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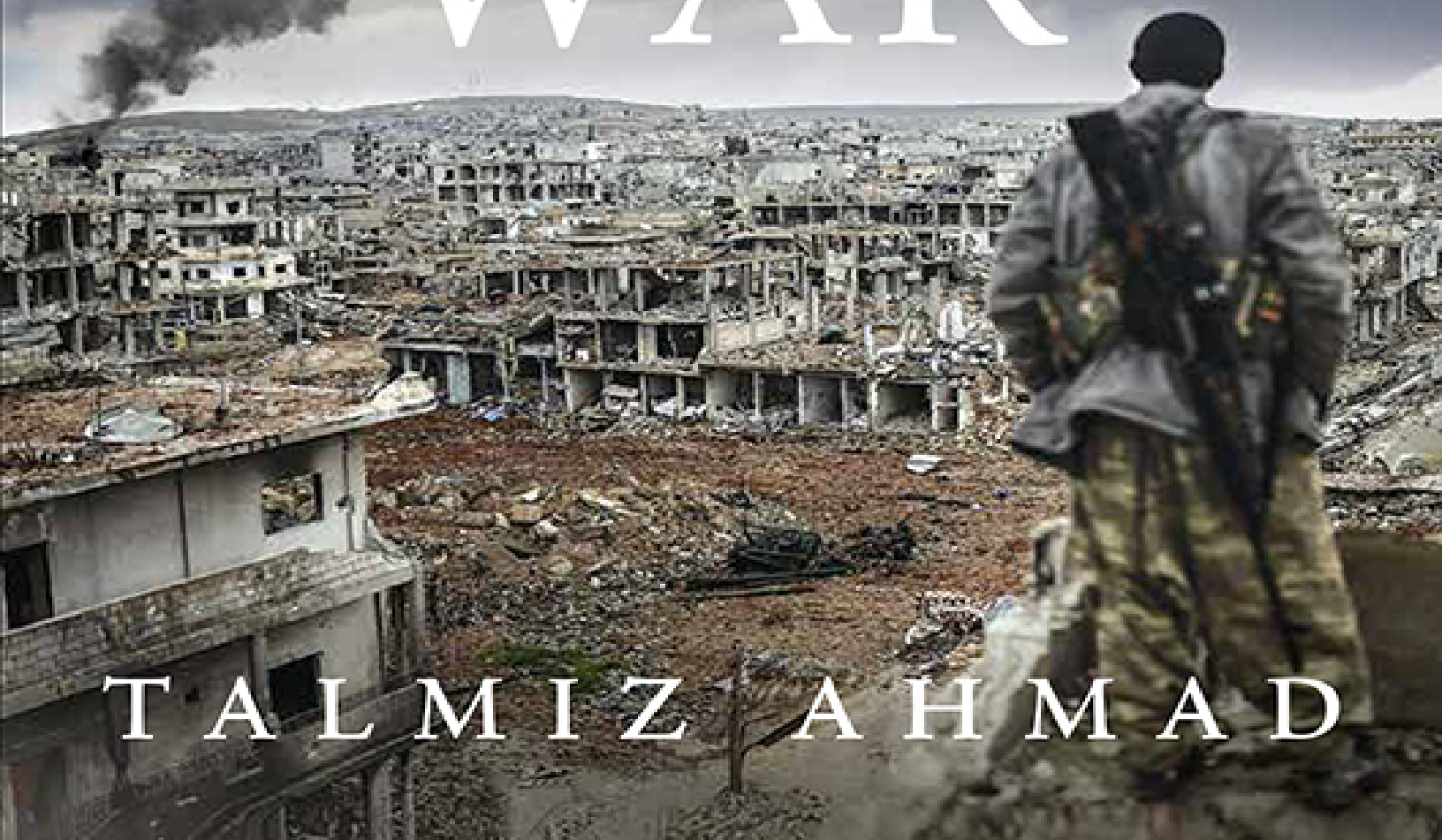
REPRESSION, RESISTANCE

ASIA AT

AND GREAT POWER GAMES

WAR

TALMIZ AHMAD





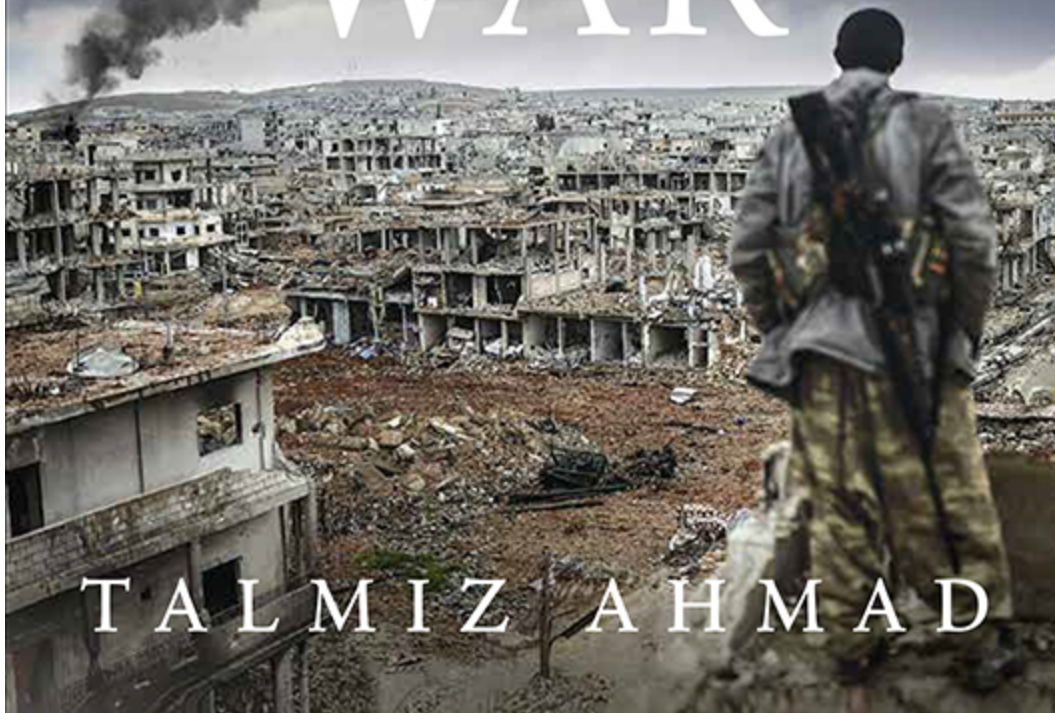
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HarperCollins Publishers India

I am most grateful to

Edward Said, Arab intellectual,
who made me read, think and investigate

Shlomo Sand, Israeli scholar,
who inspired me with his lines:

*'I don't think books can change the world, but when
the world begins to change, it searches for different books'*

and

Mani Shankar Aiyar, mentor and friend,
who imbued in me the importance of
academic rigour, empathy and compassion



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Preface



EVENTS IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF WEST ASIA MAKE THE NEWS ALMOST ON A daily basis. These are usually stories of violence – civil conflicts, terrorist attacks, suicide bombings by religious extremists, and constant confrontations based on religious, sectarian and ethnic divisions.

There are also occasions when regional or outside powers initiate major military attacks, using fierce firepower to kill or injure thousands of people in a few hours, or even low-key but lethal provocations – attacks on tankers, drone and missile attacks, state-sponsored assassinations – which keep the region tense and often at the edge of a major conflagration. We also read lurid accounts of matters relating to oil – the economics of demand and supply that has global implications, the extraordinary luxury it provides a few, the purchases of weaponry it facilitates, and the use of its revenues to still dissent and fuel war.

This book seeks to piece together these diverse matters into a coherent narrative that would help make sense of the dynamics of the region – the political, religious, military, socio-economic and cultural dimensions that have shaped present-day alignments and divisions, and made the region seem so unstable and volatile.

There are several villains here – monarchs, presidents, princes, senior officials – many of whom have worked together for cynical self-interest to reap short-term advantage, or occasionally use narrow understandings of religion to wreak havoc upon the doctrinal enemy. There are also heroes here – mostly unhonoured and unsung – who resist the violence and

injustice heaped upon them. This is the story of those villains and those heroes.

Talmiz Ahmad
Delhi, January 2022

Introduction



THE REGION WHOSE STORY WE ARE STUDYING IN THIS BOOK HAS FOR long been referred to as the ‘Middle East’. Sixty years ago, Roderic Davison, an American academic writing in *Foreign Affairs*, asked, ‘Where is the Middle East?’¹ His investigation provided an extraordinary narrative of geographers, travellers, politicians, diplomats, military officers and academics who had struggled over the previous decades to define this region that was of crucial importance to American and European interests. Davison said pointedly, ‘No one knows where the Middle East is, although many claim to know.’

Even American policymakers, who had, under the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957, committed the United States of America (henceforth US) to providing economic and military assistance to countries in ‘the general area of the Middle East’, could only describe it as ‘the area lying between and including Libya on the west and Pakistan on the east, and Turkey on the north and the Arabian peninsula to the south’. They added a further complication – they said that ‘Middle East’ and ‘Near East’ were now identical, thus casually knocking out an earlier much-respected term from its pedestal.

The ‘Middle East’

After a detailed survey of the previous century, Davison pointed out that the ‘unifying principle’ to define the very diverse region ‘had always been the political and strategic interest of outside powers, especially of Britain’.

Hence, when viewing the world from London, the areas starting from the borders of the Ottoman Empire were the 'East'. As matters relating to China and Japan became increasingly important for British policymakers, the 'East' came to be divided into the 'Near East' and 'Far East' – the former also being called the 'Nearer East', though there was never consensus on where one ended and the other began.

