in Syria. The absence of Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and his subsequent resignation underscored the fissures in Iranian policy-making, concerning the differences on Iran's regional policy. Even though Javad Zarif returned as foreign minister following the rejection of his resignation by President Rouhani, it depicted the fractures in Rouhani administration. Obviously, Tehran sees opportunity in Syria as a series of development and infrastructure projects are coming up in Syria.

In December, Iran and the US were engaged in a retributive duel, which culminated in heightened tensions in the region. On December 27, a rocket attack in Kirkuk (Northeastern Iraq) killed an American contractor with the US Department of Defense. The US alleged that the militia group Kataib Hezbollah was responsible, who denied

such responsibility. In response, Washington carried out airstrikes in five including one in Qaim (Eastern Iraq) and two in Syria, which killed 25 fighters and wounded at least 55 Iraqi security personnel. Most of these sites belonged to Kataib Hezbollah. Later, on December 31, the protestors – mainly belonging to the Hashd Al Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Forces, or PMF) – attacked and ran-over the US embassy compound in Baghdad. Later, on January 2, the US carried out a military strike against a convoy near Baghdad International Airport. The casualties included among others, Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Quds Force division of Iran's IRGC and Jamal Jaffar Mohammad Al Ibrahim (popularly known by his sobriquet Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis), the deputy commander of Iraqi PMF. US-Iran relations, after the strike, reached their lowest since the Iran Hostage Crisis (1979). In response, Iran fired multiple ballistic missiles at two US military bases at the Ayn Al Asad airbase in Al Anbar governorate, in western Iraq, along with another airbase in Erbil, in Kurdistan region of Iraq. The IRGC informed that it has completed the revenge for Soleimani's killing by inflicting 80 deaths; in response President Trump tweeted "All is well!" indicating no lives were lost.

The year 2019 was full of new economic and security challenges for the Islamic Republic of Iran. The country witnessed extreme pressure from the Trump administration with serious impact on its oil sector leading to inflation in its economy with rising costs of daily

commodities for its people at one end and Iran's increasing isolation at the international level external front. However, this pressure did not deter Tehran from its aggressive policy approach in the region of making full use of its strategic assets to retain and increase its influence in the region. To counter its isolation, Tehran continued to strengthen its ties with countries facing problematic ties with the US such as China, Russia, Turkey, Qatar, and North Korea at one level and India, Japan, South Korea and Islamic countries of Asia on the other. Despite being exposed to serious economic and political challenges internally and increasing tensions with the US and its regional rival Saudi Arabia, Tehran was able to manage both its internal and external challenges in rather modest way. However, the costs endured by Iran have been higher, which is likely to get manifested domestically, as well as, in its external relations in the coming decade.

While Iran has its own capabilities – military, demographic, natural resources – and scientific and technological potential, a lot would depend on how the country will be able to provide space to its reformist groups in a period when hardliners are becoming increasingly influential leaving very little space for the reformists. How internal political dynamics is played out in future will determine the course of both internal and external policy of the country in coming years.

GCC

The differences in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) continue to haunt the organization. The Qatar crisis remains unresolved and there have been no successful negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. There have been a few meetings between the Saudi and Qatari officials to break the stalemate, but no visible progress has been achieved. The fissures in the GCC continue to remain a challenge for the organization as well as for regional security and stability. Mediation efforts have continued on the part of Kuwait and Oman. The inflexibility on the part of the parties involved has been a key impediment to achieve any consensus. Thus, the mediation by Kuwait and Oman has not been able to produce any positive results.

There was unprecedented tension in the region after a number of ships were attacked in the waters surrounding the Gulf region. It was alleged that Iran was behind the attacks, while Iran has rejected such allegations. Though the perpetrators of such attacks were never identified, tensions ran high in the region amid continuing attacks. The existing differences between Saudi Arabia and Iran, two key regional players, continued to widen thereby further escalating the regional tension in the Gulf. Iran regularly threatens to close the Strait of Hormuz in case of an escalation in the region. The sabotage attacks on the vessels in the close waters raise suspicion in the mind of Saudi Arabia regarding the involvement of Iran in such attacks. As

a result, the Saudi-Iran relations remained tense throughout the year without any sign of both the powers willing to talk.

The attack on the two key Saudi oilfields Abqaiq and Khurais in September 2019 further heightened regional tensions. The attacks significantly damaged the oil-fields and reduced oil production in these oil-fields. Saudi Arabia alleged the involvement of Iran behind the attacks which Iran rejected. Houthis claimed the attacks on Abqaiq and Khurais but Saudi Arabia claimed that the drones and missiles hitting the oilfields came from the north which cannot be a handiwork of the Houthis. Despite the existing differences among the GCC countries, the Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces of the GCC countries [met in Riyadh](#) in October 2019. The meeting unanimously condemned the attacks on Saudi oilfields and stated that any attack on any of the individual GCC countries would be considered as an attack on the GCC. They also stressed on the need to promote collective security in the Gulf and to confront any security and terrorist threats.

As the situation escalated, the American military strengthened its position in the Gulf region. In May 2019, with increasing attacks on the vessels in the Gulf waters, the US sent *USS Abraham Lincoln* and B-52 bombers to the Gulf. Later in the year, in the aftermath of the attacks on the Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais, the US also strengthened its Patriot missile battery in the Kingdom.

In May 2019, amid the attack on the vessels in the region and the Houthis' attack on the pipeline in Saudi Arabia, King Salman called for an urgent GCC meeting in Mecca. He also invited Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim to participate in the meeting but he did not participate.

Amid the crisis in the organization, the GCC held its 40th annual summit in December 2019 in Riyadh. Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Abdullah Bin Nasser Al Thani represented Qatar, as the Emir Sheikh Tamim chose to skip the annual summit. The [annual summit called for](#) strength, cohesion and solidarity among the members of the organization. They also emphasized military and security cooperation among the member states. The Summit supported the permanent sovereignty of the Palestinian people over the Palestinian territory, supported the unity and sovereignty of Iraq, expressed support for the government in Yemen, and supported the UN's role and activities in Libya and Syria. The document, however, is silent on the continuing rift among the member states. The Summit also chose Nayef Al Hajraf to be the next Secretary General of the GCC.

The [differences between Saudi Arabia and UAE](#) emerged in Yemen over Emirati support for the southern separatists. The separatists are fighting against the Hadi government, while Saudi Arabia supports the Hadi government and is working towards achieving unity and the integrity of the country. The differences did not last

long and were sorted out with meetings between the two countries. But nevertheless, their involvement in Yemen remains intense with their military is actively involved in military operations against the Houthis. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are two key regional players in Yemen who play a decisive role in the future of the country.

Yemen remained a key source of insecurity for both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. There have been a number of rocket attacks launched on Saudi Arabia by the Houthis from Yemen. Several high-value destinations and installations in Saudi Arabia have been targeted by the Houthis. Saudi Arabia, on its part, has intercepted a number of missiles and drones heading towards Mecca, Medina and Riyadh, while some of them have hit their targets. Among the key targets hit by the Houthis are the East-West oil pipeline, oil tankers in the Red sea, attack on Abha airport etc. For their involvement of the UAE in the military operation in Yemen, the Houthis have also [threatened the UAE](#) of severe consequences.

Turkey

Political, economic, security and foreign policy developments in 2019 underline the continuity in terms of the challenges faced by the country over the last few years. The opposition to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) grew louder, while the security situation in the country's northeast is more vulnerable. Though the Turkish economy showed signs of recovery, it is

the erratic foreign policy that has exacerbated the challenges for Ankara.

The AKP government faced one of its toughest electoral tests in March 2019 during the country-wide municipal elections. The performance of the AKP and its alliance partner Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) was poor in some of the most important mayoral seats and it lost to opposition nominees in the three important cities of Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. This was significant as the cities were administered by members of the ruling party for the last 25 years. The loss of Istanbul to the People's Republican Party (CHP) candidate Ekrem Imamoglu was a major blow as the city is not only a major bastion of the AKP but also because President Recep Tayyip Erdogan started his political career in the city when he was first elected in 1994.

The loss in Istanbul prompted the AKP-MHP alliance to challenge the outcome of the election and demand a recount. However, when the recount did not change the outcome, the ruling alliance challenged the validity of the election and demanded annulment alleging massive irregularities in recording of the votes. This was a last-ditch effort to reverse the outcome, but proved to be a major embarrassment for the AKP when Imamoglu won the rerun in June with a bigger margin, making it one of the worst electoral defeats for the AKP since it came to power in 2002.

The poor performance of the ruling party and a good show by the main opposition CHP and the newly-

launched Good Party (Iyi) has prompted a debate about the changing political mood in the country. Furthermore, the Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) also did well in many cities and some of the candidates supported by it won the mayoral elections in the southeast region. In addition to better coordination among the opposition forces, the AKP had to face a number of defections from its ranks in 2019.

The first important leader to leave AKP was Ali Babacan, one of the co-founders of AKP, former Minister of Economy (2002-07) and former Deputy Prime Minister (2009-15). In July 2019, Babacan resigned from the AKP over what he described as "deep differences" over policy matters. In September, another prominent AKP leader Ahmet Davutoglu, the architect of Erdogan's foreign policy of "strategic depth" and "zero-problem with neighbours", who also served both as Foreign Minister (2009-14) and Prime Minister (2014-16), left the AKP. Davutoglu had a fall out with Erdogan in 2016 and this had led to his resignation as Prime Minister and since then he had been trying to unite like-minded leaders to form a front against AKP but had largely failed. After resigning from the AKP, in December he finally launched the Future Party eyeing the same moderate-Islamist centre-right space from where the AKP began its political journey.

The political upsets notwithstanding, the economic situation has remained a major concern for the AKP government.

In fact, most of the political reverses suffered by the AKP in 2019 were an outcome of the economic problems that have been continuing over the past years. Nonetheless, the economy showed signs of recovery in 2019. In the third quarter (July-September) of 2019, the year-on-year real GDP grew after contractions in three previous consecutive quarters. It further strengthened in the fourth quarter, leading to Turkey registering a growth of 0.9 per cent in 2019.

Other economic indicators including external trade, private sector performance as well as the budget deficit showed improvements. But the FDI continued to fall due to fear of political uncertainties and other fiscal policies dropping by nearly 12 per cent in 2019. The 2018 currency crisis, "which wiped almost 30 per cent off the value of the lira" had created serious economic challenges for President Erdogan and caused a recession, has started to ease. The inflation rate declined from 25 per cent in October 2018 to 8.6 per cent in October 2019 and ended the year in a better position compared to the end of 2018.

Another encouraging sign for the economy was the slight improvement in government revenues to 33.5 per cent of the GDP but at the same time, government expenditure grew even more rapidly, reaching 36.5 per cent of the GDP. Notwithstanding, the signs of improvement, some of the fiscal policies of the government has invited criticism from experts. Turkey's central bank, that slashed interest rates by 10

percentage points in 2019 bringing it down to 14 per cent, is facing a challenge to keep the fiscal policy intact because of the government wanting to bring down the inflation and interest rates to single digits. President Erdogan wants the Turkish economy to grow faster and had projected a five per cent GDP growth rate for 2020, even though the IMF and World Bank expect Turkey to grow at a mere 0.5 per cent.

While Turkey has been able to manage the economic situation and has even absorbed the burden of over 3.5 million refugees on the economy, the internal security situation in the country has been deteriorating. Issues of human rights and political persecutions apart, the Kurdish insurgency has been seemingly revived and intensified since the breakdown in talks between the government and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in 2015. In 2019, the security forces targeted the hideouts of the terrorist group in the southeast while launching military operations in northern Syria and Iraq to chase PKK terrorists.

However, this has caused internal tensions with an increase in the number of terrorist attacks. In July 2019, at least three people were killed in a car bomb attack in the southern city of Reyhanli near the border with Syria. In September, the PKK allegedly targeted a bus ferrying workers with IEDs in the southeastern Diyarbakir province, killing seven persons and injuring another ten. Later that month, a bomb blast targeted vehicle carrying police personnel in the town of Adana. Since it

was a low-intensity blast, only five people were reportedly wounded in the attack.

Turkey also faces threats from the ISIS despite its defeat in neighbouring Syria and Iraq. Given that a large population of migrants has crossed the Syrian border to enter into Turkey, this has become a major cause of concern for the security forces who fear that some of the remnants of the ISIS might have entered the country as refugees and they can target the country through lone-wolf attacks.

In addition to political, economic and security issues, Turkey has been facing numerous foreign policy challenges. Its relations with the US were on the verge of collapse over tensions on managing the situation in northern Syria and continued US support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Turkish decision to buy S-400 missile defence system from Russia and on the Turkish detention of Pastor Andrew Brunson who was finally released in October 2018. Turkey had also accused the US of continuing to give refuge to Fethullah Gulen who Ankara accuses of masterminding the 2016 coup attempt. The US has threatened sanctions under CAATSA if Turkey goes ahead with deployment of the S-400, but President Trump appeared to give Turkey the freedom to establish a safe zone in northern Syria, when in October he suddenly announced the withdrawal of US forces. Some of the tensions seemed to have eased, even if for the time-being, when Erdogan visited Washington in November and met with

Trump at the White House, a meeting that was described by both sides as cordial.

In addition to the problems with the US, Turkey's problems with its neighbours in Europe and West Asia continued. On the other hand, relations with China continued to improve. But a key issue was the complicated relations with Russia which is an important trade partner of Turkey; Ankara depends on Moscow to import nearly one-third of its energy needs. Turkey's decision to militarily intervene in northern Syria and its failure to convince the armed rebels in Idlib to join the political process had created tensions between the two countries. Though eventually, the Ankara and Moscow decided to set aside differences and work together to manage the conflict in Syria, their support for two parties fighting each other makes it difficult for both to manage the situation. Turkey's problems with the Gulf countries – especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE – compounded over support for Turkey and the two Gulf states seeing Turkish moves in the region as a precursor to assertion of its military supremacy.

Egypt

In 2019 Egypt witnessed an increase in the President's hold over the country. On April 16, 2019 Egyptian parliament or House of Representatives approved a set of constitutional amendments to the country's 2014 constitution. These [amendments](#) allowed President Abdel Fattah El Sisi's current term to six years and allow him to stand for another term. The amendments increased the

President's power over the judiciary and legislature. Presently with a unicameral legislature, the new amendments made provisions for an upper house or [senate](#) where one third of the members will be chosen by the President. In a national [referendum](#) from on 20 to 22 April 20-22, 2019 domestically and from April 19-21, 2019 for expatriates, these amendments were supported by [88 per cent](#) of the voters. This referendum has been [criticised](#) for being unfair and increasing President's power over Egyptian politics.

