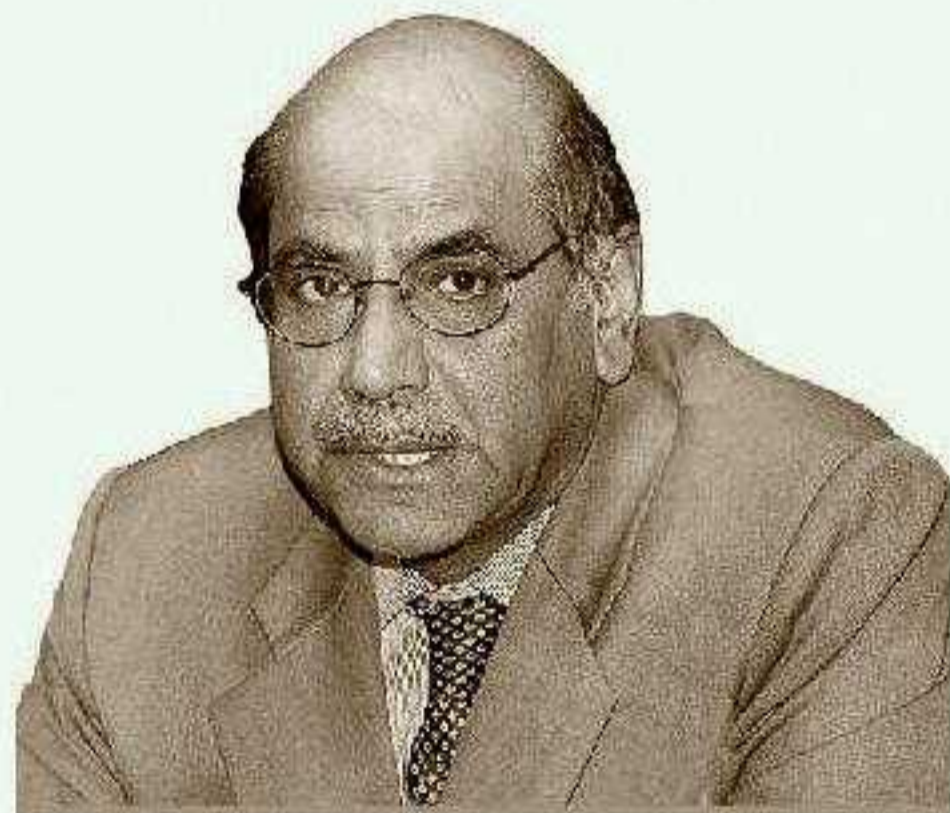




The shifting sands of West Asia & the Gulf

India must undertake a careful analysis of the political and social transformation in the region as it may impact our own society

India's western neighbourhood stretching from Iran to Turkey has been in perpetual turmoil over the past decade and more. The developments in this region should be of major concern to our foreign policy. Over six million Indians live and work in the Gulf kingdoms and their remittances contribute a significant amount to our foreign exchange earnings. This region is also a major source of India's energy supplies despite efforts to diversify to other sources. And finally there are strong religious and cultural cords that link our own diverse population to the ethnic, religious and cultural cousins who inhabit these ancient lands. It should come as no surprise that any political turmoil and economic disruptions in this region would confront India with multiple challenges and potentially grave risks. Our resources were overstretched in handling even a relatively modest exodus of a few thousands of our citizens stranded in war-torn Iraq or Libya. Think of what the challenge would be if a few million and not just a few thousands had to be rescued and evacuated from conflict-ridden countries. Could they be resettled and rehabilitated in the states where they came from? Do these states have the capabilities required to handle such large and unexpected influx? Do we have a reasonably comprehensive data on Indian citizens living and working in these countries, their states of origin and their skill profile? Have we taken stock of the assets available to us to undertake large scale evacuation if this becomes necessary and are there potential partners who may face similar challenges and may be ready to work together with



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us? Could we call upon some friendly countries in the region outside the conflict zone to serve as temporary shelters and staging points to enable a more gradual and orderly evacuation? We had begun to undertake this exercise in the National Security Advisory Board but its subsequent fate is not known. In any case this exercise should be an urgent priority. It is equally necessary to review our energy dependence on this region and plan our response to possible disruption of supplies. But even more important to my mind is the undertaking of a careful and continual analysis of the political and social transformation unfolding in the region which may have an even more profound impact on our own plural society through the long-standing religious and cultural transmission belts that link India and this region.

A recent visit to Jordan which remains an oasis of relative calm and stability, brought home to me the continuing political fragmentation of the region, the de facto redrawing of boundaries and the sharpening ethnic, sectarian and communal conflicts that herald an even more tumultuous future than we have witnessed in the recent past. The almost elemental conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, two key powers in the region, is fuelling local conflicts, leading to political realignments and renewed assertions of ethnic identities. The United States retains a formidable military, in particular naval presence in the region but is opting for working more and more through local proxies rather than through direct application of power. There was a sense that in the latest round of local wars, the Shia crescent centred

on Iran had emerged stronger. Syria's Assad was still in power and the war was winding down with government forces advancing steadily over rebel-held areas. In Iraq, the Islamic State had been finally defeated and scattered. To counter this, the US had encouraged Kurdish irredentism in Iraq to weaken a potentially powerful and largely Shia oil-rich power affiliated to Iran, from re-emerging. It was willing to rubbish the Iran nuclear deal to enable fresh sanctions and pressures on Iran. In Syria there is an attempt to carve out an enclave for anti-Assad forces in areas that remain to be liberated in the Raqqa region. And a blind eye is being turned to the horrendous tragedy which is unfolding in Yemen which Saudi Arabia is determined to bomb back to the stone age, just so that its Shias may not ally with enemy Iran. The sectarian lines are becoming more rigidly drawn and countries which are reluctant to fall in line on this side or the other are finding themselves in a bind. Qatar is a particularly telling example. On the other hand it was also clear that a de facto alliance has already taken shape between Saudi Arabia and Israel, both determined to foil Iranian regional ascendancy. The recent decision by Hamas in Gaza to reconcile with the Palestinian Authority was reportedly brokered by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Hamas is now unlikely to pose a threat to Israel and this would be a major plus for the latter. As for the US, it is clear that for the present, it sees its interests better served by aligning itself with the Sunni forces even though it may make some local adjustments to protect its long-standing security assets such as its naval base at Qatar.

One gathered the impression that these developments are likely to persist and even gather pace with the likelihood of more crises and local wars erupting. It may become more difficult for India to maintain a balanced relationship with the major actors in the region.

Even relative zones of calm such as Jordan are carrying a crushing burden of refugees seeking shelter from conflict zones. The first wave of Palestinians was followed by those from the Iraq war and now the Syrian war. Within a decade its population has soared from about four million to 11 million at present. It is really quite incredible how the country has managed to remain a viable and functioning state, plural and relatively liberal in a region which is fragmenting along sectarian lines. With both Iraq and Syria virtually destroyed as functioning secular and plural states, only Jordan retains, precariously, something of the old world cosmopolitanism that was the heritage of this crucible of ancient civilisations and rich cultures. What has happened in this region is really a profound lesson on how precious and how equally fragile is the civilisational heritage of plurality which we share with our western neighbourhood. A lesson that demands deep reflection as we ponder our over own future.

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