The term 'Middle East' was first used by Alfred Thayer Mahan, the distinguished writer on sea power. In 1902, while discussing Russian expansion into the Persian Gulf, Mahan recommended that Britain set up bases in the Gulf; he asserted, 'The Middle East ... will some day need its Malta as well as its Gibraltar. ... The British navy should have the facility to concentrate in force ... about Aden, India and the Gulf.' This novel term came to be popularized in a series of articles on 'The Middle Eastern Question', in the *Times*, by its correspondent, Valentine Chirol. For Chirol, the 'Middle East' consisted of 'those regions of Asia which extend to the borders of India or command the approaches to India', and were thus linked with issues associated with India's political and military defence.

The two world wars further popularized the use of the term 'Middle East', but there was never any agreement among political and military leaders on the territories embraced by the term, despite pressure in Parliament for greater clarity. The best that Clement Atlee offered in April 1946 was that it consisted of 'the Arab world and certain neighbouring countries'. Later, he attempted greater precision by specifying that the Middle East covered Libya, Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon, Transjordan, Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula 'as well as, in most cases, Persia and Turkey'.

To this day, the term 'Middle East' continues to be used in most parts of the world, including across the region itself, with no concern about its geographical anomaly and no clarity about what territories should be included in it. In the US, while 'Middle East' is used very extensively, the State Department continues to have a 'Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs' – though its website says it looks after US foreign policy 'in the Middle East

and North Africa'. On this basis, the US has attempted to popularize the use of the abbreviation MENA.

After the events of 9/11, as the US promoted a wide-ranging 'reform' programme in the region, it referred to it as the 'Greater Middle East Partnership Initiative' that covered 'the countries of the Arab world *plus* Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey and Israel', though the working paper on the initiative made no mention of the last five states.

West Asia–North Africa (WANA)

Davison ended his 1960 article by noting, 'Five years ago the government of India decided to give up Middle East as meaningless in relation to its own position.' What he was referring to was that India had no use for the Eurocentric terminologies developed in the colonial period that had placed Europe at the centre of world affairs. It, instead, sought to use terminology based on objective geographical criteria.

Hence, in 1955, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs set up the 'West Asia–North Africa Division', which looked after the region from Iran in the east to Morocco in the west, and from Iraq in the north to Sudan in the south. Sometime in the mid-1980s, a separate 'Gulf Division' was carved out: it initially included Iran, the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Iraq and Yemen. The need for a separate division was due to the increasing influx of Indian nationals going to work in the GCC countries. Since the head of the Gulf Division also supervised the Hajj section, there were concerns that, while dealing with the major Arab countries, Iran would not get the attention it needed. Hence, Iran was detached from the Gulf Division and made part of the new 'Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan' Division.

As head of the Gulf Division from 1998 to 2000, I made an effort to move Iran back into the division, since its policies impinged significantly on the other Gulf countries. This was firmly turned down as Iran was then, at secretary-level, being supervised by the foreign secretary and it was considered inappropriate to presume to erode his domain!

In this book, I have covered the Arab world as also Iran, Turkey and Israel. Turkey should have a place here as it has become a major influence in regional matters. In the latter part of the book, I have brought in Afghanistan as well, since Gulf countries have been playing an influential role in its affairs. The correct collective term for the countries covered in this book is ‘West Asia–North Africa’ (WANA). However, for convenience, I have simply used the shorter term ‘West Asia’ to describe the region being discussed.

The Insecure Region

WANA is the stage for the interplay of four regional peoples – the Arab, the Persian, the Jew and the Turk – who have interacted with each other for several centuries in terms of commerce, philosophy, faith, the arts and literature, and war, shaping in the process a unique civilizational affinity. But this interplay has often been interrupted by – and influenced by – military interventions from the West – by the Greeks and Romans in ancient times, by the British and French more recently, and by the Americans over the last fifty years.

West Asia’s interactions with Western powers over the last two centuries have been particularly fraught. They led to gradual colonial control over the Arab, Turkish and Persian territories. As the peoples reeled from the hammer blow of imperial domination, some of their intellectuals commenced a profound introspection over their unprecedented predicament and sought to understand not only the reasons for their comprehensive defeat at the hands of Christian powers but also how their faith and culture could be rejuvenated by learning from this encounter.

The results of these studies were rich, wide-ranging and diverse, and gave the promise of significant changes in the religious, political and cultural order. But colonial control did not allow for this effervescence to fructify into real reform: instead of experiencing the challenge and excitement of reshaping their decaying polities through their own effort and within the framework of their own culture, West Asian societies found their

creativity and initiatives crushed by their imperial masters. The latter controlled the political and economic order by making the ruler their puppet, and sought to reorganize the cultural order on Western lines.

In almost every colonized Arab state, there were fierce uprisings to resist foreign domination, which were brutally put down. Ignorant of the region's history and hostile to its culture, British and French colonialism, after the First World War, drew lines on the map to define the territories each of them would control. Additionally, they made local rulers their puppets, crushed resistance whenever it emerged and created polities that were weak, divided and not in control of their destiny, and entirely dependent on Western powers for their sustenance. These actions set the pattern for Western interventions in West Asia over the next century.

But colonial rule went a step further: it brought back hundreds of thousands of Jewish people living in the diaspora to West Asia after two millennia, and settled them on lands occupied by the Palestinian people. They thus forcibly helped create a Jewish state, Israel, as an expression of what the Palestinian historian Nur Masalha has called 'Zionist settler-colonialism' that ignores the existence and rights of the indigenous people.² The leaders of the Zionist enterprise shared the sense of racist supremacy that the Europeans had towards native peoples: referring to the Palestinians living in the lands claimed for the Jewish homeland, the prominent Zionist leader, Chaim Weizmann, said, 'The British told us that there are some hundred thousand niggers and for those there is no value.'³

This project has left an enduring legacy of bitterness and outrage that has poisoned the region. Besides three wars between the Arab states and Israel, it has also set a pattern of racial discrimination, abuse and violence against the Palestinians – both those who are citizens of Israel and those who live in territories occupied by Israel in the Six Day War in 1967.

Fragile State Order

West Asia offers two models of the Arab state – one republican, the product of domestically engineered coups d'état by the armed forces, and seeking

credibility and legitimacy for the regime by espousing the populist rhetoric of nationalism, socialism and revolution. The other is monarchical. This includes the six states of the Gulf, as also Jordan and Morocco. But, while all Arab states are authoritarian, neither of the two models has produced 'strong' states.

While the republics have been led by 'strongmen', the states they head, as the distinguished Arab scholar Nazih Ayubi has pointed out, have limited capacity to enforce laws or effect economic development and imbue in the diverse sections of their citizens a collective sense of nationhood.⁴ He quotes the scholar of the Arab state, Waddah Sharara, who said in 1980 that these states 'faltered at the first shock, and the carefully erected façade has cracked open to reveal all manner of horrid monsters that many thought History had long since laid to rest'.⁵

The situation relating to the monarchies is not very different. All of them are products of direct Western (usually British) cartographic manipulations, and, while they have the structures and institutions of modern states, they are inherently incapable of taking care of their own security. They are, therefore, dependent on external sources both for political security – through military agreements – and economic well-being – through the sale of their oil and gas resources in international markets.

Oil sales have been used by the oil-producing monarchies to co-opt their citizens into the state order through social contracts that promise the latter education, health and employment in return for their quiescent acceptance of the authority of the ruling regime and its monopoly over the exercise of state power and opaque utilization of state resources for this purpose.

These oil revenues have also buttressed national security in the region by promoting alignments with powerful foreign nations through purchase of their weaponry and providing opportunities for their corporations to participate in lucrative trade exchanges and high-value projects in the energy, infrastructure, industrial, technological and services sectors. These foreign allies, primarily the US, not only secure the state; they are, in fact, guardians of the ruling royal family, whose fortunes are conflated with the interests of the state.

The monarchies obtain their legitimacy through their status as traditional heads of the diverse tribes in the country by pandering to the needs of the tribal chiefs, the establishment clergy – who enjoy state largesse and provide religious validation for royal decisions when required – and the heads of private corporate enterprises that are maintained through royal patronage. But these co-options, both domestic and foreign, for regime security are essentially transactional and crucially dependent on the flow of oil revenues (i.e., the Gulf states), and foreign assistance and remittances from their nationals who work in oil-producing countries (i.e., Jordan and Morocco).

Given its inherently fragile character, the Arab state – both republican and monarchical – is, in Ayubi's words, a 'fierce state', a state that controls its citizens through coercion. It uses security forces to command obedience and acquiescence when the blandishment of co-option is not sufficient or inadequate due to limited resources or recalcitrant elements who reject the allures offered. The Arab state, Ayubi says, is often violent *because* it is weak.⁶

Not surprisingly, these insecure states also face external threats from their Arab and non-Arab neighbours. The latter are Israel, Iran and Turkey – all three politically and militarily powerful, with a history of contention with the Arabs, but also, by themselves not strong enough to safeguard their interests and hence, also in search of allies, within and outside the region, like their Arab neighbours.

Regional Confrontations

The US-led destruction of the Taliban emirate in Afghanistan in 2001 and the removal of Saddam Hussein two years later had the unintended consequence of removing two of Iran's foes at its eastern and western borders. And as the US sought to justify its occupation of Iraq as being intended to empower the beleaguered Shia, Iran once again found a congenial space to expand its influence in a major Arab country.