Protests by the people have been declared illegal under Egyptian Protest Law of 2013. However, [protests](#) erupted in several cities such as Suez, Port Said, Mahalla el Kubra, Naga Hamadi Alexandria and Cairo on September 20-21, 2019 over President Sisi's corrupt practices. Egyptian military contractor Mohamed Ali, who is now living in Spain, alleged earlier in September that Sisi and his senior officers were exploiting public funds. Another [wave of protests](#) took place on September 27 calling for President Sisi's ouster. Both were followed by nation-wide [crackdowns](#) on the dissenters arresting as many as 3000 by October.

The *Wilayat Sinai* (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria: Sinai Province) has been active in the Sinai Peninsula and has launched several terrorist attacks. The group [claimed](#) to carry out 20 attacks January, 7 in February, 13 in March, 14 in April, 21 in May, 20 in June, more than 4 in July, and 13 in August 2019. Maximum numbers of the terrorist

attacks were carried out in Northern Sinai. [From January 2019 to September 2019](#) more than 150 of the suspected militants were killed and more than 200 were arrested. In order to further strengthen its fight against the *Wilayat Sinai*, President Sisi [admitted](#) having security cooperation with Israel as well.

Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon

In early 2019, there were clear signs of some major hostilities and protests that rocked Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan later that year, but both the internal and external political actors did not give heed as chaos ensued in the three countries.

Iraq Turns into Arena for US-Iran Hostilities

As early as February 2019, Iraqi President Barham Salih and then Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi candidly conveyed to the visiting US Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan their rejection of President Trump's plan to keep American troops in Iraq to "watch" Iran. Throughout the year, Iraqi leaders voiced their opposition against the presence of foreign troops (particularly US forces) in the country as they feared that a US-Iran conflict could play out in Iraq.

For its part, the US reassured the Iraqi government that it did not intend to use the country as a staging ground to launch attacks against Iran. But in April, then Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi was told during his official visit to Tehran by the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei that the premier should

"make sure that the Americans withdraw their troops from Iraq as soon as possible because expelling them has become difficult whenever they have had a long military presence in a country."

Meanwhile, air strikes on Iraqi territories by unidentified aircraft in July raised speculation that Israel had started targeting Iran-backed Shiite militia inside Iraq. It was widely reported that the Israeli Air Force (IAF) targeted Iran-backed Iraqi militia targets on July 19, July 30 and August 21, 2019. Israeli officials neither confirmed nor denied responsibility.

After the return of US forces to Iraq in 2014, Iran-backed militia and American troops did not attack each other as they fought a common enemy – the ISIS. However, with the decimation of the ISIS in Iraq and the killing of Baghdadi in Syria in October, tensions rose between the US and Iran over the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign that included crippling sanctions. By the end of the year, Iran-backed militia in Iraq such as Kataib Hezbollah conducted "11 attacks over the last two months (November-December 2019) on bases and facilities housing American contractors and service members", according to US forces. In retaliation, the US carried out five airstrikes with Air Force F-15E fighter planes on December 29, which hit three locations in Iraq and two in Syria controlled by the Kataib Hezbollah group. On January 3, 2020, it killed the Iranian general Qassem Suleimani as

well as the deputy chairman of Iraq's PMF and commander of the Kataib Hezbollah Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis, which led to a major international crisis.

Lebanon, Jordan Oppose Trump's Golan Decision

The other major geopolitical issue involving the US in the Levant pertained to the reaction of Lebanon and Jordan over the US' position in the Golan Heights. In January 2019, the then Foreign Minister of Jordan Ayman Safadi told the visiting US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at a joint press conference that, "the Golan Heights are occupied. Israel must withdraw from it".

In fact, the statement anticipated President Donald Trump's recognition of Israel's sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights in March 2019. The decision was vehemently opposed by Lebanon because the issue of Golan Heights is linked to the issue of Shebaa Farms, wherein Lebanon claims the latter to be its own territory. Thus, Lebanese President Michael Aoun said that Beirut's stance regarding the status of Golan is an absolute rejection of Israeli "sovereignty" over the territory, especially as part of it includes the Shebaa Farms and the Kafreshuba Hills.

Popular Protests in Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan

Similarly, the groundswell of popular discontent that swept and upstaged governments in Iraq and Lebanon as well as threatened Jordanian politics was ominous even in early 2019. It all

began in Jordan when in the middle of February 2019, unemployed youngsters took to the streets, first in Aqaba and then across the country, to march towards the Royal Court offices in Amman, where they staged a sit-down protest.

Jordan's Chief of the Royal Court, Yousef Issawi and senior government officials met on a daily basis with strikers' representatives to resolve the crisis, but it ended in failure. For several months, regular Thursday demonstrations were held across from the prime minister's office in Amman, calling for major political and economic reform. On several occasions, demonstrators shouted slogans even against the King and demanded a constitutional monarchy.

In Lebanon, the longstanding peg of the country's currency (Lebanese Pound) to the US Dollar came under threat in January, presaging public unrest that followed the ensuing financial crisis. By April, Lebanese citizens were staging a protest against the upcoming budget fearing that the government may announce reduction in pensions in a bid to reduce an enormous public debt. But this ongoing protest became a nationwide agitation when the Lebanese government announced new tax measures on October 17. In unprecedented scenes, tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators, cutting across all religious, sectarian and class denominations, assembled in cities across the country blaming the political leadership of nepotism, corruption and incompetence as well as

calling for a social and economic overhaul. All attempts by the government to placate the protesters with promises of reforms proved fruitless, as public agitations continued in Beirut, Zouk, Tripoli, Jal el Dib, Saida and other places. Eventually, Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced his resignation.

Although popular protests had been raging in Iraq since 2018, the government's budget in February drew a lot of criticism for failing to shift resources away from salaries and the security sector towards services, agriculture, industrial development, and the reconstruction of war-torn areas in the country's north. The pent-up grievances boiled over in October, when people took to the streets of Baghdad and Basra, cutting across the Shia-Sunni divide, to express their anger at rampant corruption, the high rate of unemployment and the poor state of public services. There was also deep-set resentment over Iran's heavy interference in Iraq's political and

economic affairs, which upset even the Iraqi Shiite community in the south of the country as much. The biggest leaderless protest broke out in Baghdad's Tahrir Square. Security forces opened fire in early November when people were crossing a bridge to reach the Green Zone – where the main government offices were located.

Earlier, on October 9, then Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi assured a reshuffle of his cabinet and start programmes to reduce unemployment. The announcement failed to convince the masses and protesters returned to the streets on October 25. As violence intensified till the end of November that claimed 149 civilian lives, according to Iraqi official sources, Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi resigned, saying his decision was “necessary as part of the de-escalation”. Meanwhile, President Barham Saleh promised a new electoral law that would “allow for elections that are more just and better represent the people”.

Conflict Zones: Syria, Yemen and Libya

Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, Nagapushpa Devendra and Paulami Sanyal

The situation in the key conflict hotspots of Syria, Yemen and Libya continues to remain alarming. All the three countries are still facing prolonged civil war, widespread violence, terrorism, internal displacement and a severe humanitarian crisis. Years of continuing conflict and violence have created political instability and unremitting security challenges. In the absence of any mutually agreed roadmap for the future, the political and social polarizations in these countries still remain widespread. As a result, the negotiations and mediation efforts to restore peace and stability have produced meager results. The developments in the previous year have not been encouraging for these countries either.

Syria

Even after eight years of violent conflict, the Syrian civil war does not show any sign of abating. President Bashar Al Assad has been successful in saving his regime in the face of violent protests and a constant hard-hitting campaign by the opposition coalition, but at a steep cost. The economy is shattered, there are more [than](#) 5.6 million Syrian refugees living in other countries, around 6.6 million people are internally displaced, and the

government absolutely lacks the resources to rebuild the country. According to the [UN](#), US\$ 3.29 billion was required to meet the urgent needs of the most vulnerable Syrians in 2019, but only about two-thirds of it has been received.

The country remains divided into three zones, each in the hands of a different group and supported by foreign forces. The first, under government control with backing from Iran and Russia, encompasses 90 per cent of the country, which includes all of its major cities. The second, in the east, is in the hands of a Kurdish-Arab force backed by the US. The third, in the northwest, is under Turkish control, with a mix of opposition forces dominated by religious extremist forces. The Assad regime, certainly, would not accept partition of the country and would, ultimately, reassert its control in the eastern and northwestern regions. As a result, armed conflict to capture more and more territories continues in the country.

As of December 2019, the Syrian military reportedly captured several villages in southeastern Idlib province while continuing airstrikes on the city of Maarat Al Numan. The Syrian military opened a “humanitarian corridor” to allow civilians trapped in

southern Idlib and northern Hama provinces to escape the fighting there. The regime has also recaptured the town of Khan Shaykhun for the first time since 2014. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says that rebels also withdrew from their remaining territory in Hama province, which would have been encircled once Khan Shaykhun fell.

The Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS) reportedly [attacked](#) the town of Kafr Takharim in Idlib province in retribution for anti-HTS protests that residents held. Protests against HTS and in solidarity with the people of Kafr Takharim reportedly broke out in other towns in Idlib province. While the rebels cannot match Russian air power and shelling by the regime, they are still fighting to hold on to any territory under their occupation. Turkey continues [boosting](#) its weapons supplies to rebel proxies in northwestern Syria including armoured vehicles and anti-tank weaponry, which has helped shift the military focus on the ground. Turkey's aim is mostly to stem the flow of refugees toward the Turkish border.

Operation Peace Spring

President Erdogan said that a Turkish invasion of northeastern Syria could begin "at any time." Ankara has been frustrated with the lack of progress in talks with the US about setting up a safe zone in northeastern Syria to "secure" Turkey's border with Syria. As Turkey has not been to sign a deal with the US, it has threatened to act unilaterally. In late 2019, Turkey launched its

'Operation Peace Spring' in northeast Syria. Turkish-backed forces entered the areas such as Ras Al Ayn, Tel Abyad, and Suluk; and controlled the towns as well as the highways. US President Donald Trump threatened Erdogan of further economic sanctions. Later, Vice-President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Turkey and met with President Erdoğan in order to end Operation Peace Spring. The US and Turkey reached an agreement to a ceasefire that Mike Pence said would be a 'solution [that] we believe will save lives.' As per the deal, the US agreed to withdraw the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Ankara would get relief from the economic sanctions that Trump has imposed on Turkey. The immediate effect of the ceasefire will be to leave Turkey in control of a 20 mile deep "safe zone" along the border that Turkey had previously demanded. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says the fighting has left 224 SDF soldiers, 183 Turkey-backed fighters, and 72 civilians, dead. The fighting has also displaced around 275,000 people in the area.

Israeli air strikes

Israel has carried out a large number of strikes in Syria throughout the year. On December 6, 2019, an Iranian ammunition depot in Al Bukamal was hit by an Israeli airstrike. This attack came after Israel conducted four air strikes in Syria [between](#) November 12 and November 20. The air strikes [targeted](#) the advanced air defense systems, surface-to-air missiles,

reconnaissance sites and warehouses, among other targets. Israeli attacks on Syria have two main purposes. Firstly, to diminish Iranian support to Hezbollah and other militias who are working to open a low-intensity military front threatening Israel's northern border, and secondly to maintain Israeli freedom of action and air supremacy in its neighbourhood and weaken Syrian military capabilities, more specifically anti-aircraft missile sites and their support system.

US Withdrawal from Syria

President Trump has stated his intention to withdraw from Syria leaving only around 500-600 US soldiers in eastern Syria, to continue the anti-ISIS mission and to secure the oilfields. But reports suggest that there are concerns about the security of those US forces as they have no longer any local allies after the Kurds have started cooperating with the Syrian regime. Thus, the US forces are at the risk of being surrounded by the Syrian military. US forces in northeastern Syria have relied on the SDF for security and intelligence; and if those channels are now compromised then it would be harder for the US troops to remain in Syria.

ISIS and Al Qaeda

ISIS and Al Qaeda affiliates in Syria continued to perpetrate abuses, ranging from executions and kidnappings to interference in aid delivery. ISIS's physical footprint and operational capacity in Syria has been significantly diminished by sustained military

campaigns against it since 2016. The territory controlled by the ISIS has now been significantly reduced to the central desert pocket in the country with Deir ez-Zor being the heartland of remaining Syrian ISIS remnants. The Syrian military has conducted combing operations and airstrikes against the pocket, but only with limited success. The US-backed SDF are still "rooting out" ISIS fighters from the area around Baghouz in eastern Syria. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, ISIS fighters carried out multiple attacks, targeting Syrian soldiers across Homs and Deir Ezzor provinces, killing a large number of people.

Though the ISIS is significantly weakened in Syria, the challenge from Al Qaeda continues to remain serious in the country. It is believed that the Al Qaeda may plot terrorist attacks by exploiting the existing chaotic security situation in the country. A new branch of Al Qaeda, called Hurras Al Din, emerged in early 2018 with estimated 2,000-3,000 fighters. It is the successor to the Khorasan Group, a small but dangerous organization of hardened senior Al Qaeda operatives in Syria to hit the Western targets. The rise of the Hurras Al Din as well as the operations of other Al Qaeda affiliates in Africa, Yemen and Afghanistan, underscores its enduring threat despite the death of Osama bin Laden and being largely eclipsed in recent years by the ISIS. Hurras Al Din consists, basically, of those Jabhat Al Nusra members who refused to go along when

Al Nusra severed its links with Al Qaeda back in 2016.

Safe Zone

Erdogan met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi on October 22, 2019, to discuss the situation in northeastern Syria. They came out with a deal to jointly patrol the border area and ensure that SDF fighters withdraw towards the south. In return, Turkey agreed to the Russian demand to acknowledge Syria's territorial integrity. The agreement presumably forestalls any possibility of a conflict between Turkish forces and the Syrian army, which is deployed in northeastern Syria after an agreement with the SDF. It also mandates the removal of the SDF from a much larger area compared to that under the agreement, which Turkey reached with the US.

But, the crucial question is about the size of the proposed 'Safe Zone'. The US says that Turkey is only occupying a strip of border territory between Tel Abyad and Ras Al Ayn, which is around 120 kilometres. But Ankara seems to think it will control all the territory along the Syrian-Turkish border, even in places where the Syrian military has already deployed in the wake of the SDF's agreement with Damascus. The buffer zone plan may also be in danger because Turkey continues to insist that the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia, which makes up the bulk of the SDF, has not withdrawn from the border area. Turkey has threatened to expand its "buffer zone" for security reasons and to launch a new offensive

in northeastern Syria to clear "terrorists" from the area around the border. However, a spokesperson for the Russian defence ministry has warned that the Turkish threat "can only escalate the situation in northern Syria." Russia has also announced that it is moving additional military police into northeastern Syria to bolster the forces that have been conducting joint patrols of the border region with Turkey.