It institutionalized this influence through the various Shia militia that it sponsored in Iraq that harassed the American forces and also protected the interests of the Shia from attacks from the emerging jihadi cohorts organized by the veteran of the Afghan conflicts, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. It also went further: it helped support the various Shia parties that were set up to join the democratic political process that the Americans had put in place in the country that was based on a sect-ethnicity quota system that privileged the Shia. Thus, Iran became the principal player in Iraqi affairs.

Though Iran was crippled by sanctions, its expanding regional influence encouraged in Saudi Arabia a deep sense of strategic vulnerability vis-à-vis its neighbour. While the challenge perceived by the kingdom was related to its security, the support base it mobilized at home and in the region was sectarian in character – highlighting Iran’s ‘hegemonic’ intentions in the region as a threat to the Sunni communities. Regional confrontations, born of state insecurity, thus got framed in a hard sectarian structure that led to proxy Saudi–Iran confrontations in Syria and Yemen.

What aggravated regional insecurities and confrontations was the fallout of the Arab Spring uprisings. Reeling from the anger of their disgruntled populations over poverty, unemployment, rampant corruption and the absence of accountability, panicky Arab rulers initially dispensed generous doles among their people, but soon the mailed fist emerged from the velvet glove: the rulers redefined the uprisings as the enterprise of marginalized groups that, in the view of leaders in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, were entirely sponsored by Iran. As Mehran Kamrava, professor of international studies at Georgetown University-Qatar, has noted, ‘sectarianism quickly found receptive ears among populations feeling besieged and under threat’.⁷

As sectarian conflicts have raged in Syria and Yemen, the breakdown of the Iraqi state after the US invasion of 2003 gave birth to a new monstrosity – jihad. Starting as a foe of foreign occupation, the jihadi movement led Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, that loosely affiliated itself with the Al Qaeda, became fiercely sectarian and attacked Shia communities with the same ferocity as it did the US forces.

This movement, emerging from specific Iraqi circumstances, metamorphosed into a transnational force as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). It rejected the Sykes-Picot–ordained border between Iraq and Syria, so that, in, its ‘state’ straddled the two countries. For about four years, this state was the size of the United Kingdom (henceforth UK), it had a population of about million, an armed force of 200,000, and a monthly income that ran into millions of dollars.

As in the case of Iraq, the breakdown of state order in Libya was the result not so much of domestic insurgency as of Western military intervention that achieved regime change through a massive assault on the Muammar al-Qaddafi–led government, culminating, as in the case of Iraq, with the humiliating public execution of the larger-than-life leader – signalling to regional potentates their possible fate if they chagrined Western powers beyond endurance.

As Arab states broke down, they opened the doors for interventions by their non-Arab neighbours. Iran, already well placed in Iraq, now expanded its active role into the conflict zones of Syria and Yemen, becoming for the Saudis even more of a threat than it had been in 2003. In Syria, Iran resisted Saudi attempts at regime change (with the support of the Russians from 2015), and in Yemen, it ensured that Saudi Arabia would not be able to exclude the Zaidis, represented by the Houthi militants, from participation in national affairs. It did more: it provided the beleaguered Houthis with drones and missiles, which highlight the vulnerability of the Saudi state and regularly affirm the folly of the invasion it had so cavalierly embarked on in March 2015.

A new non-Arab player in regional affairs is Turkey. For long the master of much of WANA during Ottoman rule, Turkey had turned its back on the Levant over the last century as it asserted its ‘European’ identity. But, while the West was happy to use Turkish military prowess by admitting it into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), it would not accept it culturally and emotionally as European. With its membership application to the European Union (EU) repeatedly rebuffed, Turkey rediscovered in its former Ottoman territories a fresh space for the

expansion of its ambitions. Its president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has gone beyond the legacy of the father of the modern Turkish nation, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, to its earlier inheritance that is older, longer and richer – its Ottoman heritage.

While its early efforts to regain its former glory were low-key, moderate and peaceful, the contentions thrown up by the Arab Spring uprisings have given a sharper, more aggressive edge to Turkey's search for its manifest destiny in West Asia. Its regional projections combine the political hegemony of the earlier sultans as also their religious status as the caliphs of the global Muslim realm, so that the region is now witnessing the jackboots of Turkish soldiers and the whine of its air force clothed in the mantle of Islam. Erdogan thus is seeking the territorial spaces his ancestors had commanded and the special doctrinal standing that was theirs across the region.

But, beyond the aspirations to replicate ancient glories, the neo-sultan has a more immediate and mundane challenge – the Kurds, the long-standing *bête noires* of the Turkish state. While he has been dealing with the Kurds at home with robust coercion, mixed with occasional dollops of co-optation, the civil conflicts in Syria and Iraq have created new opportunities for the Kurds to fulfil their aspirations and new hazards for the president in Ankara. Here, he is doing what he does best – hammer Kurdish aspirations for their homeland into dust with vigorous firepower. Turkish forces now occupy large parts of northern Syria and northern Iraq and, as of now, have plans for long-term residence.

An interesting Turkish foray of recent times is across the Mediterranean waters to Libya. Here, Turkey is backing an Islamist faction in the ongoing fratricidal disputes in the country – its ambitions being propelled by visions of imperial glory and Islamic zeal. Based on its Libyan engagement, it has marked out extravagant claims to the energy resources of the east Mediterranean, thus confronting members of the EU whose ranks it had once wished to join but had been curtly blackballed.

And then there is Israel. For long it confined its activities to the edge of West Asia, responding harshly to the periodic challenges thrown up by the

Palestinians in the occupied territories, and working hard in the US to ensure fulsome domestic support to its aggression and abuse against the Palestinians. The events of 9/11 ensured that its American cohorts, the neocons, could engineer the first part of its agenda of systematic destruction of hostile regional states – the assault on Iraq and the plunging of that state into civil conflict.

Since then, it has had a single-point item on its agenda – to engineer a massive US-led assault on Iran or, failing that, to cripple the country through harsh sanctions, which would encourage regime change through domestic dissent. This effort is accompanied by deliberate provocations – killings of Iran’s nuclear scientists, sabotaging of its nuclear facilities, and, recently, skirmishes with Iranian naval vessels in the Western Indian Ocean. These are accompanied by constant bombardments of Iranian assets in Syria and Iraq, which are said to number several hundred just in 2020.

Since 2001, successive US presidents have been partners of Israel in these aggressions upon Iran, seeking to destroy its economy and discredit its leaders through harsh sanctions, which have impoverished millions of Iranians without either effecting regime change or even a curtailment of its nuclear programme.

The US in West Asia

The US has emerged as a major influence in West Asian affairs for two reasons: one, to ensure the free flow of oil and, linked with this, the security of the oil producers, and, two, to guarantee the security of Israel. Almost all of the US’s role in the region is expressed in military terms. In the 1980s, it was a co-sponsor (with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan) of the ‘global jihad’ in Afghanistan, and provided arms and generous funding to the ‘Islamic’ struggle against the Soviet Union.

Again, viscerally hostile to Iran after its Islamic Revolution, it provided weapons and intelligence support to Iraq in its war with its neighbour. After Iraq occupied Kuwait, it turned against its former protégé and led the coalition against it. The US followed this up by enforcing a tough

sanctions–inspections regime and no-fly zones in Iraq, and then subjecting both Iraq and Iran to ‘dual containment’. This denied the Iraqis food and medicine, and caused the deaths of over a million people, including several hundred thousand children, due to malnutrition.

But the US’s central association in the region has been with Israel. With adroit mobilization of the American Jewish community and the Christian evangelist groups, Israel has set up a powerful support base in the US, referred to by scholars as the ‘Israel Lobby’, that carries extraordinary influence with the country’s political and business leaders and large sections of the media – so that matters relating to Israel are not foreign policy issues in the US, but matters of domestic politics.

This lobby has also ensured that neighbouring countries that Israel views as its enemies have also become the US’s enemies, since the lobby has successfully sold the idea that there is a full congruence between the interests of the US and Israel. At the heart of this effort have been the neo-conservative (neocon) intellectuals, who are passionately committed to Israel and were most influential in the George W. Bush administration.

What they have done is to move their following, both in the US and in Israel, to the hard right, thus distancing themselves from moderate Jewish opinion in the US and non-Likud parties in Israel. The US’s war on Iraq (in 2003) and the policy of confrontation against Iran to obtain regime change are the products of the neocons’ influence on various US administrations. Outside neocon influence, the US has also been involved with military conflicts in Afghanistan (after 9/11) and Syria.

All these interventions have been unmitigated disasters for US interests, while causing extraordinary destruction in the countries concerned. As the American West Asia expert Mathew Duss has pointed out,⁸ the US has been continuously on a war footing since the 9/11 attacks. Since that date, the country has been involved in combat operations in twenty-four different countries. These wars have cost the US \$6 trillion. The conflicts saw the deployment of nearly 3 million soldiers, of whom 60,000 were killed or injured; it is estimated that 83 per cent veterans of post-9/11 wars are living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Among the causes for the failure of US interventions, US diplomat Philip Gordon notes that US policymakers know very little about the history and culture of the country they are planning to attack, and then reorder its political system.⁹ Interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran affirm that the US-initiated conflict with its leaders – political and military – have little sense of the warriors they were engaging with militarily and the people at large whom they plan to save from tyranny and provide the benefits of Western-style governance. In the absence of in-house knowledge, the US has had to depend on the advice of others, who are self-serving and often do not support US interests.

One final point: it is astonishing to realize that the US expended so much treasure and manpower in conflicts that went on for a decade (Iraq) and even two decades (Afghanistan), without either clarity or consensus among its policymakers of what its aims were and at what point it could accurately declare ‘mission accomplished’. In regard to Afghanistan, the distinguished American international security analyst Anthony Cordesman has written:

If one examines the cost of the war and the *lack of any clear or consistent strategic rationale for continuing it* [emphasis added], then it is far from clear that the U.S. should ever have committed the resources to the conflict that it did or that it had the grand strategic priority to justify two decades of conflict.¹⁰

Similarly, the US had no clarity about why it was attacking Iraq in 2003: the country had no links with the 9/11 attacks or with the Al Qaeda; several hundred United Nations (UN) inspections had given no indications that Iraq possessed or was developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This war was entirely pushed by the neocons, who could co-opt Vice President Dick Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to their cause after the trauma of 9/11. The war was very much on the Israeli agenda, but what US interests were involved was never clear; Bush’s decision appears to have been born out of the rage that 9/11 had engendered in him.

‘Eras’ in the West Asian Narrative

Different authors, looking at the flow of West Asian history, have broken up their narratives into different eras based on their personal perspectives. Writing at the end of 2006, former US diplomat and president of the Washington-based Council on Foreign Relations Richard Haass had described four ‘eras’ in West Asia history: the first, from the arrival of Napoleon at Alexandria in 1798 to the end of the First World War, which was the break-up of the old order, i.e., the end of the Ottoman Empire, and the division of territorial spoils in West Asia between the UK and France. The second era – the era of colonial rule – continued for about forty years, up to the republican revolutions from the 1950s.

The third era was the period of the Cold War, from the 1950s to 1991. During this period, the big powers intervened actively in regional affairs, but also helped maintain a level of uneasy balance in the region – for instance, by working together to end the 1973 war, and then promote accord between Israel and Egypt.

For Haass, the fourth era was the period of US hegemony that, in his view, ended in 2006. Haass believed that henceforth ‘outside powers [would] have a relatively modest impact and local forces [would] enjoy the upper hand’. Among such ‘local forces’, he mentioned ‘radicals committed to changing the status quo’.¹¹

Haass’ structures are unsatisfactory, since he views the region entirely from the perspective of external influences on it. By dividing the region’s narrative into colonial, Cold War and American periods, he ignores the dynamics of forces at play *within* the region that, in fact, confronted these external intrusions.

As a corrective to this perspective from the outside, the American scholars of West Asian affairs Marina and David Ottaway have spoken of ‘three epochal transformations’ over the last century. These are: one, the transformations effected by the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence new states; two, the upsurge of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s; and, three, the Arab Spring uprisings from 2011. With these

uprisings, the Ottaways write, ‘the region is being transformed profoundly and will never go back to what it was’.¹² While this analysis has the advantage to appraising the region from within, it leaves large gaps in its story, ignoring several transformative developments over the half century from the nationalist revolutions to the Arab Spring agitations.

Structure of This Book

Benefitting from these earlier efforts, I have structured my approach to the West Asian narrative within the framework of resistance:

- During the colonial period, resistance to colonial intervention – political, military and cultural – and resistance to rulers imposed on the region by Western imperialism on the basis of nationalism and socialism.
- From 1948, resistance to the creation of Israel and sustained opposition to Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories.
- From 1979, opposition to Western domination and influence over local rulers on the basis of radical Islam.
- From 2001, resistance to US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq through home-grown radical groups.
- From 2011, resistance to authoritarian rule through the Arab Spring uprisings and the clamour for wide-ranging change – socio-economic and political.

The division of the chapters, broadly chronological, reflects this paradigm of resistance.

Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the West Asian encounter with Western incursions into the region, and the attendant political, economic and cultural domination over the region. They also outline the efforts by Arab intellectuals to understand the dimensions of this challenge and frame responses that would affirm the region’s traditional culture and values, while setting out a path of significant change. The chapters will also show

how colonial control systematically foiled these efforts at reform, and imposed on the region an archaic political order headed by rulers sponsored by the colonial masters to serve their interests.

Chapter 3 examines the region's republican revolutions from the 1950s that threw off the colonial yoke on the basis of a new sense of Arab nationalism. It discusses the impact of the Cold War divide in West Asia – particularly between the republics and the monarchies. The chapter points out that after the Six Day War of 1967, the pendulum of regional influence swung in favour of the monarchies, which mobilized 'Islam' to serve monarchical interests.

Chapters 4 and 5 look at the ramifications of regional events that placed 'Islam' at the centre of regional affairs, and shaped it into an ideology to resist Western powers and the local surrogate rulers who served their interests. Besides the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Iran–Iraq war, the chapters discuss the factors leading to the 'global jihad' in Afghanistan and how this West-sponsored initiative metamorphosed into a powerful weapon against the very same powers that had shaped it.

Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 are US-centric, examining different American initiatives in the region – the war on Iraq in 1991, the sanctions–inspections regime and dual containment; the attempts at Israel–Palestine peace (Madrid, Oslo and Camp David II), culminating in the Second Palestinian Intifada; and the events leading to the 9/11 attacks. This is followed by a discussion of US retaliatory attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq. Chapter 8 discusses how Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump dealt with matters relating to Iran and Israel, while Chapter 9 looks briefly at how the US dealt with West Asian issues in the first year of the Joe Biden presidency.

Chapter 10 provides a detailed exposition of different aspects of the Arab Spring uprisings, continuing the story to the agitations in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq in and briefly noting the serious threat to the nascent democratic order in Tunisia and Sudan at the end of the year.

Chapter 11 gives an overview of India's ties with West Asia in recent years.

Chapter 12, the concluding chapter, reflects on the West Asian story of the last 200 years, highlighting the pattern of resistance, and the efforts of local rulers and their external associates to successfully block these agitations for change. The chapter also examines possible US disengagement from the region, and the implications this would have for local and regional politics.

West Asia is a region in constant flux. Every writer on the region lives in constant dread that his confident assertions will be abruptly superseded by new, unexpected developments. Writers on West Asian affairs can offer analysis and understanding, but generally fare poorly when it comes to prophecy. In his 2006 article, referred to above, Haass offered a twelve-point prognosis for the region. He got most things right, but he erred in predicting that outside actors would have a relatively ‘modest impact’ on the region. He did not anticipate that the US would find no way to arrange an honourable exit from Afghanistan and Iraq, and that the fight against extremist elements would ensure US military presence across West Asia for several more years.

But Haass was surely right when he said that West Asia ‘will remain a troubled and troubling part of the world for decades to come’. I hope this book will facilitate a better understanding of this influential region in world affairs.

1

West Asia Enters the Modern Era (1798–1900)



BY THE END OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, THE BALANCE OF POWER – political, economic and cultural – was already shifting in favour of the West. Till then, while Asian monarchies had suffered military setbacks from time to time, there was as yet no sense of being comprehensively overtaken by a new force from the West, a force that would effectively overturn world order in its favour.

Egypt experienced this change most dramatically. In June 1798, British warships arrived at the port of Alexandria and warned of the impending arrival of a French flotilla. They offered to provide military support to the Egyptians to contend with this foe; this offer was summarily rejected. In July, French ships, led by Napoleon, appeared at Alexandria and defeated the Egyptians within a few hours. French soldiers then marched on to Cairo and took it in less than an hour. Fierce Egyptian horsemen brandished swords and rode towards the French ranks, but were mowed down by cannon fire before they even reached striking distance.

This was the first European military force in West Asia since the Crusades 700 years ago. But the outcome of this encounter was quite

different – then, the Muslim forces, after their defeat in the first crusade, had repelled Christian armies over the next six attacks and retained Jerusalem till the First World War. Now, a new era had dramatically dawned across Muslim lands in West Asia.

This European success was the result of profound changes in Western economy and technology, which had created ever-widening gaps between European and Asian skills and prowess. The distinguished Arab scholar of West Asian history and political economy Albert Hourani noted that in Europe, over the previous decades, the plague had been controlled, agriculture had been extended with new lands cultivated and new crops introduced, while improvements in shipbuilding had enabled European explorers to roam the oceans, and later penetrate and control new markets, which boosted domestic manufacture.¹

This accretion of population and wealth facilitated the raising of armed forces – army and navy – that would project Western power in the Asian domain. Asia had, thus far, generally failed to develop and experience these extraordinary discoveries and inventions that gave rise to the agricultural and industrial revolutions, and the age of enlightenment. To recall Hourani, in most of Asia and Africa ‘population was held down by plague and famine’, while paucity of domestic production failed to provide the capital that would encourage investments in the changes that increasingly came to shape Western powers.²

Napoleon brought with him to Egypt several intellectuals whose task was to study these newly conquered territories, and expose them to Western technological achievements and ideas. While the French occupation was projected as a civilizing mission, it had strategic interests at its centre – at that time, the French were engaged in fierce competition with the British in India, Africa, the West Indies and the Americas, and viewed Egypt as the pathway through the Red Sea to India.

In the event, none of this worked out for the French: in 1801, the British navy under Nelson destroyed the French flotilla at Alexandria, forced Napoleon to flee to France, and then defeated the French armies by August

of that year, forcing French soldiers to obtain passage home on British and Ottoman ships.