Prior to this, the US gave Turkey a "final offer" that included a joint US-Turkish operation to set up a nine mile deep, 87 mile long safe zone on the Syrian side of the border. All YPG forces would withdraw from that zone, which covers about a third of the border between the Euphrates River and the Iraqi border. The US and Turkey would jointly patrol the area, and if things went on smoothly there, the zone would eventually be extended to cover the rest of the border. The US had also sent a team to southeastern Turkey to discuss the details of a possible safe zone in northern Syria. At this point, the only thing on which Ankara and Washington have agreed is to set up a "joint operations center" to oversee the implementation of the safe zone. Turkey has been demanding to impose a 20-mile deep safe zone in the east of the Euphrates. It would have the opposite effect – likely displacing more than 90 percent of the Syrian Kurdish population, exacerbating what is already an extremely challenging humanitarian situation, and creating an environment for increased conflict

that would require an extended deployment of military forces.

The proposed safe zone will hurt the US interests as well. The US has been trying to prevent the resurgence of ISIS, protect those who fought it alongside the Global Coalition, and thwart alleged Iranian efforts to use the area to propagate its sectarian activities. The US-backed Syrian Kurdish forces are the most effective fighting element in Syria against ISIS. Their presence promotes stability and the return of local governance, which is key to prevent the resurgence of ISIS. Their control of the area also shuts down facilitation, movement, and resources that ISIS requires to achieve its objectives. Implementing a safe zone that would drive Kurdish forces out would likely disrupt those efforts.

Yemen

The civil war in Yemen which is in its fifth year shows no signs of abating. The war has killed thousands of Yemenis, including civilians, children as well as combatants, and has significantly damaged the country's infrastructure. The intense conflict during the last five years between the Yemeni government forces and the Houthi rebels has left tens of thousands dead or injured. According to the UN, in Yemen, around 14.3 million people are classified as being in acute need, with around 3.2 million requiring treatment for acute malnutrition. The UN reports that an estimated 3.3 million people remain displaced, up from 2.2 million in 2018, including 685,000 people who fled fighting in Hudaydah and on the west

coast, since June 2019. In 2019 there have been 4,900 recorded events that have caused 17,700 civilian casualties as verified by the UN.

Yemeni Peace Process

Despite multiple attempts by the UN to broker a ceasefire that would lead to a comprehensive settlement to the conflict, the parties themselves continue to hinder diplomatic progress. In December 2018, the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, brokered a ceasefire known as the Stockholm Agreement, centred on the besieged Red Sea port city of Hodeida. Even at the end of 2019, the Agreement's confidence-building measure remains unfulfilled. The Houthis have offered the Yemeni government a new, relatively small prisoner swap, involving around 2000 people as a first step toward further peace talks. This seems a little more manageable than the 15,000-person swap that was originally negotiated.

Representatives of the Yemeni government and the Houthis met on a UN-chartered ship in the Red Sea to discuss the implementation of the Hodeida ceasefire plan they concluded late last year. Talks concluded with what the UN called a "mechanism and new measures to reinforce the ceasefire and de-escalation". The two sides are supposed to be meeting regularly to coordinate their mutual withdrawal from Hudaydah. Since then the Houthis say, and the UN agrees, that they've implemented step one of the redeployment plan by pulling their forces out of Hodeida's sea port as well

as two smaller ports in province. [Now](#) it's up to the Yemeni government to withdraw its forces further from Hudaydah city, at which point the parties can move to the second phase of the withdrawal agreement, in which both sides are to withdraw from Hudaydah completely, to a distance of at least 18 kilometres. Though the [fighting](#) between the Houthis and coalition continues in the areas not covered under the peace deal, many view the Stockholm Agreement as an indicator of sustainable peace and that if pushed harder, it could lead to negotiations on winding down the rest of the north Yemen conflict.

Southern Transitional Council

In the summer of 2019, tension between the Hadi government and the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) boiled over, leading to violence between the local allies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. While the pro-government forces, including the Islah and The Muslim Brotherhood are supported by Riyadh; the STC is being backed by Abu Dhabi. The escalation revealed the differences between the two key regional powers – Saudi Arabia and the UAE – over Yemen. The UAE supports the Hadi government and has declared to protect the Yemeni constitution. But given its strategic location bordering Bab el Mandab, a vital chokepoint in the region, Abu Dhabi views Aden as significant factor that could connect its expanding military base in the West Asia and North African region. In 2017, the UAE went to the extent of [supporting](#) the

then governor Aidrous Al Zubaydi through the provision of salary, benefits, and dealt with him as a president – allowing him to act as an alternate government. President Hadi sacked Zubaydi over his disloyalty to the government and allegiance to the members of Southern Movement.

The UAE's policy shift in Yemen did not appeal to the Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in the long-run. He eventually decided to pull off the duct-tap and allowed the Hadi government to condemn its activities and support as “illegal” and “violation of its Sovereignty”, which is outside international norms. He also did not attempt to curb the growing resentment against Abu Dhabi's military presence in South Yemen. In mid-June 2019, demonstrations [broke out](#) in the Shabwah governorate that featured banners opposing the UAE's ‘occupation’ of the region. On July 1, popular unrest intensified in the Island of Socotra, where demonstrators raised the Yemeni flag and decried the UAE's alleged destabilization of the Island. However, the UAE later [partially withdrew](#) its forces in March 2019. The STC, disenchanted with its patron's military withdrawal, raised anti-government rhetoric due to which clashes erupted between the separatist group and Yemeni forces in Aden.

On August 26, 2019, Riyadh offered a ceasefire to the members of STC, who in turn, expressed their zeal to [participate](#) in the Saudi-led dialogue at Jeddah. The separatists [withdrew](#) their forces from the presidential palace

and central bank offices. So far, they are not giving up the military sites it seized, and insist that that they will not do so unless members of the Islamist Islah Party and “northerners” are purged from all government positions. On November 11, 2019, the Saudi-Hadi coalition signed an agreement to end the STC’s uprising in southern Yemen and form a new unity government. As per the agreement, the STC will get several cabinet ministries in return for giving up control of the territories it seized during an insurrection that started in August. Among those territories is the city of Aden, which will regain its former status as the temporary capital of the displaced Yemeni government.

While the deal has reduced fighting between the government and the STC in Aden, clashes on other fronts have intensified. It was reported that the separatists have begun moving in Zinjibar – the capital of neighbouring Abyan, Ataq and some other cities near the Gulf of Aden. The Yemeni government has accused the UAE of bombing and air-striking its soldiers in southern Yemen. The Yemeni defense ministry claimed that more than 300 of its soldiers were killed and wounded in UAE strikes. The UAE officials, however, have said that they targeted “terrorists” who had attacked “coalition” forces.

Al Qaeda and ISIS

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has established its presence in large parts of Yemen stretching from Aden to Hadhramaut including the

control of oil pipelines and oil fields of Balhaf, Mukalla and Ash Shihr. Additionally, Al Qaeda is also strongly connected with the local communities and tribal leaders. It poses a much greater threat than the ISIS in Yemen, which has failed to embed itself in Yemeni society and establish links with other local factions, something the AQAP has been successful in achieving. Al Qaeda has also attacked the STC fighters who are trying to expand its occupation in Southern Yemen. It has re-captured several areas in Abyan and Shabwah province from forces aligned with the STC. The Al Qaeda is also accused of bombing Yemeni soldiers in Hadhramaut province. At present, the ISIS operates training camps in some areas of the south and takes credit for attacks on Houthi-linked targets, though it has yet to carve out any areas of territorial control.

AQAP and ISIS have increasingly come to blows with each other, prominently, clashing in Al Bayda province. ISIS and Al Qaeda are reportedly engaged in a conflict of their own in central Yemen. Throughout the year, clashes occurred regularly in central Al Bayda province between Yemeni tribal forces aligned with the two terror groups. The ISIS deployed suicide bombers, including a Somali national, against Al Qaeda positions, killing and injuring more than 10 fighters, including its commanders. Al Qaeda, in retaliation, attacked ISIS bases, claiming to wrest six of them away. In turn a tribal group affiliated to Al Qaeda offered a US\$ 20,000 reward for the apprehension or death of the local ISIS leader. In

addition, an online propaganda war of videos, images and even poems regularly take place in social media forums and Internet chat rooms as both sides seek to gain more followers and sympathizers.

For the most part, this fight involves local factions aligned with either group working out their own grievances with one another under the imprimatur of international jihadism. But with ISIS looking for a new home, that could change, and even if it doesn't, this is still one of several local or regional conflicts that will make it difficult to keep Yemen together if and when the main war finally ends.

The US State Department has put a US\$ 6 million bounty on the head of a senior AQAP leader Saad bin Atef Al Awlaki, and a US\$ 4 million bounty on the head of another AQAP terrorist named Ibrahim Ahmed Mahmoud Al Qosi. Saudi Arabian Special Forces have reportedly captured the leader of ISIS's branch in Yemen, who goes by the name Abu Osama Al Muhajer. They captured him and several other senior ISIS leaders in a June 3 raid on a house that locals say was in Yemen's Abyan province.

Libya

The situation in Libya continues to remain extremely fragile and tense. The parliamentary elections proposed to be held in 2019 could not be held due to escalating violence among various groups, and a lack of consensus among the key political factions in the country. Libya has also witnessed intense

political interference by the regional and extra-regional powers which further worsen the situation. Though the UN has been actively trying to mediate and broker a deal among the parties, the continuous and unregulated violence has been an obstacle in the establishment of peace in the country.

Political factions

Throughout the year 2019, Libya remained divided under two different political and military factions. One is the UN-backed and internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) headed by Prime Minister Fayeze Al Sarraj based in Tripoli; and the other one is the Tobrouk-based government backed by General Khalifa Haftar under the Libyan National Army (LNA). The claim of these two parallel factions, along with their military forces, to authority and legitimacy has remained a critical hurdle in the way of reaching a political consensus in Libya.

Haftar launches attacks

The beginning of 2019 witnessed Haftar launching attacks on the oil-rich southern parts of Libya. His forces attacked the city of Sabha in January; El Sharara and El Feel oilfields in February 2019. These two oilfields produce approximately 400,000 barrels per day. [These areas were attacked under the pretext of removing terrorists hiding there.](#) The terrorist groups in Libya primarily operate from the Mediterranean coastal strip, but for Haftar, military control over the

southern parts of the country is also important as it gives him the strategic control over the transmission of electricity, supply of water, and control of important trade and smuggling routes along the southern border. Brigadier General Ahmad Al Mesmari, the spokesman for the LNA, said that [Haftar is planning to eliminate the Sudanese, Chad and local insurgent groups](#) who, given the attractions of vast reserves of energy and water in southern Libya, have created a safe haven in that area.

On April 4, 2019 Haftar and LNA forces launched attacks on Tripoli and the western parts of Libya under the control of GNA. The LNA captured the city of Sirte, Mitiga Airport and Gharyan; and as a result, a no-fly zone was declared over Tripoli in November. According to the LNA, the objective of the attack was to remove The Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups and other Islamist factions in those areas. According to a report by *Al Jazeera* on December 13, 2019, [at least 200 civilians and more than 2,000 fighters were killed since April 2019](#); and around 146,000 people have been internally displaced in the country.

Negotiations

Negotiations between rival factions have remained unsuccessful. General Haftar and Prime Minister Fayez Al Sarraj participated in a dialogue prior to the Tripoli attack in Abu Dhabi on February 27 under the mediation of UAE. [Both leaders agreed to hold general elections to end the transitional phase](#) but they failed to reach a

consensus on key issues. Haftar rejected proposals to submit his army to the government in Tripoli; Al Sarraj, on the other hand, emphasized to build a [unified military placed under a civilian authority](#). Moreover, a [Libya Local Governance Forum](#) supported by USAID, the World Bank, and UNDP Libya was organized on September 14-16, 2019 in Tunis to develop a political solution from the local administration. Similar such events were organized among the local leaders in 2017 and 2018, in Tunisia and Libya respectively. These meetings made it clear that local governance in Libya has no place for external interference to end the war in the country.

Amidst the persisting political instability and violence, municipal elections were [held](#) in nine out of 69 councils of southern and western Libya (120 municipal councils in the country) on March 30. The turnout in this election was only about 38 percent. Another nationwide election was [proposed](#) by Fayez Al Sarraj on March 5, 2019. The election was meant to convene an [all-inclusive Libyan congress](#) in order to reach an agreement on a future roadmap, along with a constitutional foundation for presidential and legislative elections before the end of 2019. On March 20, Ghassan Salamé, the head of United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), announced that a National Conference on the possible Libyan elections would be held from April 14-16 at the city of Ghadames. However, after the attack on Tripoli, he

announced the postponement of the National Conference.

ISIS in Libya

The ISIS continues to remain a key challenge for peace and security in Libya. It is taking advantage of the power vacuum and continuing civil war in the country. ISIS carried out [four attacks](#) against the LNA, in Fuqaha, Tamanhint air base in Sabha, Ghadwa, and at the Zella oilfield in May 2019. The US carried out [three missile attacks in Murzuq](#) in southwest Libya in September, killing 36 ISIS terrorists. After the killing of Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi the ISIS in Libya has [pledged](#) their allegiance to the Abu Ibrahim Al Hashemi Al Qurashi, who was announced as the new leader of the group. Between April to November 2019, 10 suspected ISIS terrorists were arrested in the city of Sirte. Prior to 2019, when the US airstrikes targeted and struck ISIS positions on the ground, Libyan fighters were used to assess the damage and gather intelligence. However, Haftar, bombing the Libyan forces, including [a strike](#) that destroyed their main headquarters, has stopped Libyan fighters from traveling to sites of the US airstrikes and from patrolling the desert.

Regional and extra-regional powers

The involvement of the regional and extra-regional players has, to a large extent, shaped the politics and security in the country. In 2019, LNA managed to capture international support via its attempt to fight Islamist terrorism in

Libya. France has been supporting Haftar for his fight against the ISIS, along with UAE, Jordan and Egypt. US President Donald Trump too [recognised](#) Haftar's participation in fighting terrorism and securing Libya's oil resources. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El Sisi argued that the GNA would not be able to have a free reign because they were hostages under militias in Tripoli that he labeled as "[terrorists](#)". Though the UAE has officially supported the UN-backed government in Tripoli, recently it too has been supportive of Haftar's activities. On the other hand, even though it is UN-recognised, GNA received support only from Turkey. On November 27, Turkey and Libya signed two agreements on security and military cooperation and restriction of marine jurisdictions. Erdogan also [said](#) that if it is required by GNA, Turkey will increase its military support on December 22.

Conclusion

Even after a decade since the Arab unrest began, the situation in these three countries is unstable. There are a number of factors that have shaped the developments in these countries. While the political differences among the political factions and groups remain unresolved, the involvement of armed militias and terrorist groups has created further violence and instability. Taking opportunity of weak central authority, terrorist and extremist organisations have been trying to expand and further strengthen their strongholds in these countries. Though

the ISIS has been defeated in Iraq and Syria, it is reported that the remnants of the ISIS are trying to reassemble and may resurface at any opportune time in future. They are trying to gain a foothold in Yemen and expand their activities in Libya. If the situation continues unabated, it will only lead to violence, death, and destruction. The reconstruction of these countries will take years of effort, and at the same time, it would require a huge amount of financial assistance. The UN and the international community are trying their best to help these countries to come to terms with the civil war

situation. However, the parties and stakeholders involved in the conflicts have been inflexible and adamant in their approaches towards the situation, thereby, further driving the situation towards instability.