But this Egyptian encounter with European civilization had long-term implications. The distinguished Oxford-based scholar of West Asia Eugene Rogan notes that Egyptians' 'sense of superiority had been shaken by their confrontation with the French, their ideas, and their technology'.³ These had included ideas relating to agriculture, urban infrastructure and public health, and introduced to the country the secret ballot used in the administrative councils and its first printing press. And, while we should not exaggerate the changes that the Napoleonic intervention effected in Egypt, it certainly did expose the populace to what Arabist and academic researcher John McHugo has called the modern, efficient, 'Western' way of doing things.⁴

Egypt almost immediately felt the impact of this French encounter. Muhammad Ali Pasha, an Albanian soldier from Macedonia, seized power in the country, got the Ottoman sultan to recognize him as governor, and then went on to build a modern, authoritarian state: he addressed agriculture, irrigation, drainage, canal desilting and expansion of cotton production. He set up Egypt's first Ministry of Education, a bureau to translate European technical writings, and medical and engineering colleges. He also modernized the country's armed forces and backed the Ottoman sultan against the Greeks, and then, on his own, ventured into Syria and into the Turkish realm of Anatolia, threatening the Ottoman Empire itself.

The sultan recognized Muhammad Ali's governorship of Egypt as hereditary in return for the pasha confining his ambitions to his core territories. During, Egyptian forces were deployed against the aggressive Wahhabi forces in Najd, which, in the early nineteenth century, had occupied the holy cities of Mecca and Madinah. They again fought the Wahhabi forces in 1817-18, finally annihilating their state and taking their leaders into captivity.

After Muhammad Ali Pasha's death in 1849, his successors continued with the development of national projects, including the railway systems

and postal services, culminating with the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869. Muhammad Ali's grandson, Ismail Pasha, built a new capital on Western lines, and obtained the title of 'Khedive' that placed him above all the other Ottoman governors.

But these achievements came at a heavy price. Most projects were funded by foreign investors and when they failed, the government was compelled to provide 'indemnities' as compensation. These indemnities, coupled with loans from foreign sources and financial profligacy on the part of the rulers, drove the treasury more heavily into debt and exposed it to Western encroachment. As Rogan has thoughtfully noted, 'The single greatest threat to the independence of the Middle East was not the armies of Europe but its banks.'⁵

Egypt's debts became the doorway through which Western financiers and then its politicians assumed control. Western authority over Egypt was established in 1878 when two European commissioners were appointed to the cabinet – the British commissioner became the finance minister, while the French official became the public works minister. When Khedive Ismail attempted to dismiss these two a year later, the Western powers arranged his own removal by the Ottoman sultan and the appointment of his more accommodative son, Tawfiq. This reflected the shift in the balance of power in favour of the West both in Istanbul and Cairo.

Popular discontent with the increasing authority of Western powers in the country, the immunities enjoyed by foreign communities, and the subordination of the ruler to Western interests led to a demand for a Constitution and, finally, armed rebellion by a military officer, Ahmad Urabi Pasha. The uprising was put down by the British warships' bombardment of Alexandria, followed by the occupation of the country by British armed forces in 1882.

British domination over Egypt was initially justified by the need to set the country's finances in order; this was achieved by the early 1890s. But by now, the British had come to enjoy the fruits of imperialist authority, while excluding France and other European powers from Egypt. French ire

was further aggravated when Britain expanded its control over Sudan as well.

France satiated its imperialist aspirations in other parts of Africa, starting with Algeria. France's takeover of Algeria was done through direct military action: with the excuse of ending piracy and the slavery of Christians, France landed 37,000 troops in Algeria and took control of the coastal areas. Later, in response to a local resistance movement led by the legendary hero Abd al Qadir (1808–83), the French unleashed extraordinary violence upon the general population, inflicting hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties and obtaining the surrender of Abd al Qadir in 1847.

Tunisia was headed by reformist rulers, particularly a great hero figure, Khayr al-Din Pasha (1820–90), who was first a general and then became prime minister. He was a strong advocate of wide-ranging reform, but supported conservative fiscal policies. Here, he was undermined by his ruler, whose extravagance led to the country's first foreign loan in 1863 that culminated in Tunisia's subordination to a European financial commission. After this, following a petty excuse, France used land and sea forces to colonize the country in 1881.

British control over Egypt encouraged a heightened enmity with its historic rival France, with the two of them nearly going to war in 1898. Following the Entente Cordiale, which made them allies in Europe, France initiated action to control Morocco: it began with economic penetration through a massive loan, followed by military incursions; the occupation was completed in March 1912.

The third colonial power to enter the scene was Italy. It did so through military action in Libya in 1911. Facing stiff resistance, the Italians diverted their attacks to other Ottoman targets (since most of Libya was under direct Ottoman control) such as Beirut, the Dardanelles Straits and other parts of the east Mediterranean. At the peace conference convened by the European powers in October 1912, Libya came under Italian imperial control.

Intellectual Ferment: Al-Nahda

In 1826, Muhammad Ali Pasha sent to France a group of forty-four young men who represented the diverse communities in the Ottoman realm – Arabs, Turks, Greeks, Circassians, Georgians and Armenians. This group had as their imam (leader of prayers in a mosque) a young scholar, Rifa'a al Tahtawi (1801–73). It was in France for five years.

Al Tahtawi has left us a detailed account of his impressions of this great centre of European intellectual and culture life. He applauded the West's superiority in science and technology, and noted their absence in the Muslim kingdoms, despite the fact that European progress over the previous 200 years had been built on Islamic scientific achievements.

Al Tahtawi was also enamoured of France's institutions and practices in the political domain. He translated into Arabic the French Constitution and noted that 'justice and equity are the causes for the civilisation of kingdoms and the well-being of subjects' and that these values have determined how 'their country has prospered, their knowledge increased, their wealth accumulated and their hearts [were] satisfied'.⁶

He was impressed by the equality of all citizens and the equality of opportunity enshrined in the Constitution, as also the freedom of expression reflected in newspapers, then unknown in the Arab world. He welcomed the revolution of 1830 in which King Charles X was overthrown for his despotism since he had 'shamed the laws in which the rights of the French people were enshrined'.⁷

Al Tahtawi returned home in 1831 and was tasked to set up a translation bureau. Moreover, in 1834, he published his observations in France, extolling Western scientific and political progress.

This marks the advent of extraordinary intellectual ferment in West Asia as the people sought to understand and confront the challenges posed by the West. The intellectual ferment in the Arab world in response to Western colonialism is referred to as Al-Nahda ('Renaissance') and broadly covers the period from 1798, i.e., from Napoleon's invasion of Egypt to the eve of the Second World War. The Tunisian scholar of democracy in West Asia Larbi Sadiki describes Al-Nahda as a 'shock, an awakening, and a soul-searching'.⁸

In the face of military defeat at the hands of the English and the French, the diagnosis of most religious leaders was that this calamity had befallen Muslims as they had deviated from the righteous path set out in the Koran and Hadith (the ‘Traditions’ of Prophet Muhammad), and, hence, their salvation lay in a fresh commitment to the fundamental tenets of their faith.

Others were more circumspect: there were those who saw the growth of European power and the spread of new ideas as a challenge to which they had to respond by ‘changing their own societies and the systems of beliefs and values which gave them legitimacy, in a certain direction, through acceptance of some of the ideas and institutions of modern Europe’.⁹ However, within this broad framework, the detailed analyses of their predicament and the panaceas offered differed quite widely among different scholars.

The first and perhaps the most influential response came from individuals who shared the sense of crisis, but differed in regard to their understanding of their root causes for the Muslim predicament and the way forward. These intellectuals included ‘liberals’, who called for reform in Islam in keeping with modern times, as also traditionalists, who asserted that there was no need for reform, and that going back to the original message of Islam was sufficient to confront Western intrusion.

The traditionalists struggled with the fundamental issues of the day: authoritative texts versus the need for reform; foundational cultural values and the challenges of modernity, and, above all, the need for political change and democracy.¹⁰ The pioneers of the first generation of traditionalists grappling with the profound challenge from the West, besides al Tahtawi, were Khayr al-Din Pasha, and Abdel Rahman al-Kawakibi (1848–1902). Their thought was anchored in Islam and it was from Islam that they drew all their precepts for reform. The principal issue before them was: how could they become part of the modern world while remaining Muslims?

They found their solution in the doctrines of Islam. The central aspect of their advocacy was for good government, which meant that it would be in accord with Sharia, which, being influenced by considerations of *masalaha*

(public interest), would lead to a just political order. They envisaged rulership as a ‘just despotism’; shura (consultation) would be at the heart of the system, though it would be limited to the nobility in al-Kawakibi’s plan of ‘democratic administration’. They envisaged a ‘Rule of Law’, which, though based on Sharia, would be reformed through ijihad (independent reasoning). They viewed liberty and justice as intrinsic to Islam.¹¹

Thus, this first generation of Arab reformers accepted the need for change; they supported peaceful opposition to despotism; they advocated consultation; and, above all, maintained the central importance of public welfare in the reformed political order. The difference between them and the liberals was only one of degree in that the latter used the same Islamic principles to call for more far-reaching changes in society.

Foremost among the liberals was Jamaluddin al-Afghani (1838–97) for whom the principal concern was not domestic reform but the battle against imperialism. He was deeply learned in Islamic traditions and was convinced that, if correctly interpreted, ‘the law of Islam was capable of the most liberal developments and that hardly any beneficial change was in reality opposed to it’.¹²

Like al-Afghani, his pupil Muhammad Abduh (1850–1905) commenced his analysis of the Muslim predicament with the need for ‘inner revival’, which, while sensitive to modern developments, rejected the option of a secular political order. What the Muslim order needed was a reinterpretation of Islam for modern times by a new religious leadership, one that was ‘tied neither to slavish imitation of the past nor to the godless interpretations of the West, one able to understand the benefit of modern sciences and the reality of living in the modern world’.¹³

His thinking was anchored in Islam, but it was an Islam that took note of the contemporary scenario. He said:

Liberate thought from the shackles of imitation [taqlid, the authoritative views of a scholar] and understand religion as it was understood by the community before dissension appeared; to return, in the acquisition of religious knowledge, to its first sources and to

weigh them in the scale of human reason, which God has created in order to prevent excess or adulteration in religion ... in this light, religion must be accounted a friend to science ...¹⁴

His understanding of true religion distinguished between the essential message of Islam which pertained to obligations to God, i.e., ibadat (worship), and others that regulated men's ties with other men in muamalat (this world).¹⁵ While the former were eternal and immutable, in the latter, only general principles had been set out in the holy texts and hence, their application could be reviewed in the light of human reason so that they would be relevant to contemporary times.