(Dr. Prasanta Kumar Pradhan is an Associate Fellow at West Asia Centre, IDSA.)

(Nagapushpa Devendra is a Research Analyst at West Asia Centre, IDSA.)

(Paulami Sanyal is a Research Analyst at IDSA)

Israel-Arab Relations: More Intractable than Ever

Adil Rasheed and Jatin Kumar

Little love was lost between the state of Israel and the Palestinian factions in 2019, as a new spiral of violence exacerbated the decades-old conflict between the two sides, while the Trump administration officially recognised Israeli sovereignty over Golan Heights, which had been seized from Syria in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Even the economic aspects of the Trump peace plan, titled “Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People”, which the US released on June 22, 2019, led to more acrimony and mistrust between the contending sides, as all Palestinian factions rejected the plan outright. Political uncertainty also prevailed in Israel, where recurring elections could not break the jinx of fractured mandates and failed attempts at government formation.

Israel-Palestinian clashes

The Israel-Palestinian conflict continued to spill blood in 2019, as phases of uneasy calm were interspersed by frequent clashes between the Hamas and the Islamic Jihad with the Israel Defence Force (IDF). Tensions spiked in May 2019, when two Israeli soldiers were injured in sniper fire in the Gaza Strip. In retaliation, Israeli Air Force targeted the area that killed two Palestinians. This led to a barrage of rockets being fired into Israel’s southern territories

and reprisal attacks by the IDF. On May 5, 2019, over 250 rockets were fired into southern and central Israel, many of which were intercepted by Israeli forces mid-air. In response, Israel Defence Forces struck 60 locations in the Palestinians. In view of the escalating situation, an Egypt-facilitated ceasefire came into effect on May 6, 2019.

However, tensions between the sides flared up later in the year, when the IAF targeted and killed Baha Abu al-Ata, commander of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) on November 12, 2019. In its briefing following the strike, the IDF described Abu al-Ata as a “ticking time bomb”, who it claimed was preparing for several attacks on Israeli territories. According to the IDF, he was responsible for “volley of rockets fired at the city of Sderot on November 1” and for targeting an open-air Sderot festival in August. The killing escalated hostilities between Israel and several Palestinian factions, excluding Hamas, which lasted two days. The clashes claimed 34 lives, including 23 men, eight children and three women.

Hostilities between Israel and Palestinians undermined any prospect of peace between the two sides. The US-proposed peace plan, termed as “peace for prosperity”, proved to be a non-starter.

Trump's Declaration on Golan Heights

On March 25, 2019, President Donald Trump officially recognised the Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights which was seized from Syria in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The US declaration spurred a fresh war of words between Israel and the countries of the region. Responding to the declaration, Syria's foreign ministry called the US decision a "blatant attack on the sovereignty and territorial integrity" of Syria. He further noted: "The liberation of the Golan by all available means and its return to the Syrian motherland is an inalienable right". While the Foreign Minister of Turkey, Mevlut Cavusoglu, said his country would not accept the US decision on the Golan Heights, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stressed that "the status of Golan has not changed". The United Nations Security Council had adopted a unanimous resolution in 1981 which stated that Israeli "decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights is null and void and without international legal effect".

In the wake of the UNSC resolution, the recent Trump declaration was criticised by some member-states of the Security Council. For its part, France noted that any effort to move away from international law and UN resolutions through unilateral decisions "is doomed to failure". While the UK said that the Golan is territory occupied by Israel. Commenting on the decision, the Foreign Minister of Russia said changing the status of the Golan Heights would violate UN Security

Council resolutions. In its response, Iran's foreign ministry said the "illegal and unacceptable recognition does not change the fact that it belongs to Syria". Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly rejected the move and said the Golan Heights are occupied Arab territory. The announcement was also condemned by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Israeli General Elections

For the first time in the history of Israel, two elections were held in the same year. However, the inconclusive results in both elections failed to produce a decisive mandate and no political party had the requisite majority, nor was any political combination able to form a government. With the withdrawal of one of the ruling Likud Party's vital coalition partners from the government on November 16, 2018, Israel decided to hold early elections on April 9, 2019, seven months ahead of schedule. The decision was taken to avoid the possibility of a sitting prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, being indicted in future on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in a set of long-running corruption cases.

The elections were held in the backdrop of violent confrontations with Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and with Iran in Syria. The results were largely in line with the projections made by pre-election polls and surveys. With a voter turnout of 68.41 percent, Likud appeared as the largest party with 36 seats, while the newly-formed 'Blue and White' bloc secured 35 seats. The results registered a significant change in the vote share of smaller parties with

Shas and United Torah Judaism securing eight seats each, Hadash-Ta'al and Labour winning six seats, Yisrael Beiteinu and United Right gaining five seats each and Meretz, Kulanu and Ra'am-Balad winning four seats each (See Table 1.1). After seeing off a strong challenge presented by Blue and White bloc in the elections, Netanyahu was given the opportunity to form a coalition government, but he failed to do so.

In the absence of a ruling party or coalition, Israel was left with no option but to hold another election within five months of the previous one. The second election was held on September 17, 2019 for the 22nd Knesset. The voter turnout was at 69 percent and the results placed Benny Gantz's Kahol Lavan Party as the largest with 33 seats, leaving Netanyahu's Likud Party one seat less at 32. The results showed that

the Likud was losing popularity, largely due to the ongoing corruption charges against Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Unlike previous elections, smaller parties performed better and secured more seats. The joint list secured 13 seats, Shias nine seats, Yisrael Beiteinu eight seats, UTJ and Yamina won seven seats, Labour-Gesher won six and the Democratic Union secured five seats (See Table 1.2). After the declaration of results, Netanyahu was invited to form a coalition government yet again, but was unable to in the assigned 42-day period. President Rivin then asked Benny Gantz to form the coalition government but he too failed.

It is noteworthy that Israel experienced a similar kind of deadlock twice in 1984 and 1988, though at that time the opposition party, Labour, helped Likud to form a National Unity Government.

Table: 1.1 – Knesset Election in Israel (April 9, 2019)

Name of list	Number of Votes	Percent of Total Votes	Number of Seats
Likud	1,140,370	26.46	35
Blue and White	1,125,881	26.13	35
Shas	258,275	5.99	8
United Torah Judaism	249,049	5.78	8
Hadash-Ta'al	193,442	4.49	6
Israeli Labor Party	190,870	4.43	6
Yisrael Beitenu	173,004	4.01	5
United Right	159,468	3.70	5
Meretz	156,473	3.63	4
Kulanu	152,756	3.54	4
Ra'am-Balad	143,666	3.33	4
Number of Eligible Voters	6,339,729		

Source: Government of Israel,

https://knesset.gov.il/description/eng/eng_mimshal_res21.htm

Table: 1.2 – Knesset Election in Israel (September 17, 2019)

Name of list	Number of Votes	Percent of Total Votes	Number of seats
Blue and White	1,151,214	25.95	33
Likud	1,113,617	25.10	32
Joint List (Hadash, Ra'am, Ta'al, Balad)	470,211	10.60	13
Shas	330,199	7.44	9
Yisrael Beitenu	310,154	6.99	8
United Torah Judaism	268,775	6.06	7
Yemina	260,655	5.87	7
Labor-Gesher	212,782	4.80	6
Democratic Union	192,495	4.34	5
Number of Eligible Voters	6,394,030		

Source: Government of Israel,
https://knesset.gov.il/description/eng/eng_mimshal_res22.htm

Economic Part of ‘Deal of the Century’ Unveiled

In order to address the Israel-Palestinian peace process, which has fallen into abeyance for several years, the Trump administration unveiled a \$50 billion Palestinian investment and infrastructure proposal aimed at supporting its much-anticipated but until then unreleased, “deal of the century” Middle East peace plan on June 22, 2019. The scheme called for an assortment of public and private financing and intended to create at least a million new jobs for Palestinians. The details were posted on the White House website before a two-day conference in Bahrain in late June. According to the proposal, donor nations and investors would contribute about \$50 billion, with \$28 billion going to the

Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza, \$7.5 billion to Jordan, \$9 billion to Egypt and \$6 billion for Lebanon. The White House hoped wealthy Gulf States to be among the biggest donors. Money raised through this international effort would be placed in a newly-created fund to boost the economies of the Palestinian areas and the aforementioned three states. The amount would be dispersed by a multinational development bank and the fund would be administered by a board of governors who would fix allocation on the basis of project proposals.

A “Peace to Prosperity” workshop in Manama was held amidst intense scepticism about its viability, and the fact that Palestinian leaders had rejected the economic proposal

outright, as it was believed that the proposed economic largesse was conditional to Palestinians making major political concessions as part of the complete deal. With no official participation from both Palestinians and Israelis the conference was later dubbed a ‘workshop’ and the economic part of ‘deal of the century’ proposal turned out to be a damp squib. Continued uncertainty and strong doubts over the plan’s political vision and the potential of a looming US-Iran conflict, prevented the proposal from becoming a serious plan.

Worsening Jordan-Israel ties

The year 2019 saw increasingly embittered Israel-Jordan relations. This can be attributed to recent Israeli policies on the issue of Jerusalem, West Bank settlements, its reported plans to annex the Jordan Valley and the stalled Israel and Palestinian peace deal. Strained political relations between the two countries remained a concern for the Jewish State, because Jordan and Egypt are the only two Arab countries that share formal diplomatic relations with Israel.

On October 14, 2019, the Speaker of the Jordanian House of Representatives and president of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union Atef Tarawneh, noted at the 141st International Parliamentary Union Assembly in Belgrade that the peace treaty between Jordan and Israel is “under threat” and it's mainly due to Israeli “violations” against Jerusalem. The situation further deteriorated on October 30, 2019, when Jordan called back its

envoy to Israel in protest against Israeli refusal to release two detained Jordanian citizens. In November 2019, King Abdullah of Jordan declared an end to a leased agreement that gave Israelis access to two border enclaves, Baqura and Ghamr. This has come as a major blow to the Israel-Jordan peace treaty, which was signed in 1994 between King Hussein and Yitzhak Rabin. The symbolic value of the decision points to the gradual erosion of trust between the two countries. The fact was acknowledged by King Abdullah himself on November 21, 2019 at an event organized by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in New York City, when he said that “the Jordanian-Israeli relationship is at an all-time low. Part of it is because of Israeli domestic issues”.

Israel expands ties with Gulf States

The growing fear of Iran’s rising influence in the region has brought erstwhile adversaries Israel and the Gulf countries much closer than before. In June 2019, Israeli journalists were surprised by the welcome they received at the ‘Economic Peace Summit’ at Bahrain. This was first time when the Israeli journalists were allowed to visit the country. On July 16, 2019, Foreign Minister Israel Katz met Bahrain’s Foreign Minister Sheikh Khaled Al Ahmad al-Khalifa in Washington. He was on a visit to Washington to take part in the US State Department’s freedom. On October 21, 2019, the head of the Foreign Ministry’s regional security and counter-terrorism

department of Israel Dana Benvenisti-Gabay, took part in a security conference known as the Working Security in Bahrain. This conference was a follow-up to the US-led Middle East Conference in Warsaw, which was held in February 2019 and focused on growing Iranian threats and terrorism in the region. Currently, Bahrain and Israel do not share formal diplomatic ties, but the Gulf countries are progressively developing the relationships with Israel against rising insecurity from Iran. In November 2019, Israeli players participated in a Ju-jitsu World Championship that was held in Abu Dhabi. It was also invited to participate at the Expo 2020 in the UAE. The Israeli participation has given a fresh sign of warming ties between Israel and some Arab states.

Although Kuwait has always been against normalizing relations with Israel, it was reported by an Israeli News Agency that a group of Kuwaiti businessmen visited Israel in February 2019. On November 26, 2019, the Foreign Ministry of Israel hosted a delegation of Arab journalists comprising participants from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq and Egypt, as well as two musicians from Iraq.

The assessment of Israel's Gulf policy underlines that in the short run, it wants to sign a "non-aggression" agreement with Gulf States which can become a cornerstone for the normalization of relations between the two. On October 6, 2019, Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz also hinted about it in his tweet which said that he is

seeking "non-aggression" agreements with Gulf States.

Series of protests erupt in Lebanon

Since October 17, 2019, the people of Lebanon have been protesting against the deteriorating economic situation and the corruption in political leadership. The protests focus on essential grassroot issues and have gone beyond the sociological divide. Interestingly, it has not been led by any political party. However, the demands of protesters have been more or less similar to previous protests in the region, as they mainly focus on corruption, economic crises and lack of freedom. The protests erupted on 17 October 17, 2019 when the government suggested raising revenues by introducing taxes on gasoline, tobacco and online phone calls, especially on the social media app 'WhatsApp'. The decision came at a time when other long-term issues, such as corruption, squandering of national wealth and swindling of governmental entities pushed people to agitate.

The proposal for new taxes came at a time when the country was facing a looming liquidity crisis. One of the main complaints of the people was the strict procedures imposed by banks in the country on the average depositors. The banks imposed caps on withdrawals which caused a scarcity of national currency in the Lebanese market. They also devalued the Lebanese pound against the US dollar. Furthermore, people were also unhappy with the political system,

which was believed to be riddled with nepotism and sectarianism and had failed to provide basic amenities to the citizenry.

To put an end to the protests on October 21, 2019, then Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced a set of reforms which promised strict measures against corruption and redressal of local grievances. However, the package of reforms did not satisfy the protesters who demanded his resignation and wanted an end to the sectarian quota system in Lebanese politics that according to them fostered corruption, nepotism, and government mismanagement.

Under immense pressure from the people, Saad Hariri stepped down from the position of prime minister on October 29, 2019. His resignation was welcomed by protesters; but the nationwide uprising continued and paralyzed life in the country for months. Finally, President Michel Aoun asked Hassan Diab to form the next government on December 19, 2019. The Hezbollah and its allies nominated Hassan Diab after consultations with Members of Parliament. Unsurprisingly, right after Aoun's announcement, protests started against Hasan Diab's nomination and protesters called for an independent head of government. This made it clear that the protesters were not going to accept any candidate which has the backing of the Hezbollah. The intensity of demonstrations underlined that the situation in Lebanon was not going to change so soon. Currently, Lebanon is

in urgent need of a government competent in dealing with the existing economic calamity and saving the country from further deterioration.