While Abduh extolled the golden age of early Islam and the community of first believers, the salaf (pious ancestors), the latter, in his view, were not confined to the Prophet and his companions, but extended over several centuries when the core traditions of Islam were developed.¹⁶ The Muslim community declined in this view due to the increasingly rigid adherence to Islamic law, taqlid (established Islamic law), which was contrary to Islam's true spirit of freedom. Authoritarian rulers took advantage of this loss of self-confidence among Muslims to subordinate and corrupt the ulema, so that they became handmaidens of tyranny rather than the guardians of the Muslim community.

Thus, while Muslims languished under tyranny and ignorance, the Europeans not only made progress in the sciences, they also cultivated the 'social virtues of reason and activity'.¹⁷ Abduh concluded:

The Muslim nations could not become strong and prosperous again until they acquired from Europe the sciences which were the product of its activity of mind, and they could do this without abandoning Islam, for Islam taught the acceptance of all the products of reason.¹⁸

In his programme to reform the Muslim community, Abduh gave priority to the reform of Islamic law, so as to adapt it to address modern-day matters.

He was guided in this by the concept of *masalaha*, in terms of which a judge in his rulings should consider that public welfare was being promoted by his judgement. Abduh expanded the use of this idea to assert that it could be the guiding principle in revising most traditional norms.¹⁹

He was mainly concerned with social, religious and judicial matters; hence, his writings on political issues are limited and his thoughts appear to be ‘fragmentary and changing’.²⁰ He first advocated representative government, but later, fearing that Egypt was not yet ready for it, suggested that the rule of a benevolent dictator for fifteen years would enable the peoples to reach a level of political maturity that would make representative government viable.²¹

Abduh has left behind a complex legacy, one which has enabled several later Islamic reformers, both liberals and traditionalists, to claim him as their mentor and guide. The third intellectual of the *Al-Nahda*, who, in fact, straddled the liberal–traditional divide, was Rashid Rida (1865–1935). He followed Abduh in advocating the need for *Sharia* to be in tune with contemporary times through the use of *ijtihad* and *qiyas* (analogical reasoning), and placed *masalaha* at the heart of the reformed political order.

On the basis of *masalaha* and the use of *ijtihad*, the Muslim community, represented by a just and learned ruler and a wise *ulema*, would develop a body of positive law: it would emerge as a result of a legislative rather than a judicial process; it would be subordinate to *Sharia* in that in case of a contradiction the latter would prevail, else it would effectively constitute a body of law founded on Islamic precepts but otherwise relevant to the needs of modern times.²²

Rida recognized that such a body of law required an authority ‘to maintain and enforce’ the law. Drawing on Islamic tradition, he found his just ruler in the institution of the caliph. However, the caliph envisaged by him was not an absolute ruler, or even a temporal one. Learned in Islamic law and capable of being a *mujtahid* (i.e., qualified to exercise *ijtihad*), he would be the supreme religious authority and guide, whose interpretations of the law would prevail in matters of public interest. He would preside over a ‘real Islamic society’ that would pursue the sciences, and make the

community strong and prosperous. It would 'restore the purity of religion and drive out superstition and innovation and create an Islamic unity' that would bring together all the Muslim sects and schools.²³

In this way, the nineteenth century saw the first Arab forays into the areas of constitutional government. These pioneers, as Hourani has observed, justified their efforts 'as being not the introduction of something new but a return to the true spirit of Islam ... [they believed] that the modern parliamentary system was a restatement of the system of consultation which had existed in early Islam and was the sole guarantee of freedom'.²⁴

This effort on the part of the Al-Nahda intellectuals was broadened to draw on a number of terms from traditional Islam and imbue them with contemporary Western meanings. It led to the 'linguistic modernization of political vocabulary' of Arabic.²⁵ Thus, for Abduh, *masalaha* became utility; *shura* became parliamentary democracy, and *ijma* (consensus) became akin to public opinion.²⁶

Arab Nationalism

The urge towards modernization following the painful encounter with the Western powers – commercial, intellectual, military and political – generated a consciousness relating to personal identity and the mobilization of group identities that would shape the aspirations of the Arab communities and define their movements for self-realization.

The sense of being 'Arab' was self-evident and was defined by the Arabic language shared across the territories from Morocco to the Arabian Peninsula. But the 'Arab' was deeply aware that he had multiple identities – his faith, his sect, his 'state' (for instance, Iraqi, Syrian, Egyptian, Tunisian, etc.), and his tribe. Yes, the language of government in the Ottoman Empire was Turkish, but the sultans saw Arabic as the sacred language of their faith, and Arabic retained its position as the principal language for religious education and law.

This ensured that nineteenth-century Arab intellectuals clamouring for change would focus on the reform of the practice of their faith, rather than mobilize movements founded on 'Arab' identity and pursuing 'Arab' independence. Thus, as noted above, al-Afghani and Abduh sought to reform Islam by reinterpreting its tenets to accommodate contemporary circumstances – al-Afghani asserted that Islam was 'in harmony' with all the principles discovered by modern-day science, and both of them posited that the fresh understanding and practice of their faith would make Muslims independent of, and even superior to, the powers that had come to dominate them.

Rashid Rida was more rigorous in distinguishing Arabs from Ottoman Turks, viewing the former as superior both in terms of conquest and culture. He called for 'political separation and statehood for the Arabs', which he believed would be to the advantage of the Muslims in general.²⁷ But, as the authority on West Asian history and politics Adeed Dawisha has noted, Rida neither sought to give up his Ottoman nationality, nor did he seek the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, which he thought was good for Islam.²⁸ His principal commitment was to Islamic solidarity and, in fact, he saw assertions of nationalism as attempts to divide the Muslim community.

The principal advocates of Arab nationalism in the nineteenth century were Christian intellectuals, mainly from Syria and Lebanon. They were anxious to break away from the Ottoman Empire, where their minority status gave them a subordinate position, and seek a separate Arab identity based on language and a secular state, in which 'Arabs' of all creeds would be equal citizens.

Thus, Naguib Azoury (d. 1916), a Syrian Christian, saw Arabs constituting a 'nation' from the Tigris to the Suez and from the Mediterranean to the Arabian Sea. Another Syrian Christian, Ibrahim al Yaziji (1847–1906), described the Arabs as 'the most remarkable of nations'; once the Turks were evicted from Arab lands, the Arabs would recover their 'old vigour' and 'resume their former progress in civilisation'.²⁹

But, as Dawisha notes, these were isolated voices; the majority of Muslims were unenthusiastic about the secular state and reluctant to sever links with the Ottoman Empire: they wanted improvements in their political, economic and social status, but *within* the empire; in fact, 300,000 Arabs fought in the Ottoman army in the First World War.³⁰

Regional Identities

While the idea of a unified Arab nationalism might not have taken shape before the war, the experience of Western domination did create and consolidate regional identities in different parts of the Arab world.

Egypt provided the most fertile soil for these ideas to flourish, particularly on account of its rich newspaper culture. The Syrian Christian, Adib Ishaq (1856–85), based in Cairo, was a pioneering editor whose columns explored a variety of identities – the ‘Eastern’, in opposition to European racism; the ‘Arab’, based on deeply felt and shared unity; the ‘Ottoman’, emerging from authority and law, and the *watan* (country), the territory that brings within its frontiers people who belong together and care for their shared entity.³¹

Another pioneer was Abdullah al Nadim (1844–96), writer, orator and political activist, who advocated a united Egypt of both Muslims and Copts (an ancient Orthodox Christian community in Egypt), and called for a national education to preserve this shared national culture. He explained Europe’s success (and Egypt’s failure) on its strength due to: unity of language and religion; unity of Europe against outsiders; and the Europeans’ economic enterprise, universal education, constitutional government and freedom of expression.³²

Britain’s occupation and control over Egypt from 1882 inspired a new generation of intellectuals and activists. The new authorities denied there was a unified Egyptian ‘peoples’, that the people in Egypt would take several generations to be fit for ‘real ... autonomy’, and, towards this end, they would need ‘to work cordially and patiently, in cooperation with European sympathisers’.³³

The most effective response to these views was provided by Mustafa Kamil Pasha (1874–1908). He believed in an ‘Egyptian nation’ and called for the end of British occupation. He set up the National Party and, with his eloquence, attracted popular support, and came to exemplify the aspirations of the people for freedom and reform. He advocated learning from the West, but not slavish imitation; he believed the true principles of Islam should be understood since they embraced justice, unity, equality, tolerance and patriotism. Egypt, he said, would be free only through its own efforts, the primary effort being national unity. This would emerge from ‘the sense of belonging to the nation and [assuming] responsibility for it’. This sense of unity came from the land of Egypt – ‘the world’s paradise ... the people who dwell in her ... is the noblest of peoples and [are] guilty of the greatest crimes against her ... if they surrender control of her to the foreigner’.³⁴

A central figure in this intellectual ferment and activism in Egypt was Saad Zaghloul (1859–1927), who dominated Egyptian thought and politics through the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. In the 1870s and 1880s, he was part of the inner circle of al-Afghani and Abduh. From 1892, he was a judge for fourteen years, and worked with Abduh and other reformers on modernizing Egypt’s laws. He joined the government in 1906 as education minister and then, in 1910, became justice minister. In 1913, he left the government, entered the legislative assembly and became the leader of the Opposition to the government.

While his public career after the First World War will be considered later in the book, here we will examine his views on national issues. In line with Abduh’s thinking, he sought Egypt’s independence to be achieved on the basis of the reform of law and the education system. He believed in democratic government, a government that prioritized individual and social welfare. The nation, according to him, should be the result of a ‘sacred union’ among the various individuals and communities, regardless of religious diversities.

Thus, the intellectual climate through the nineteenth century up to the First World War helped shape not an ‘Arab’ but an Egyptian identity.

Similar assertions of sub-identities on regional basis emerged in other parts of the Arab world as well.

In Tunisia, the resistance to the French invasion of 1881 had shaped a 'national' Tunisian identity. A political group called the 'Young Tunisians' was set up in 1907, but it did not seek immediate withdrawal of French rule – what it sought were improvements in modern education and greater access to government service. In Algeria too there was a 'Young Algerians' movement with a reformist agenda – French education, financial and legal reforms, and greater political rights.

Arab nationalism embracing the wider Arab world would obtain its nascent shape after the First World War.

We will pause our discussion relating to European interventions in WANA, and the ferment this created in the local populations, and look at the developments in another part of West Asia – the Persian Gulf.

Britain Controls the Gulf

The expansion of British control over the region of the Persian Gulf in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was largely linked with maintaining the security of the British Empire in India. The East India Company set up its first 'factory' in the region at Jask island, at the mouth of the Gulf in 1616, just three years after its factory had come up at Surat, in western India. Through the century, its factories expanded to other towns along the northern coast – Shiraz, Isfahan, Bushire, Kerman and Basra, with Muscat being the only factory on the southern side.

British economic interaction then was largely confined to Persia and Iraq, while its interest in the Arab Gulf sheikhdoms was limited due to fear of piracy. Hence, till the nineteenth century, while India was very important economically for the Gulf sheikhdoms as the principal source of foodstuffs and textiles, shipping and trade between the two was controlled by Arab, Persian and Indian traders.

The Gulf became more important for British economic interests as the need to protect shipping between Persia, Iraq, Muscat and India arose.

These economic interests were bolstered by political concerns as well. France emerged as a regional rival after Napoleon's foray into Egypt in 1798, which opened up links between France and Persia. British envoys went to Tehran and Muscat in the early nineteenth century to conclude treaties that would exclude France from their territories.

Thus, a combination of concerns relating to politics and piracy opened the door for the Gulf sheikhdoms gradually coming under British influence – becoming in effect a part of Britain's 'informal empire', i.e., emerging as 'territories over which Britain had acquired some degree of suzerainty (or partial sovereignty) by treaty'.³⁵ In 1819-20, Britain sent a naval expedition against pirates operating along the Gulf coast and then imposed an anti-piracy treaty, the General Treaty of 1820, on local rulers.

To ensure the implementation of the treaties, maintain ties with the rulers, and protect Britain's shipping interests, the office of 'Political Resident' was created at Bushire, which was supported by 'political agents' located in the principal port towns across the Gulf – Muscat, Sharjah, Bahrain, Kuwait, and, from 1947, at Doha, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The resident was backed by a naval squadron permanently stationed in the region, and infantry units in different town. Later, airfields were located at Basra, Kuwait, Bahrain, Sharjah and Muscat.

The residencies and agencies were staffed, funded and controlled from British India – from the Bombay Political Department (under the governor of Bombay Presidency) till 1873, the Indian Foreign Department (under the governor general/viceroy) and, after India's independence in 1947, from the Foreign Office in London. The residents and agents generally belonged to the Indian Political Service. The deep political, military, administrative and economic involvement of British India in matters relating to the Gulf has led the British scholar of the history of the Gulf, James Onley, to point out that 'Arabia was the western-most frontier of the British Indian Empire'.³⁶

After the General Treaty of 1820, Britain entered into 'maritime truces' with local rulers, which evolved into the 'Perpetual Maritime Truce' in 1853. Under this agreement, the rulers gave up war at sea among themselves and against merchant shipping in return for British naval

protection. This ‘Trucial system’ made Britain the ‘protector, mediator, arbiter, and guarantor of settlements’.³⁷

Later, in response to concerns about possible Russian and Ottoman encroachments into the Gulf, Britain entered into ‘exclusive agreements’ with the Gulf sheikhdoms from 1888 onwards that gave the Empire full control over their external relations; this legitimized the exclusion of Ottoman, German, French and Russian influences from the Gulf, effectively creating a ‘cordon sanitaire’ to safeguard British India.

In addressing local rulers in 1903, Lord Curzon, the viceroy in India, applauded British achievements in the region thus:

We found strife and we created order. ... We saved you from extinction at the hands of your neighbours. ... we shall not wipe out the most unselfish page in history. The peace of these waters must be maintained; your independence will continue to be upheld; and the influence of the British Government must remain supreme.³⁸

Britain’s ‘informal empire’ in the Gulf was recognized as ‘unique’ in a Foreign Office memorandum of 1908 in which the writer noted:

[In the Persian Gulf, Britain] has for generations borne burdens there which no other nation has ever undertaken anywhere, except in the capacity of sovereign; she has had duty thrust upon her without dominion; she has kept the peace amongst people who are not her subjects; has patrolled, during upwards of two centuries, waters over which she has enjoyed no formal lordship.³⁹

Even as the British were consolidating their presence in the Gulf, on the great land mass of the Arabian Peninsula, outside direct British control or influence, major developments were taking place – this was the emergence of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Early Saudi States

Early in the eighteenth century, in the arid wasteland of Najd, in the heart of the Arabian Peninsula, a religious reformer and preacher emerged who, by the end of the century, would have a profound effect on the peninsula – by providing Islam with a new religio-political belief system, a new political entity that would shape regional affairs for decades to come, and a new ideological influence that would inspire global debate and conflict for the next two centuries.

This scholar from Najd was Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab; the political entity he helped shape was the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, under the leadership of its royal family, the Al Saud. The religious doctrine that bears his name – Wahhabism – went on to inspire diverse radical intellectuals and movements that would challenge governing regimes and even world powers.

Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab was born in Najd in 1702-03 in a family of religious scholars. He followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, and took up religious studies. He travelled extensively – to Mecca, Madinah and Basra – before returning to Najd in. He enjoyed the patronage of a local dignitary for some years. They fell out over his religious views, after which he travelled to the town of Diriyya, then headed by a local chief, Mohammed bin Saud Al Muqrin (1687–1767). In 1744, the scholar and the chieftain entered into a covenant which provided that, in the territories under Al Saud, ibn Abdul Wahhab would be responsible for religious matters, while Al Saud would control political and military issues – with neither interfering in the domain of the other. This covenant shaped the politics, first of the peninsula and then of West Asia, for the next decades.

In essence, ibn Abdul Wahhab's message was simple and clear: he called for a return to the original Islam as contained in the Koran and the Hadith. This, in his view, provided for the centrality of tawhid (oneness of God). Tawhid meant a complete rejection of shirk (the association of other entities with God), including the veneration of saints, superstitious practices (for instance, the use of amulets, incantations to ward off illness or evil, etc.), and bida'a, innovations and aberrations in belief and practice, i.e.,

doctrine and practices that were not based on the two primary sources of Islam, but had developed over subsequent years. These included the beliefs and practices of Sufis and the Shia.

Ibn Abdul Wahhab preached a return to the fundamentals of the faith largely in response to religious practices around him. In Najd as also in Hijaz, the western region of the peninsula, he saw people's faith suffused in ignorance and superstition – worshipping at graves, holding trees and stones to be sacred, believing in spirits, fortune-telling, sorcery – in short, polytheism and paganism, which were far removed from the pristine faith of the Koran and Hadith.

Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab is a controversial figure today since his doctrines are believed to have sanctioned the violence of the Saudi states that emerged in the nineteenth century, and providing the ideological bases of radical Islam in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Even modern scholars do not agree on the message and legacy of this religious figure. The Russian Arabist Alexei Vasiliev, in his monumental history of Saudi Arabia, says that 'the centre of gravity of the Wahhabi doctrine lay in politics rather than in the social sphere'.⁴⁰ He then goes on to highlight ibn Abdul Wahhab's hostility to Shias, Sufis and his intolerance of opposing views. More seriously, he says that ibn Abdul Wahhab's teaching moulded Wahhabis 'into a united sect and kindled a spirit of fanaticism', leading them to accept 'the necessity of undertaking jihad against the "polytheists"'.⁴¹

Vasiliev seems to have taken a rather superficial view of ibn Abdul Wahhab's thinking and is judging him, not on the basis of what he believed in or advocated, but on the actions of the Saudi state that he neither sanctioned nor supported. As the distinguished authority on Wahhabism Natana Delong-Bas points out, ibn Abdul Wahhab's primary interest was not in politics but in faith; his alliance with Al Saud was entirely instrumental – to use the Saudi chiefs to further the message of tawhid.⁴² The division of responsibility between them clearly meant that the imam alone, i.e., ibn Abdul Wahhab, would declare a jihad when it was in accord

with religious precepts; it could not be used to justify conquest for power and glory.