Syria: Battleground for Iran and Israel

In 2019, Syria continued to be an active playground for Iran-Israel rivalry. This was mainly due to Iran's presence in Syria which is seen as a serious national security challenge to Israel. Therefore, Israeli air force carried out multiple airstrikes targeting Iranian positions in Syria. On January 21, 2019, Israel's Intelligence Minister openly said that "Israel is in open confrontation with Iran in Syria". The statement came after Israeli Air force repelled a missile attack by Iranian forces from Syria into Israeli territory which intended to hit the northern Golan Heights. The tension grew amid planned US withdrawal from Syria. On August 25, 2019, it attacked areas near Damascus in order to avert an imminent drone attack by Iran. The attack was considered one of the most intense attacks on Iranian targets in several years and was responded to by Syrian anti-aircraft guns. On September 9, 2019, Syria blamed Israel for targeting eastern Syria which killed 18 Iran-backed militiamen. The attack came in the backdrop of growing tensions between Iran and the US in the wake of its withdrawal from JCPOA. On November 20, 2019, Israeli Air force targeted Iranian-backed forces near Damascus, in response to an Iranian attack on Israel a day earlier, significantly aggravating tensions

between Iran and Israel in Syria. According to a rights monitoring group, the strikes killed at least 21 people. Commenting on the strikes, IDF said

Conclusion

In the wake of the above developments the prognosis for the upcoming year in this region seems quite grim. For one, there is the likelihood of continued Israeli-Palestinian confrontation with very low possibility of reaching an agreement. Israel favours the 'Deal of the Century' peace proposal, but it has already been rejected by the Palestinians. Meanwhile, Iran's presence in Syria will continue to force Israel to carry out air strike. Protests and a worsening economic situation in

that the strikes were focused on "Terror Targets" and was retaliated by a Syrian air defense missile targeting Israel.

Lebanon have the potential to add one more politically and socially weak state in the region. Israel's worsening relations with Jordan may exacerbate security issues; Israel's gradually improving relations with the Gulf countries may have a positive effect on the Jewish state, as it does not share formal diplomatic relations with a large number of Arab States.

(Dr Adil Rasheed is Research Fellow at West Asia Centre, IDSA)

(Jatin Kumar is Research Analyst at West Asia Centre, IDSA)

External Powers and WANA: The US, Russia and China

Meena Singh Roy and Md. Muddassir Quamar

The West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region has for long faced interventions and has been influenced by external powers. While historically, the European colonial powers had intervened in the region in search for resources and market, the situation changed after the Second World War, whereby in the dynamics that played out, the United States and Soviet Union competed for influence and alliances in the region. This led to serious conflicts and proxy wars between the US and former Soviet Union. The debate of a unipolar world after the disintegration of the former Soviet Union notwithstanding, the United States remained the only pole in regional geopolitics in WANA region until the advent of the Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria, that facilitated the re-entry of Russia in the region. Further, in the last decade or so, China has gained a significant foothold in the region through its economic diplomacy and has now started to take interest in political and strategic affairs to safeguard its economic interests. Moreover, given the developments within the European Union and the growing regional competition in WANA, the European countries too are taking greater interest even though their ability to shape the outcome of regional geopolitics remains limited.

The US

US foreign policy has faced serious disruptions and unpredictability under President Donald Trump. In the WANA region, the focus of the Trump administration has been containment of Iran by exerting “maximum pressure” to weaken the Iranian resolve to spread its hegemony in the region at the cost of the US’ strategic interests and of its regional allies namely Israel and Saudi Arabia. The other issue that has received substantial attention of the Trump administration is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the objective of finding a solution through the much hyped “deal of the century”. Besides, President Trump has focussed on lucrative defence deals with the countries of the region and for the first time since the Kuwait Crisis (1990-91) stationed forces in Saudi Arabia. In Syria and Iraq, US military presence continues despite the expressions by President Trump to minimise military commitments or completely withdraw forces.

US-Iran hostilities witnessed a sharp rise in 2019 following the US decision of May 2018 to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the re-imposition of secondary sanctions on Iran under the “maximum pressure” strategy. In April 2019, the US designated the Iranian

Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organisation (FTO) and sanctioned some of its key leaders including its commander, General Qassem Soleimani. The IRGC is one of the most important arms of the Iranian regime with significant influence over domestic political and economic affairs and has a near-monopoly over strategic affairs, especially in developing Iran's regional influence. IRGC is responsible for developing Iran's military ties with state and non-state actors in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and the Palestinian territories. Trump, without identifying the [specific instances accused IRGC of involvement in multiple acts of terror](#) against the US, reiterated the view that Iran is sponsoring terror through the IRGC. The US also ended the exemptions for eight countries, including India, which was extended for 180 days in November 2018 while imposing secondary sanctions on Iranian oil imports.

The hostilities between the US and Iran continued to escalate throughout 2019. Iran, as a way of responding to US sanctions on Iranian oil exports either directly or through the Houthis in Yemen, targeted oil vessels in the Persian Gulf. For example, [two Saudi oil tankers were sabotaged off the UAE coast](#) in May while similar attacks took place against two oil tankers operated by companies based in Japan and Norway in June in the Strait of Hormuz. This prompted the US to step up its military deployment in the Persian Gulf [with deployment of additional warships and patriot missile batteries](#) in May. The situation came to a head in June

after Iran shot down an unarmed aerial surveillance drone accusing it of violating Iranian air space. However, at the time, President Trump changed the plan to attack Iran stating that it will cause [disproportionate damage and loss of life](#) to Iran. In July, an Iranian oil tanker allegedly heading to Syria was seized by Britain in the Strait of Gibraltar, and in retaliation Iran captured a British oil tanker and its crew, including Indian members, in the Persian Gulf. The issue was resolved later after the two tankers and crew members were released by both sides. Further, the US refrained from taking direct military action after the [attack on two Saudi Aramco oil facilities](#) in Abqaiq and Khurais in September, which both Saudi Arabia and the US blamed on Iran despite the Yemeni rebels claiming responsibility.

Towards the end of 2019, the tensions had started to rise again but this time the theatre was Iraq which was facing protests against the Iraqi government as well as Iran's interference in domestic politics. Tehran, in conjunction with Baghdad, was trying to contain the unrest and this led to the targeting of the protestors by the *Hashd al-Shabbior*, the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF), the Iran aligned umbrella organisation of Shi'a militia which caused [deaths of several Iraqi protestors](#). Further, *Kataib Hezbollah*, a dominant group within the PMF, carried out rocket attacks at the [K1 military base in Kirkuk used by the US forces](#) in the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq that led to the death of a US military contractor and injured

some US personnel. In retaliation, the US launched air strikes on *Kataib* targets in Iraq and Syria leading to death of 25 fighters. To protest US action and the killing of its fighters as well as a counter to ongoing Iraqi protests to demand the end of the Adel Abdul-Mahdi government, the PMF organised sit-in and protests near the US embassy in Baghdad.

On December 31, a serious escalation happened when a large number of PMF protestors tried to break-in the embassy and set a number of security installations in the outer perimeter of the embassy on fire. The US retaliated with [drone strikes at Baghdad airport](#) on the intervening night of January 2 and 3, 2020, in which General Soleimani, the IRGC commander and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the chief of *Kataib Hezbollah* along with several others, were killed. The killing of Soleimani, considered close to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and regarded only second to him in terms of his influence within the regime, not only stunned the world but also created an immediate fear of serious military escalation in the Persian Gulf. Iranian leaders pledged to retaliate and take revenge for the killing and the IRGC through its bases in Iraq targeted military bases in Iraq used by US personnel. Nonetheless, the mistaken downing of a Ukrainian civilian aircraft put Tehran on the defensive.

The Trump administration since taking office has stated the objective of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the much hyped “deal

of the century.” After the controversial decision to recognise undivided Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, in March 2019, [Trump recognised the 1981 Israeli law annexing Golan Heights](#) which it captured from Syria during the 1967 war. In June 2019, the first part dealing with the economic aspects of Trump’s proposed peace plan was launched in Manama. The document titled [“Peace for Prosperity” pledges to contribute US\\$ 50 billion](#) for the economic development of the Palestinian territories if the Palestinian leadership agrees to the political plan for ending the Israeli occupation. Incidentally, the event to launch the economic plan of the “deal” was not attended by the Palestinian leaders who claimed that they are not ready to sell the rights of the Palestinian people.

Later, in January 2020, the [political framework of the deal](#) was launched ending the long-anticipated and much-hyped talk about the best possible plan to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The proposed framework came as a shock and surprise for the international community as it justified the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and did not address any of the important issues in the long conflict, namely border, settlements, right of refugees to return and status of Jerusalem. Expectedly, the plan was rejected by the Palestinian side [that termed it as “slap of the century”](#) calling that the US has lost its position as a neutral mediator and the proposed plan confirms that the Trump administration is working at the behest of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu to help him in the forthcoming Israeli Knesset elections.

With its efforts failing to make any headway in resolving the rift within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the growing tensions in the Persian Gulf, the US has enhanced its military deployments in the Arab Gulf countries. While the GCC countries rely on the US for security, Saudi Arabia is among the largest buyers of US military equipment and training programmes. President Trump since taking over the administration has touted the defence deals with Saudi Arabia as the most important aspect for continued strategic partnership between the two countries. During his visit to Riyadh in May 2017 the two sides had [reportedly signed a defence procurement deal worth US\\$ 110 billion](#). However, in May 2019, the administration's plan to sell surface-to-air missile systems to Saudi Arabia for deployment in Yemen came in for bipartisan criticism in the US Congress.

In October, the [US Department of Defense announced](#) that due to the escalating tensions in the Persian Gulf, the US has sent around 3,000 personnel to be stationed in Saudi Arabia. This is in addition to the limited number of personnel sent for training and advisory purposes. This is the first time that the US military personnel returned to the kingdom after they had left in later 1990s due to the rising controversy over stationing of foreigners and "infidels" in the kingdom. Further, the US has confirmed that in 2019, over 14,000

additional military personnel were sent to various US military bases in the Persian Gulf in the wake of rising tensions with Iran to ensure safety and security of the smaller Arab Gulf states.

The US, despite the announcement has not been able to withdraw completely from the Syrian and Iraqi theatres. In the Syrian case, Trump had in [December 2018 announced that the US will withdraw from Syria](#) as the main objective of the defeat of Islamic State (ISIS) had been achieved. However, this raised doubts within the US as well as among the allies in Europe over the sudden vacuum the complete withdrawal will create. At the time, the Pentagon and State Department had been able to reduce the anxiety by preventing a complete withdrawal and underlining that the US only plans to reduce its personnel after the defeat of the ISIS but will continue to deploy some forces to help strengthen the Kurdish militias who were instrumental in the fight against the ISIS. However, again in October 2019, President Trump took everyone by surprise, after talks with the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, announcing that the US [has ordered complete withdrawal of US forces from northern Syria](#). This was done to placate Turkey which had been threatening to launch a full-scale war in northern Syria against the US-allied Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Unit (YPG) which Ankara claimed was in league with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey. Despite the announcement of withdrawal of forces, the US killed the

ISIS leader on October 27 in an operation carried out with the assistance of Turkish forces in the northwest Idlib region of Syria.

Even in Iraq, the situation has not changed much despite the growing cost of the war and President Trump's occasional pronouncements to bring back the American soldiers from [the wretched wars in the Middle East](#). After the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in 2011, the US forces were redeployed under a diplomatic agreement in 2014 in pursuance of the US-Iraq Strategic Framework Agreement signed in 2008 to fight the growing menace of ISIS. Despite the much anticipated military defeat of the ISIS in December 2017, the US has not been able to withdraw its forces from Iraq because of growing internal divisions in Iraq, the continued weakness of the Iraqi military as well as the growing influence of Iran-aligned militias. The US Congress has authorised the continued deployment of US forces until December 2020 and given the escalation in tensions with Iran and reports about the revival of ISIS, it is unlikely to be able to withdraw the forces from Iraq.

US-Turkey relations have gone through major fluctuations in the past few years. One of the key sticking points has been the Turkish decision to buy the Russian S-400 missile system. In July 2019, after the first consignment of the S-400 was delivered, the US announced that it is removing [Turkey from the agreement on supply of 100 F-35 fighter jets](#) and the US will no longer manufacture the components of F-35 jets in Turkey. In

addition, there have been several issues that have created tensions between the two allies including differences over dealing with the Syrian Kurds. While the US sees the Syrian Kurds as an ally that helped defeat the ISIS in Syria, for Turkey the YPD-PYG's association with the PKK is considered a national security threat.

As noted earlier, the US decided to pull back its forces in northern Syria in October to facilitate the creation of the Turkish safe-zone to secure the porous Turkey-Syria border. In the same month, the Trump administration imposed sanctions on a few of the cabinet members of the Turkish government but after the coming into the effect of the ceasefire on October 23, the sanctions were withdrawn. This has, however, not changed the status of resolutions passed by the US Congress on Turkey called the [Protect against Conflict by Turkey Act](#) which has provisions for sanctioning Turkish officials and institutions for foreign arms procurement. The continued tensions place the long-term relations between the two NATO allies in serious jeopardy.

Russia

In a region deeply affected by rivalry, historic disputes, civil wars and national security concerns, Russia was able to enhance its presence and role. With its aggressive involvement and active diplomacy President Vladimir Putin has been able to secure Russia's long-term eminence in the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region. Moscow's military intervention in Syria

in 2015 was the turning point, officially restoring Russia as a key player in regional geopolitics. Thereafter its presence and involvement continued to grow. In 2019, Moscow's strategies signalled its continued desire to sustain its strategic space in Syria and build stronger ties with other Gulf partners. Its [policies were focused on](#) maximizing opportunities in the region with a minimum of commitment or potential for losses.

Throughout the WANA region, Russia has been ubiquitous, with its growing political, security and military linkages. Russia's growing involvement was in many ways facilitated by the lack of any comprehensive US strategy towards the region. [Some believe](#) that "Russia has made inroads in the Middle East at the expense of U.S. power." Interestingly, its role in Syria was acknowledged by President Trump. He thanked Putin for facilitating the operation to kill Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the ISIS leader. Despite Moscow's strong ties with Iran, Saudi Arabia gave a red-carpet welcome to President Putin. More importantly, Russia's role in the region in general and Syria in particular, has made Moscow a crucial actor for regional countries including the US allies, to manage their national security interests. Some of the examples are those of Turkey, the Kurds and the Bashar Al-Assad regime. [All three have engaged Russia](#) to protect their security interests. Turkey has fallen deep into Moscow's sphere of influence, not only enhancing political ties but also by buying the S-400 system, a deal opposed by the Trump administration.

Similarly, Lebanon has struck a deal with Rosneft, mainly to develop and operate oil facilities in the northern city of Tripoli. This helps Russia to have its presence in Lebanon's energy sector, besides managing to secure Syrian border with Lebanon by thwarting Tripolitan Islamist support for the Syrian opposition. Lebanon views Russia as a counterbalance to Iran. Egypt has advanced its political and defence ties with Russia to counter new security challenges coming from Sinai, from Syria and the critical situation evolving in Libya. Expanding counterterrorism cooperation, Egypt held first-of-a-kind joint military drills, dubbed 'Arrow of Friendship-1', from October 26 to November 7, 2019. Israel, yet another important American ally, has maintained good relations with Russia. Israel signed an agreement with Russia according to which, Moscow will not only secure the Israel-Syria border but also prevent Iran from building military bases in southern Syria.

The Arab Gulf countries have been equally welcoming towards deepening their ties with Moscow. Growing Arab-Russia ties are viewed by the Gulf leadership as a counterbalance to the Iran-Russia partnership. This perception becomes more important in the light of the shifting focus of the Trump administration towards East Asia as compared to West Asia. President Putin's first visit in October 2019 to Saudi Arabia and the UAE since 2007, highlighted his desire to build stronger ties with these two vital Gulf states assuring its Gulf partners that

Russia-Iran relations were not against them. President [Putin said](#) that “We build bilateral relations that rely on positive trends generated by our contacts; we do not build alliances against anyone.” Showing the Kingdom’s interest to work closely with Russia, [Saudi King Salman remarked](#), “We look forward to working with Russia to achieve security and stability and fight terrorism.” Russia has been pursuing a balancing policy in the region to protect its interests. Russia-Israel relations continued to grow, which was reflected by Moscow’s acceptance of Israeli strikes in Syria against Hezbollah on many occasions. However, at the other end it continued to cooperate with Iran and Hezbollah on the ground in Syria to protect the Bashar Al-Assad regime. It also provided the S-300 anti-aircraft system to both Iran and Syria, despite Israel strongly opposing the move. In case of Yemen, Russia sided with the Gulf States against Iran by supporting the GCC’s position. Similarly, Moscow associated itself with Arab partners – Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt – in the case of Libya, by supporting General Khalifa Haftar. Despite supporting Haftar, Moscow has built links with all major players on the ground. As tensions continue to escalate there, Moscow is [well-positioned to play a role of mediator](#), particularly in a situation when the US seems to be supporting a Russian role. Russia’s strategic interests in Libya are real (mainly energy and port access) and it is making every effort to secure its interest. Countries like Oman, Kuwait, and Iraq have followed the policy of maintaining

equal distance with Russia, the US and Iran. Russia maintained cordial relations with these countries. After the killing of Gen. Qassim Suleimani, the Iraqi government called for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.

Russia views its engagement with the WANA region as a way to re-establish its past position as global power particularly at a time when the US position and influence is seen to be weakening. The other important reason for Russia to enhance its engagement with the region has been its concern about the potential for the spread of Islamic extremism and terrorism to Russia and its neighbouring states from hotspots in West Asia. Unlike the US, Moscow presents itself as a reliable partner to promote trade, investment and energy cooperation instead of raising issues of human rights, regime change and freedom of press. By its intervention and diplomacy in the Syrian conflict, President Putin has succeeded in positioning himself as a regional powerbroker. Common energy interests of Russia and the regional countries have facilitated their cooperation in this field. [Russia and the West Asian](#) region have more than 60 per cent of the world’s proven oil and gas reserves, and they produce 50 per cent of the world’s oil and almost 40 per cent of its natural gas. Russia and Saudi Arabia have been the primary drivers behind the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)+1 arrangement that has been involved in setting the oil prices. Russia is not only a primary exporter of oil and gas, it also exports significant nuclear

technology to the West Asian region, with deals to build nuclear power plants in Iran, Jordan, and Egypt and discussions underway with Saudi Arabia, which has an ambitious plan to build 16 nuclear reactors by 2032. Arms sales have been a key factor, driving Russia's policy towards the region. [Nearly fifty percent of Russian arms sales](#) go to this region, up from 36 per cent in 2015. Regional countries view Russia as a feasible alternative source of arms supplies to the US. Egypt and Iraq are major arms importers from Russia. [Egypt and Russia concluded a deal](#) worth \$2 billion in March 2019, which includes more than 20 Sukhoi SU-35 multi-role fighter jets. Russia has also signed deals with the UAE. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are reported to be in discussion with the Kremlin to purchase the advanced [S-400 anti-aircraft system](#).

Another important tool that Russia possesses to enhance its presence and influence, has been the usage of its soft power through state-funded media networks like *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) and *Sputnik International* news agency. They continue to partner with local media outlets to enhance their legitimacy, particularly driving the attention of the youth of the region. A most [recent Arab Youth Survey](#) found that 64 per cent of young Arabs see Russia as an ally, while only 41 per cent say the same about the US. Moreover, the perception of the US as the enemy has nearly doubled since 2016. In the near future, Russia will continue to enhance its influence in the region despite its limitations. Russia's policy

in the region clearly signals its intent for a long-term presence to protect its strategic assets and to gain from its military sales and energy cooperation. Now, it has made inroads beyond Syria, establishing ties with Arab and non-Arab countries.

China

In addition to the US and Russia, China is the most important external player in the WANA region. China's rapid economic rise and its growing trade and diplomatic relations with the regional countries has made it as a major international actor in regional affairs. Though China has eschewed any serious military or strategic commitment in the region, it has not shied away from agreeing to develop bilateral defence and military ties and has increased its maritime presence in the western Indian Ocean region. Towards the end of 2019, [Russia, China and Iran conducted a massive joint naval exercise in the Gulf of Oman](#). From the Iranian point of view, this was considered a show of strength and as a way to assert that Iran is not isolated amidst heightened regional tensions. China though, termed the exercise as a routine drill, to enhance the operational understanding in international waters to safeguard its maritime trade routes and a Chinese defence ministry official clarified that [this need not be linked to the regional situation](#).

China has also spent billions of dollars to build and upgrade ports and naval facilities in the western Indian Ocean region including in Djibouti and Oman, that underlines the growing Chinese

appetite for developing assets in the region that can be utilised for safeguarding Chinese trade and business interests in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman. Despite the growing diplomatic, political and strategic relations, compared to the US and Russia, China has continued to focus on trade and economic relations. There are, however, signs that China might be preparing to change that, and this is visible from its growing forays in the western Indian Ocean as well as the organisation of the [first security conclave on the Middle East](#) in November 2019.

The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has received an enthusiastic response in the region which sees economic opportunities promised by the BRI. In terms of total trade with the region, China has more trade with the WANA region than the combined total of the US and Russia. In 2019, its [total trade with West Asia](#) was estimated at US\$ 236 billion, which is a minor drop from US\$ 245 billion in 2018. A key component of the bilateral trade is energy imports from the Persian Gulf. China, like India, imports a majority of its oil and gas from the region, with Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran as the leading suppliers. In addition to energy, [the major commodities of trade include](#) heavy machineries, electronic goods, automobiles, iron and steel, textile and footwear, chemicals and food and agricultural products, which China exports to WANA.

In addition to bilateral trade, China has emerged as one of the [key international](#)

[investors in the economies in the WANA region](#) both through FDIs as well as partnership in infrastructure development projects. Chinese financial commitment for developmental projects was estimated at US\$ 20 billion in 2018 with an additional US\$ 3 billion in loans for revival of the banking sector in the Arab countries affected by conflicts. China is among the most important partners for Gulf countries in their bid to build infrastructure and diversify their economies. Among the most important projects which China is involved in, are: the construction of the Lusail stadium in Qatar for hosting the FIFA 2022 World Cup, the Yanbu refinery project and the Harmain railway project in Saudi Arabia and several port development projects in the region including in the UAE, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel.

The European Union (EU)

The EU has been embroiled in internal problems due to the unresolved Brexit issue. Having finally agreed on a plan the problem of how it will impact trade and economic ties with the Gulf countries comes to the fore. Whatever the future might hold, the EU countries have been significantly affected by developments beyond their control as far as their engagements with WANA are concerned. The signing of the JCPOA in 2015 had brought new opportunities for the EU for business and trade with Iran; however, the sudden US decision of withdrawing from the JCPOA seriously jeopardised the interests of the EU vis-à-vis Iran. To

circumvent the US sanctions and to keep the JCPOA alive, in January 2019, the EU3 (Germany, France and UK) announced the creation of the [Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges \(INSTEX\)](#), a special-purpose vehicle, to continue trading with Iran. However, there is a lack of information as to the extent to which this has been effective.

On May 8, 2019, Iran announced that it will [scale-down its commitments to the JCPOA](#) but will not completely withdraw from it, which kept the hopes of the EU alive of finding a way out of the situation. However, the escalation in tensions throughout the year and the killing of General Soleimani in the beginning of 2020 has further blurred the possibilities of keeping the nuclear deal alive. Soon after the escalation, Iran announced that it is partially withdrawing from the nuclear deal. According to [a BBC report](#), the statement issued after a cabinet meeting in Tehran said that Iran “would no longer observe limitations on its capacity for enrichment, the level of enrichment, the stock of enriched material, or research and development.” This raises doubts about the EU’s efforts to keep the nuclear deal afloat.

The other EU concern vis-à-vis the WANA region is the constant flow of refugees from the countries affected by the civil wars including Syria, Iraq and Libya. This has led to the rise of xenophobic calls for prevention of refugee influx and has caused serious internal strife and tension with Turkey

that was used by the refugees as a passage to Europe. Though countries such as Germany have been more forthcoming in allowing the influx of refugees, the growing xenophobic calls pushed the [EU countries to enter into a deal with Turkey](#) to prevent the flow of refugees. This not only led to pressure and bargaining from Turkey but also raises questions about the humanitarian and human rights commitments of the EU itself. Nonetheless, after an agreement with Turkey, the EU countries were hoping to have resolved the situation, but in early 2020, with the situation in Syrian region of Idlib worsening, Ankara decided to allow the passage of Syrian refugees to Europe, straining the [already fragile relations](#) further between the EU and Turkey.

Though politically marginal, the EU has robust trade ties with the WANA region, especially the Arab Gulf countries and Turkey. According to estimates, EU-WANA trade is worth an average of over US\$ 600 billion since 2014-15 and despite disruptions due to regional strife, trade with GCC countries and Turkey has shown an upward trend. The EU is the second-largest weapon supplier and aid provider to WANA, behind only the US. Further, they have significantly invested in the major economies including Turkey, Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Israel, which makes them more vulnerable to rising conflicts and instability in the region.

Prognosis

In 2019, the region continued to grapple with problems that are either externally created or have been accentuated due to external intervention and influence. The US remains the most important external power whose moves in the Persian Gulf, Syria, Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continued to define the regional dynamics. However, US dominance was challenged by the growing influence of, and alignments between, Russia and China. China and Russia are unlikely to replace the US but their policy will be driven mainly by the desire to secure their economic interests and strategic space.

The European countries have remained divided on how to safeguard their interests, but have continued to engage with all regional and external actors to assuage the situation without much impact on the outcome.

(Meena Singh Roy is Research Fellow and Coordinator, West Asia Centre, IDSA)

(Md. Muddassir Quamar is Associate Fellow at West Asia Centre, IDSA)

India and the West Asian Region: Expanding Cooperation and Managing Challenges

Meena Singh Roy and Lakshmi Priya

West Asia continued to be in a state of deep disarray in 2019. The region witnessed the second phase of 'Arab Spring' with public protests in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon and Iran. The Iran-Saudi rivalry took a completely different turn, being reflected in increased violence in Yemen, sabotaging of oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, and attacks on the Saudi ARAMCO oil refinery. The "maximum pressure" policy of President Trump led to heightened tensions between the US and Iran affecting the entire region. The unveiling of the "Deal of the century" by the US did very little in terms of finding unacceptable solution to the Palestine-Israel conflict. In Syria, one noticed a new situation with the Syrian government's offensive to retake Idlib and Turkey's increased offensive to secure its security interests. Some of the other noticeable trends in the year were the indictment of Benjamin Netanyahu for bribery and sentencing of Sudan's ousted President Omar Al Bashir for financial irregularities.

In a region fraught with economic and social upheavals, conflicts, proxy wars and uncertainties, India continued to pursue active diplomacy, building stronger security ties and advancing economic partnerships with the

countries of the region. The year 2019 was in many ways a continuation of India's policy of cementing its strategic ties to protect its economic and strategic interests in the region. These interests are mainly, free flow of bilateral trade and investments, energy security, expatriate remittances, counter-radicalisation and combating terrorism, and maintaining strong relations with regional power centres despite the adversarial relations between them. The number of high-level visits of delegations both from India and the countries of the region demonstrates the success of bilateral relations. The details of some important visits are given in Annexure-1.

Re-invigorating Cooperation with Gulf Partners

India has strong relations with the regional countries but its core interests lie in the Persian Gulf region where nearly 9 million of its citizens live and work and contribute nearly 50 percent of the remittances India receives annually. In addition, India imports over 60 percent of its energy needs and over 80 percent of its crude oil needs from the region. This region is one of India's largest trading partners, with

bilateral trade amounting to over US \$150 billion in 2018-19. India has therefore significantly enhanced its engagement with the Arab countries with frequent political and diplomatic contacts. This has resulted in a greater understanding and appreciation of each other's concerns and interests. India has prioritized the agenda of economic development and cooperation with the Gulf countries for mutual economic progress. There are growing synergies on fighting terrorism, combating radicalism and ensuring maritime security in the Arabian Sea and Western Indian Ocean.

A key pillar of India's engagement during 2019 has been its enhanced focus on cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE while maintaining stronger partnerships with other countries in the region. India re-energized cooperation with Gulf countries, as Saudi crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud paid his first state visit to India in February and conveyed his appreciation for the Indian model of inclusiveness, pluralism and tolerance while Prime Minister Modi welcomed the reforms in Saudi Arabia to bring openness. The two sides agreed to cement the existing strategic partnership by creating the Strategic Partnership Council and welcomed the opportunities of joint collaboration and investments brought out by the workshop between NITI Aayog and Saudi Centre for International Strategic Partnership. [MoUs and agreements](#) on investment, tourism, housing, and international solar alliance were signed as the Crown Prince announced an

investment of US\$ 100 billion in areas of refining, energy, petrochemicals, infrastructure, agriculture, minerals and mining, manufacturing, education, and health in India. Focusing on investment, Riyadh and New Delhi acknowledged the untapped potential in merchandise trade as part of non-oil sector and intended to align the Kingdom's vision 2030 with India's flagship initiatives of 'Make in India', 'Start-up India', Smart cities, Clean India and Digital India.

India and Saudi Arabia agreed to expedite the implementation of the joint venture west coast refinery and petrochemical project and transform the buyer-seller relationship to a strategic partnership. The two partners decided to set up a joint working group on skill development, enhancing defence cooperation and inaugurated a joint naval exercise. Cooperation on maritime security, counter-terrorism, cybercrime, and peaceful use of atomic energy is the new focus. Prime Minister Modi visited the Kingdom in October 2019 to attend the third session of the Future Investment Initiative Forum, discussed ways to promote security and safety of waterways and reiterated rejection of interference in internal affairs of other countries. During this visit, both countries signed [12 MoUs/Agreements](#) on a number of issues. The agreements were in the fields of establishment of the Strategic Partnership Council; renewable energy; combating illicit trafficking and smuggling of narcotic drugs; military acquisition, industries, research, development and technology; civil aviation; medical products regulations;

small and medium enterprises; an agreement between Foreign Service Institute, and Prince Saud Al Faisal Institute of Diplomatic Studies; Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves and Stock Exchanges and Payments.

India and Saudi security and defence cooperation have moved in new directions. Signing of the defence cooperation agreement, the agreement on military acquisition, industries, research, development and technology demonstrates mutual trust and confidence to engage each other in the sensitive defence sectors. Security cooperation has emerged as a key pillar of India-Saudi bilateral relations. Earlier, in an [interview](#) to Saudi newspaper *Arab News*, Modi stated, “Asian powers like India and Saudi Arabia share similar security concerns in their neighborhood. In that respect, I am happy that our cooperation, particularly in the field of counterterrorism, security and strategic issues, is progressing very well.” Saudi Arabia has deported a number of Indians wanted back in India for several crimes and terror activities. India has also condemned the drone and missile attacks on the kingdom.

During the year, India re-energised its ties with the UAE. The Order of Zayed, the highest civil decoration of the UAE was awarded to Prime Minister Modi in recognition of his distinguished leadership for giving a big boost to bilateral relations between the two countries. The depth of bilateral cooperation got reflected when the Emirate strongly defended the decision

to invite India as a guest of honour to the meeting of the [Organisation of Islamic Cooperation \(OIC\)](#) foreign ministers in March despite Pakistan’s strong objection and threat to boycott the event. The comprehensive strategic partnership was raised to new level during the visit of the UAE’s foreign minister to India. It is to be noted that the UAE is the first country to participate in India’s ‘Strategic petroleum reserves’ programme.

Another significant event that cemented India’s ties with its Gulf partners was Prime Minister Modi’s visit to Bahrain in August 2019, which was the first-ever by any Indian Prime Minister. During his visit, PM Modi was conferred the prestigious ‘The King Hamad Order of the Renaissance’, the highest honour of Bahrain. Three were signed during this visit in the areas of space technology, renewable energy and culture. The visit was undertaken to fructify collaboration between ISRO and NASA, BENEFIT and NPCI for launch of the RUPAY card in Bahrain and with the International Solar Alliance. India expressed its strong desire of cooperation between its energy companies in conventional exploration and development of newly-discovered oil and gas assets in Bahrain. Maritime security figured as an important area of cooperation as it is vital for the safety of sea lanes.

Oman, a significant and strategic Gulf partner for India, continued to draw attention from the Indian leadership. India’s Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar had a “fruitful” discussion with the Omani defence minister

during his [visit to Oman](#) in December. Both countries reaffirmed their commitment to further expand “robust” defence, security and maritime ties. India is among Oman’s [top trading partners](#). During 2018-19, bilateral trade was worth US\$ 5 billion. There are over 7,80,000 Indian citizens in Oman, the second-largest expatriate community in the country. In 2018, India was the second-largest importer of crude oil from Oman.

Similarly, India and Kuwait worked together to enhance economic ties. It is important to note that Kuwait, with its plan to double its investments in India from the current US \$ 5 billion by the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA), is exploring third-country joint projects with New Delhi on the lines of the India-UAE project in Ethiopia. India’s Vice-President M. Venkaiah Naidu proposed to host an economic forum in New Delhi to bring together investors from the private sector, officials from the chambers of commerce and industry, and investment bodies from both the countries, to discuss ways of increasing trade and investment opportunities, during a meeting with the Ambassador of Kuwait Jassim Al Najem. [Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al Jarallah](#) noted that Kuwait is keen on boosting relations with India, and the joint political coordination committee meets regularly.

Qatar-India ties have generally been associated with their strong energy cooperation, but 2019 saw the strengthening of cultural ties. 2019 was Qatar-India Year of Culture, culminating in the exploration and

celebration of similarities and differences. Some of the key events in India were the Qatar Art Exhibition and the Doha International Book Fair 2019, where India was the Guest of Honour. The two countries conducted a three-day naval exercise, Za’ir Al Bahr (Roar of the Sea) in November.

Managing Expectations of Iran and Iraq

India continued to manage its ties with Iran in the light of increasing Iran-US tensions and the growing effects of the ‘maximum pressure’ policy of the US. In his [maiden visit to Iran](#), Jaishankar reviewed the entire gamut of India-Iran cooperation and agreed on accelerating the Chabahar Project. As the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran, [Javad Zarif](#) visited India [twice](#), both countries tried to find ways to move forward on cooperating on issues of security and connectivity despite the fact that India stopped importing oil from Iran. Adhering to its principle of strategic autonomy, New Delhi continued to pursue its partnership with Tehran to protect its long term economic and strategic interests.

Iraq became India’s top crude oil supplier for the second consecutive year, meeting more than one-fifth of the country’s oil needs in the 2018-19 fiscal year. In September, Ambassador of Iraq [Falah Abdulhasan](#) said Iraq was looking for investments by Indian companies in the oil and gas sector. Iraq has been expecting greater involvement by India in their oil and gas sector. In this context, New Delhi needs to work towards increasing its

presence in Iraq. While circumstances are difficult, yet, a blueprint of long-term engagement deserves greater attention. With the aim of developing closer political cooperation, [Shri V. Muraleedharan](#), Minister of State for External Affairs visited Iraq in September. During the visit, he unveiled a bust of Mahatma Gandhi at Sami Abdulrahman Park and addressed the Indian community.

Israel and Palestine: Balancing Act

The year 2019 witnessed cementing of the existing strong relations between India and Israel. The leadership on both sides has acknowledged the growing nature of strategic cooperation and friendship. In PM Modi's words the bilateral relationship, ["is strong and eternal."](#) Similar views were aired by Israeli PM Netanyahu who said: ["Our ties will only strengthen in the future."](#) Describing India-Israel security cooperation as a "strategic asset" President Reuven Rivlin said that bilateral relations are at an ["all-time high."](#) One [noticed greater synergy](#) between the two countries in the area of cyber security to safeguard their financial markets, including collaboration between market regulators and bringing Israeli investment in corporate bonds. It is important to note that Israel is looking to Indian investments in the Tel Aviv stock market. Some new areas of engagement were also highlighted by Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, which are mainly –the construction sector, new trends of connectivity and artificial intelligence. The close bond between

the two countries got reflected when India voted in [favour of Israel](#) over a decision to grant consultative status to Shahed, the Palestinian human rights NGO in June. Netanyahu thanked Modi personally for India's support and the unprecedented ["historic vote"](#).

India has been consistent with its policy of de-hyphenating relations with Israel and Palestine. In November, India along with another 165 nations voted in [favour of the resolution](#) titled "The right of the Palestinian people to self-determination" at the UN General Assembly's Third Committee, while the United States, Israel, Nauru, Micronesia and the Marshall Islands voted against it, and nine countries, including Australia, Guatemala and Rwanda, abstained. The resolution was sponsored by North Korea, Egypt, Nicaragua, Zimbabwe and Palestine. India reiterated its support for the Palestinian people, and urged "early with Israel on the eve of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, a United Nations-organized observance that takes place on November 29 each year.

In 2018, India increased its annual financial assistance to the UNRWA four-fold, from million, and a year ago, voted against the US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital at the UNGA. India increased the number of ICCR scholarships for Palestinians from 50 to 100 in 2019-20. Apart from that, the Representative Office of India in Ramallah hosted an Iftar at the Children's SOS village in Bethlehem, organized a cycling event as part of the celebrations of the 150th birth

anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi and celebrated the 5th International Yoga Day. In June 2019, External Affairs Minister [S. Jaishankar](#) met with the Foreign Minister of Palestine, Dr. Riad Al Malki during the 5th Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) meeting at Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

Turkey: An Uneasy Relationship

India-Turkey ties hit rough weather as Ankara was seen cozying up to Pakistan while New Delhi cemented its ties with three of Ankara's close neighbours and strong rivals –Cyprus, Armenia and Greece – at the UNGA in September. Turkey was among four countries along with China, Pakistan and Malaysia that internationalised the Kashmir issue at the gathering of the world leaders in New York. [Raveesh Kumar](#), spokesman for the Indian External Affairs Ministry, advised Turkey to get a proper understanding of the situation before making a statement on India's internal matter, whereas the Speaker of the Turkish Parliament, [Mustafa Sentop](#), said that standing with Pakistan on the Kashmir issue is Turkey's duty. It surfaced in the [media](#) that India is going to put on hold an Indian Navy contract with a Turkish company estimated to be worth US\$2.3 billion and the Indian government is planning to cut imports of oil and steel products from Turkey. PM Modi [cancelled](#) his visit to Turkey and the Indian government asked its citizens visiting Turkey to “exercise extreme caution” while visiting the country.

However, prior to that, PM Modi and Turkish President Erdogan [met on the sidelines](#) of G-20 in Osaka on July 29, 2019. Former External Affairs Minister, Late [Sushma Swaraj](#) made a transit halt at Erzurum on February 19, 2019. [Dr. Ibrahim Kalin](#), Chief Advisor and spokesperson of the President of Turkey and Deputy Chairman of the Foreign and Security Council, visited India in April 2019. [Foreign Office Consultations \(FOCs\)](#) at Secretary-level were held in New Delhi in May and the 4th meeting of the Joint Working Group on Counter-terrorism was held in Ankara in July 2019. In May Ms. Srividya of Invest-India made a presentation on investment opportunities in India to major Turkish companies. India participated as a Focus Country with 80 companies in the 88th Izmir International Fair 2019 held at Izmir in September for the second time.

A Festival of India in Turkey called “India along Bosphorus” was held in March-April, showcasing Indian dance, music, food and fashion in major cities in Turkey and the second edition of the festival was planned to be held in March-April 2020. In addition, several events were organized for the celebration of the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. The Mission organized the ‘Glimpses of India Tagore Painting Competition’ for school children of Turkey in four cities in April. Indigo has started daily flights from New Delhi and Mumbai to Istanbul since March, and in September, the Trade organized the “Source India” exhibition in Turkey which is a trade show-cum-BSM

(Buyer-Seller Meet) with a focus on cost-effective promotion of Indian exporters in Turkey to facilitate direct access to potential buyers and influential decision makers. President Erdogan's new policy approach towards India and his statements on Kashmir are likely to impact negatively on bilateral ties in future.

Opening New Areas of Cooperation with the WANA Region

India continued to forge greater defence, security and economic ties with most of the countries in the WANA region, both through formal and informal mechanisms. This region is a primary source of rock phosphates and its by-products, and potash used in fertilizers. India [sources over 80%](#) of its rock phosphate requirement from countries in this region. This region is also rich in minerals. India intensified its efforts to secure its energy interests. Without getting militarily involved in the hotspots, India pursued its policy of capacity-building and reaching out to the common people of the countries.

As far as India's relations with Syria are concerned, Secretary, met with the Syrian leadership including the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. This visit culminated in fruitful discussions on expanding bilateral relations in various fields. The Indian side offered to resume the India-Syria Centre of Excellence in IT with up-gradation to a NextGen Centre of Excellence in IT. India will be sponsoring the necessary equipment for two classes of 20 students each, a

lab for 32 students, along with the services of three IT experts for a period of one year, and training of three Syrian master trainers in India. A draft MoU for the [NextGen CEIT](#), suggested by India has already been approved by the Syrian side. The Syrian side is keen on getting this Centre operational at the earliest. Under the "Study in India" scholarship programme of the Government of India, 393 Syrian students were placed in several Indian Universities for Undergraduate, Masters and PhD programmes during the academic year 2018-19, and another 600 scholarship slots have been allotted for the academic year 2019-20. The ICCR extended an invitation to noted Syrian Academic and Head of the Higher Education Cell of the Ruling Baath Party to visit India in November 2019 under the Distinguished Visitors' Programme. India is planning a [ministerial-level joint commission meeting](#) with war-torn Syria in Damascus in the near future, and intends to offer a new line of credit to assist Syria in its rebuilding process. India is also eyeing a wider counterterrorism partnership and stronger information-sharing mechanism, as Syria has experience in fighting the ISIS.

India's contribution as part of the UN Peacekeeping mission was much appreciated and acknowledged. A case in point is that of Indian peacekeeper Sergeant [Ramesh Singh](#), who was deployed with the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and lost his life in line of duty. He has been honoured for his dedication and commitment by the UNIFIL Force Commander Stefano Del

Col and the Lebanese Army “in recognition for his dedication and commitment”.

New Delhi made every effort to enhance cooperation with Lebanon. The Advanced Construction Technology Services (ACTS), a geotechnical engineering, materials testing, and consulting firm, has acquired a 51 per cent stake in Pune-based CQRA and Durocrete Engineering Services for an undisclosed amount. [Khaled Awad](#), Chairman, ACTS, said that the demand for testing the quality of bridges, roads and infrastructure being built in India is increasing at a tremendous pace and the company would bring its overseas expertise to India.

India's commitment to its ties with Egypt got reflected in many ways – high-level visits, formal interactions during various international events, defence and security cooperation. As a part of 150th Birth Anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi and under the ‘India initiative, a Jaipur Foot Artificial Limb Fitment Camp was organized at Assuit in May-June 2019. During the Camp, 550 artificial limbs were provided to 500 beneficiaries.

The Minister of State (IC) for Civil Aviation, Housing and Urban Affairs and Minister of State for Commerce and Industry, [Shri Hardeep Singh Puri](#) visited Egypt in November 2019. He met with Egypt’s Minister of Trade & Industry and delivered the Keynote Address at the inaugural session of the “Regional Conclave on India-West Asia and North Africa (WANA)” organized by Confederation of Indian Industry

(CII). Egypt’s Minister of Agriculture and Land Reclamation, [Ezz el-Din Abu-Steit](#) visited India to attend the COP14 UN Convention to combat desertification in September.

To promote trade and economic ties between the two countries, the [India-Egypt Joint Trade Committee meeting](#) was held in New Delhi in March 2019. During the year 2019-20, 110 ITEC scholarships were availed by Egyptian officials, the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) organized a special course for young Egyptian diplomats in June, and an MoU between National Sugar Institute (NSI) Kanpur (India) and Sugar Technology Research Institute (STRI) Assuit, Egypt was signed in November 2019, to provide a framework for collaboration in research, development, training and exchange of experts.

With an aim to give a push to cultural diplomacy, many events were held throughout the year. The 25th Edition of Glimpses of India was held in October, the 7th edition of India by the Nile, the annual Indian cultural festival, was held in March 2019, and the 5th edition of International Day of Yoga was celebrated in Cairo in June. The Egyptian Embassy organized the ‘[Egypt by Ganga](#)’ Festival in India, a series of events were organized to commemorate the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, like organizing the international day of non-violence, releasing a commemorative stamp on Mahatma Gandhi, and an ICCR-sponsored Indian folk dance group from the Bundeli Lok Nritya Natya Kala

Parishad and the Kalbelia Dance troupe visited Egypt.

The developmental partnership with Tunisia was re-energised by advancing cooperation in space, culture and education. The MoU between India and Tunisia on [Cooperation in the Exploration and Use of Outer space](#) for Peaceful Purposes was signed at Bengaluru, India on June 11, 2019. This agreement will [enable cooperation in space science](#), technology and applications including areas, such as remote sensing of the earth; satellite communication and satellite-based navigation; Space science and planetary exploration, use of spacecraft and space systems and ground systems and application of space technology. The Agreement would lead to the setting up of a Joint Working Group, drawing members from [Department of Space/ISRO](#), India and the National Centre for Cartography and Remote Sensing, Tunisia which will further work out the plan of action including the time-frame and the means of implementing this MoU. India continued its cooperation under its ITEC programme; 125 ITEC slots were utilized until the end of March 2019– the highest ever by Tunisia – and 18 IAFS training slots. A group of 22 senior Tunisian administrators underwent a specially-tailored training programme on e-governance and cyber security at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, New Delhi from April 15-26, 2019.

A [3-member delegation](#) headed by JS (DPA-II) visited Tunisia in May 2019 to lay the groundwork for the launching of

a project that aims to create a Tunisian-Indian centre for the renewal of ICTs in the Ghazala technology park and to study ways to strengthen Tunisian-Indian cooperation in the areas of advanced technologies and support for start-ups. In May 2019, the first-ever [Gandhi Udyan](#) was inaugurated in Riadh Ennasr (Ariana governorate), as part of the city's initiative to build partnership with India in various cultural, social and environmental fields. The cultural cooperation between the two countries was enhanced by organizing many cultural events in India and Tunisia. More than ten events were conducted in more than five cities in and outside Tunisia.

India expanded its diplomatic outreach to Morocco in 2019. Former Foreign Minister Late [Sushma Swaraj visited Morocco](#) for the first time in February to build a new partnership with the North African country. During the visit, foreign ministers of both the countries discussed ways to enhance bilateral cooperation in a number of areas, including defence and security, counter-terrorism, trade and investment. MoUs for setting up of a Joint Working Group on counter terrorism was inked. This was to develop a comprehensive approach to combat terrorism including cross-border terrorism, misuse of the internet including social media by terror entities, terrorist financing, and recruitment of members of terrorist groups. Additionally, cooperation in human settlement, youth matters and reciprocal facilitation of procedures for issue of Business Visas was discussed. During this visit the allocation of ITEC

slots for Morocco was raised from 40 to 75. Morocco has shown keen interest to utilize FSI training offered for foreign diplomats. Diplomats from Morocco regularly attend PCFD courses at FSI. A Special two-week training at FSI for [16 Moroccan diplomats](#) was organized from April 15-27, 2019.

To open new vistas of cooperation in trade, digital economy, education, training, shipbuilding and artificial intelligence in vocational training, many ministerial visits from Morocco took place during the year. [Mrs. RakiyaEddarhem](#), Secretary of State in-charge of Foreign Trade, Ministry of Industry, Investment, Trade and Digital Economy led the Moroccan delegation in the 9th edition of Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit (VG 2019) in Gandhinagar (January14-20, 2019). Morocco was a Partner Country in Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit 2019. On March20, 2019, the [VIth India Morocco Joint Commission Meeting \(JCM\)](#) was convened in New Delhi. In February 2019, the [Partnership Agreement](#) in the field of vocational training between the Office of Vocational Training and Employment Promotion (OFPPT) of the Kingdom of Morocco and National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) India was signed. Both the countries are also cooperating in the field of Water Resources under the JWG constituted in July 2018. So far two meeting have been held. Additionally, both the countries are exploring possibilities for establishing India-Morocco cooperation in military telemedicine.

The [MoU](#) between India and Morocco to facilitate Mutual Recognition of Academic Qualifications was signed on January 22, 2019. The MoU will deepen, enhance and strengthen the cooperation between India and Morocco in the field of [Education and Human Resource Development](#). The collaboration in the field of education through this MoU will enable experience-sharing and thereby improve the platform to cater to the needs of various target groups. Also, the collaboration is expected to increase the inflow of Moroccan students to India under the Study in India Programme.

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved the MoU between India and Morocco for developing, promoting and strengthening mutual [cooperation between the judiciaries](#) of the two countries. The approval will promote cooperation between India and Morocco in judicial and other legal areas and enable exchange of knowledge in infrastructure and information technology. The aforesaid developments clearly signify depth and growth in bilateral relations between the two countries.

The year 2019 witnessed growing momentum of bilateral cooperation with not only the Gulf region but also recorded the opening of new areas of cooperation with the countries of WANA region. The uniqueness of India's engagement has been the response it has received from these countries. Gulf countries have responded positively to New Delhi's

overtures for enhanced strategic cooperation. While the present momentum of engagement with the region is likely to continue, the need is to prepare for the future threats and challenges – not only security but economic as well.

Annexure -1

India-WANA: Important Bilateral Visits in 2019

1. **PM's visit to Saudi Arabia, October 28-29:** PM visited the kingdom in October and met with the leadership and exchanged views and also attended the 3rd Future Investment Initiative Forum (Davos in the Desert). The leadership discussed ways to promote security and safety of waterways and reiterated rejection of interference in internal affairs of other countries. MoUs were signed in energy, civil aviation, security cooperation, defense, launch of *RupayCard* and regulation of medical products.
2. **PM's visit to UAE, August 23-24:** PM met with Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed and received "the **Order of Zayed**, the highest civil decoration of the UAE which was conferred earlier in April 2019 in recognition of the distinguished leadership of Prime Minister Modi for giving a big boost to bilateral relations between the two countries. The award in the name of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founding father of the UAE, acquires special significance as it was awarded to Prime Minister Modi in the year of the birth centenary of Sheikh Zayed.
3. **PM's visit to Bahrain, August 24-25:** First ever visit by an Indian PM to the kingdom. 'The King Hamad Order of the Renaissance', the highest honor of Bahrain. MoUs were signed on collaboration between ISRO, NPCI for launch of *Rupay Card* in Bahrain and Bahrain joined the International Solar Alliance.
4. **EAM's visit to Oman, December 23-25:** Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar had a fruitful discussion with the Omani counterpart and Defence Minister during his visit. The two countries reaffirmed their commitment to further expand robust bilateral, especially defense, security and maritime ties.
5. **EAM's visit to Iran, December 22-23:** In his maiden visit to Iran, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar reviewed the entire gamut of India-Iran cooperation and agreed on accelerating the Chabahar Project.
1. **EAM's visit to UAE, February 28-March 1:** Visit by Late Smt. Sushma Swaraj to attend the OIC Foreign Minister meeting on the invitation of UAE as the "Guest of Honour" to address the Inaugural Plenary.
2. **Visit of UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed, July 7-9:** "Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the United Arab Emirates, is paying an official visit to India from July 7-9, 2019. He will be accompanied by a senior-level delegation. During the visit, His Highness Sheikh Abdullah will hold bilateral talks with External Affairs Minister. He will also call on Prime Minister."

3. **Visit of Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, May 13-14:** Second visit in the year in the wake of the US economic sanctions on Iran, especially on its oil sector.
4. **Visit of Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Adel Al Jubeir, March 11:** Acquired significance in the light of the heightened tensions between India and Pakistan over the terror attack in Pulwama and India's air strikes in Balakot.
5. **First State Visit of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, February 19-20:** The Crown Prince who is also deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister paid his first visit to India. He was accompanied by a high-level delegation, including Ministers, senior officials and leading Saudi businessmen. During the visit, the Crown Prince called on Hon'ble President and Hon'ble Vice President, and held bilateral talks with the PM on wide range of issues of mutual interest.
6. **Visit by Algerian Foreign Minister Abdelkader Messahel, January 30-February 1:** During his visit, he held bilateral discussions with Late Smt. Sushma Swaraj, then External Affairs Minister on a wide range of issues on how to further deepen relations between India and Algeria that include defence and security, fertilizers, Space cooperation, Counter Terrorism, Education, ITEC etc. They also discussed regional and multilateral issues of mutual interest.
7. **Visit of Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, January 7-9:** Bilateral visit amidst Iran's effort to minimize impact of US sanctions.

Annexure Source: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

(Meena Singh Roy is Research Fellow and Coordinator, West Asia Centre, IDSA)

(Lakshmi Priya is Research Analyst at West Asia Centre, IDSA)

The West Asian Region: In Search of Peace and Stability

Editorial Team

The situation in the West Asian region continues to remain fluid. A close look at the key developments that took place in 2019 indicates that the region is embroiled in prolonged political instability, deteriorating regional security and continuously worsening humanitarian crisis. The efforts to reach a negotiated settlement have not been successful. Violence perpetrated by the militia, terrorist organizations and other armed groups has been a hindrance in the way of achieving any results by means of dialogue. In the midst of such a grim situation, the prospects of peace and stability in the region remain elusive.

Regional Dynamics: Prognosis

The geopolitics in the Gulf region is dominated by the continuing tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran. No political or diplomatic effort has been initiated by either of them to hold any talks in order to reach any understanding. The US-Iran tension continues to worsen and has negatively affected regional security and stability in the Persian Gulf. The rising tensions were reflected in a number of attacks on tankers in the waters surrounding the Arabian Peninsula. Such tanker wars can recur in the future if the issues remain unaddressed. The GCC still remains a divided house. Mediation efforts by Kuwait and Oman have not produced any visible results. Though the organization has been holding its

annual meetings, the Saudi-Qatari differences still remain a roadblock.

Throughout the year, the political and security situation in Yemen remained grim. Continued military operations and violence has resulted in one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world. Parties to the conflict have killed and injured thousands of Yemeni civilians. Despite multiple attempts by the UN to broker a ceasefire, the parties themselves continue to hinder the diplomatic process. Both the parties keep walking back and forth on their statements. Saudi Arabia has been the key player leading the military coalition against the Houthis. In the south of the country, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which is demanding statehood, is supported by the UAE. The role of these two neighbouring countries in Yemen will be a key factor in the stability of the country. Taking advantage of the ongoing crisis, the Al Qaeda and ISIS have intensified their activities in Yemen. A centralized military operation against the terrorist groups is severely lacking. Yemen's political instability, civil war and the activities of terrorist organizations are impediments in restoring normalcy in the country.

Even after eight years of violent conflict, the Syrian civil war does not show any sign of abating. The situation has become more complicated because of the involvement of regional and extra-regional players in the conflict.

While Russia and Iran continue to support the Syrian President Bashar Al Assad, the US and Turkey are supporting the rebel forces. Israel is also supporting the US' anti-Iran stance in Syria by conducting air strikes on Iranian outposts. It does not look likely that the fighting in Syria will end anytime soon, as the big powers struggle to gain influence in the country.

The prognosis for Libya also remains grim as the country's civil war and violence continue to mar any efforts towards restoring peace and stability. The proposed parliamentary elections, which could have been an opportunity to establish order in the war-ravaged country, could not be held due to continuing violence. The political factions have not been able to reach a consensus, and as a result, the role played by the extra-regional powers becomes decisive. The efforts of UN to broker a peace deal have been obstructed by continuous and unregulated violence by the parties concerned. While the political factions and their armies and militias engage with each other, the ISIS is taking advantage of the situation and has strengthened its stronghold in the country. The ISIS has already launched attacks on a number of targets and may continue to take advantage of the existing chaos in the country.

Countries like Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan are witnessing popular discontent because of the prevailing economic situation in these countries. In the wake of severed headwinds facing the global economy, it might be difficult for Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan to replenish the national coffers and create jobs for the discontented masses.

Therefore, popular unrest might continue and even cause major political, economic and security challenges in the years ahead. The US-Iran and Israel-Iran rivalry might continue to make Iraq and Lebanon the arena for waging their campaigns in the future. Amid this general mayhem, there is every likelihood for more sectarian militias and violent non-state groups, even ISIS, to rear their ugly heads in the future. This grim prognosis accentuates the need for global powers and regional actors to address the socio-economic and political situation in Iraq and the Levant to avoid a major conflagration in West Asia in the months ahead.

Turkey is going through a critical time in its modern history. The consciousness about the past with a desire for revival is at its peak both at the social as well as political levels. President Erdogan is the most popular and charismatic leader to have taken the mantle of the country after Kemal Ataturk. He has used his popularity to establish himself as an undisputable leader in the country and has used both hard and soft power to project Turkish pre-eminence in the global and regional order. At the same time, he wants to be recognized as a great modern Muslim leader. Nonetheless, growing international criticism about throttling of human rights and press freedom, regional pushback by leading Arab states, especially in the Gulf, and increasing domestic opposition poses serious domestic challenges for Erdogan. The problem becomes manifold given the regional geopolitical schism and Turkey's complicated relations with world powers, especially the US, as well as important members

of the G20 including Saudi Arabia and India.

India: Re-shaping its Policy Approach

WANA region has for the past century been the theatre for geopolitical rivalry for global powers. Despite the changes in international order and the rise and decline of global powers, WANA continues to be an attraction for power play among those wanting to maintain their hegemony and those challenging the status quo. The regional dynamics look extremely complex at this stage but are expected to become more chaotic and complex with a plethora of regional players hedging their bets with multiple external players. Undoubtedly, the US, China, Russia as well as the EU will be playing a major role in shaping the future of the region. In this era of new strategic competition, India will have to be watchful and hedge its bets accordingly, based on both safeguarding its immediate concerns and the long-term interests.

Given its economic and strategic interests in the region, India will have to craft and re-shape its policy by taking advantage of its positive image as compared to Russia, China and the US. India has much appeal in the region on multiple fronts, its capacity to deliver in the areas of space, cyber security, information technology, and pharmaceuticals is immense. At the same time, India's soft-power presence offers enormous potential. Cultural diplomacy should find priority in the overall formulation of New Delhi's policy towards the region. This has

already gained some momentum and needs a push. Yoga and Ayurveda are India's new currency in the world and much appreciated. Education, training and youth exchange programmes merit more attention.

Equally important would be to get into areas of cooperation like food security and disaster management. Since energy security and trade with the region form the key element of India's relationship with the region, innovative ways acceptable to both sides need to be worked out. Joint manufacturing and cooperation in third countries could be the future model of India's engagement with WANA. To secure its security interests, deeper and stronger partnerships on counter-radicalism and combating the threat of terrorism need to be built. The active diplomacy pursued by Prime Minister Modi and his ability to manage ties with Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel would demand greater attention to sustain these ties in future. The region is still confronted with many security and economic challenges; in such a situation, India will have to utilize its resources and capacity to explore economic opportunities in countries like Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco apart from its existing strong Gulf partners. In the coming years, the region might be witness to many new threats and challenges, but India, through its smart and soft policy approach, should try to build comprehensive partnerships with all countries by converting every challenge into an opportunity.