In fact, differences in this regard between ibn Abdul Wahhab and Mohammed bin Saud led to the former resigning from his position as imam and later withdrawing from active public life in 1773. This was largely due to the fact that, following the death of Mohammed Al Saud in 1767, conquests led by his successor, Abdulaziz bin Muhammad Al Saud (1767–1803), ‘made it clear [to Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab] that the Al Saud family had as its ultimate goal the expansion of its territories and power, with or without religious legitimation’.⁴³

The First Saudi State (1745–1811)

Through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the players in the peninsula, besides the Saudis, were: the Sharifs of Mecca, hereditary rulers of Hijaz, ostensibly under the Ottoman sultan; Muhammad Ali, the ruler of Egypt, also ostensibly under the Ottoman sultan, but independent in political and military matters; the Ottoman rulers in Istanbul, formal overlords of all of West Asia and the peninsula, but steadily losing control; and, finally, the British who were anxious to retain control over the Gulf ports but otherwise having hardly any interest in the peninsula (besides their control over Aden).

Whatever may have been ibn Abdul Wahhab’s own nuanced views on jihad, the fact remains that the Al Saud’s affiliation with Islam imparted legitimacy to their conquests and fired their followers with a zeal that far exceeded the enthusiasm they might have had if they had only been lured by booty. Saudi conquests from 1745 led to the foundation of the first Saudi state in the Arabian Peninsula that flourished until its fall in 1811.

During this period, the Saudis and their warriors, fired by religious zeal, brought central and eastern Arabia under their control, fought off the armies of the sharifs who ruled Hijaz, took control of the holy cities of Mecca and Madinah, competed with the British in Oman, made forays into the south to

the provinces of Aseer and Najran, and, above all, destroyed the shrine of Imam Hussain at Karbala in 1802.

These remarkable military successes of the Saudi armies were seen as a challenge and an opportunity by Muhammad Ali, who was the effective ruler of Egypt from 1805. Vasiliev has set out several reasons for his interest in mobilizing an Egyptian army against the Al Saud: to enhance his own prestige throughout the Ottoman Empire after liberating the holy cities; possible reward from the Ottoman sultan of control over Syria, and, with Jeddah under his sway, control over the lucrative trade with Yemen and India.⁴⁴

During, the Egyptian Armies made slow progress through the peninsula by nibbling away at the territories that the Saudis had taken over. From 1813, Muhammad Ali personally directed the war against the Al Saud. By 1815, the Egyptians were in firm control over Hijaz and commenced their attacks on the Saudis, now headed by Imam Abdullah bin Saud Al Saud. From 1817, the Egyptians took the towns in the Eastern Province and then turned towards Najd from early 1818. Imam Abdullah surrendered Diriyya to the Egyptians in September 1818. In December of that year, the imam and his senior companions were executed in Istanbul, bringing the first Saudi state to an end.

The Second Saudi State (1843–65)

Egyptian occupation of Najd was unpopular: Egyptian policy, Vasiliev points out, was to plunge the region into ‘chaos, decay and ruin and destroying the chances of a renaissance’, without any concern for the interests of the local people.⁴⁵ This misrule prepared the ground for the return of the Saudis to their patrimony. A scion of the Al Saud, Turki bin Abdullah bin Mohammed Al Saud, emerged from Egyptian captivity and took control of Najd in 1823 and ruled till 1834, ostensibly under Turkish and Egyptian suzerainty. He was succeeded by his son, Imam Faisal, who was ousted from Najd during, but, with the collapse of Muhammad Ali’s

rule in Cairo, he returned to Diriyya in 1843 and remained in power till 1865, a period that is seen as the second Saudi state.

It is interesting to note that during Imam Faisal's rule, the Saudi state came into contact with the British, who, as we have seen earlier, were anxious to consolidate their presence along the Gulf coast to the exclusion of all powers, local or foreign.

The Saudi–British differences were fundamental: the British were clear that they had to have exclusive control over the Gulf coast from Oman to Kuwait; the Saudis made it clear to the British that their state encompassed the 'land of Arabia', from Kuwait to Ra's al Hadd (the eastern extremity of Oman) that 'God has given unto us'.⁴⁶ This set the stage for regular skirmishes between Saudi forces and those of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman. These were inconclusive, and did not involve any direct conflict between the Saudis and the British.

Faisal's death in 1865 marks the end of the second Saudi state. After this, the state gradually lost its territories largely due to conflicts between family members, with rivals turning to outsiders for assistance and further eroding their territory and authority. Between 1865 and 1891, three sons of Imam Faisal – Abdullah, Saud and Abdul Rehman – ruled from Diriyya on seven different occasions, with every change making the state more feeble and, in turn, making rival families in the region stronger. At one point, in the 1870s, one brother, Abdullah, was backed by Turkey, while the other, Saud, was supported by the British.

The principal rival of the Al Saud was the Al Rashid family of Jabal Shammar, with its capital at Hail. In 1891, the Al Rashid forces, backed by the Ottomans, routed the Al Saud and their allies, and took control of central Arabia. The Al Saud, under Abdul Rehman, fled to Kuwait and placed themselves under the protection of the amir (prince), initially Mohammed Al Sabah and, from 1896, Mubarak Al Sabah. In northern and central Arabia, this was a period of weak government and economic devastation as central authority collapsed and the region was overrun by Al Rashid's plunderers and Bedouin marauders. As anarchy prevailed, the

ideal of a strong central governance, provided briefly by the two Saudi states, was recalled with deep nostalgia.

Great Power Rivalries in the Gulf and the Peninsula

This weak and divided region also became the arena for big power competitions, as European nations pursued their strategic interests in this beleaguered area. In 1893, the British foreign secretary Lord Lansdowne had declared in Parliament that ‘we should regard the establishment of a naval base, or a fortified port in the Persian Gulf by any other power as a very grave menace’. The British were firmly in control of the Gulf coastal towns through their residencies and agencies, but now their unrivalled monopoly of power came to be challenged by Germany, led by Kaiser Wilhelm II, who saw in West Asia a space for his country’s ‘place in the sun’. He established close ties with the Ottoman sultan, modernized the Turkish armed forces, built the Berlin–Istanbul–Baghdad railway, planned to extend it to Basra and then Kuwait, and backed Ottoman forays into the Arabian Peninsula.

Russian and French warships also started visiting the Gulf waters: France tried to set up a refuelling station in Muscat in 1899, while the navies of the two countries paid a joint visit to the Gulf in 1903. Britain responded with a flotilla led by the viceroy in India, Lord Curzon, whose remarks extolling British achievements in the region have been quoted above.

Abdulaziz Restores Al Saud in Riyadh

Abdulaziz (1880–1953), the son of Abdul Rehman, the last imam of Najd from the Al Saud family, living in exile in Kuwait from 1893, dramatically restored his family’s fortunes with a daring raid on Riyadh in January 1902 and the final capture of the surrounding areas by May. Abdulaziz, with his father’s consent, was declared the amir of Najd, while Abdul Rehman retained the title of imam.

Over the next few years, Abdulaziz consolidated his power in central Arabia, defeating Turkish forces and their regional allies in several battles, ensuring their final departure from central Arabia, with heavy losses, in late 1906.

Abdulaziz had several encounters with the Al Rashid of Hail, but could not deliver a decisive blow. His forces also fought those of Sharif Hussain of Hijaz, but once again without a clear result. In early 1913, he moved to take Al Hasa (Eastern Province): beginning with the capture of Hofuf, he then took Qatif, and finally brought all of Al Hasa into his empire, and gained access to the Gulf.

Abdulaziz's territorial successes put him in contact with the British in the Gulf in 1910-11, even as the Ottomans attempted to bring him into their fold. With the Ottomans unable to raise forces against him, Abdulaziz thought it expedient to verbally accept Turkish suzerainty in return for funds and weapons. On the eve of the First World War, the Ottomans had lost the provinces of Najd and Al Hasa to the Al Saud; they, therefore, affirmed their ties with the Al Rashid of Hail.

We will take up the narrative of the Al Saud's revival and the family's emergence as a major factor in regional affairs in the next chapter. Here, we will take a quick look at one more development that changed the regional landscape, and with that, the politics and economics of West Asia – and the world – which was the discovery of oil.

Oil Discoveries in the Gulf Sheikdoms

Masjid-i-Sulaiman, a small town in south-west Iran, along the border of modern-day Iraq, with a present-day population of 200,000, has a board at an oilwell that says: 'Masjid-i-Sulaiman Well Number 1. The first oil well in the Middle East'. Beyond this welcoming signboard is the original rig, with its steam engine and boiler. Next to them, the signboard recalls the first discovery of commercial oil in West Asia: drilling had started on 23 January 1908 and was completed on 26 May 1908; drilling had gone to a depth of 1,179 feet before oil was struck. Unknown to the drillers then, they had

discovered an oil well that was 100 sq. miles in area and had 2 billion barrels of oil.⁴⁷

This saga had begun in May 1901, when a British entrepreneur, William Knox D’Arcy, had obtained a concession from the Qajar ruler in Tehran to discover, develop and export oil for sixty years throughout Persia (except the five northern provinces, then under Russian control), including the right to construct pipelines to transport the oil to the Gulf coast. Once the company was set up, the Persian government was to be paid £20,000, with another £20,000 in shares; and royalty of 16 per cent on net profits was to be paid to the treasury.

Earlier prospecting had indicated the presence of hydrocarbon deposits since Masjid-i-Sulaiman was the site of an ancient Zoroastrian fire temple, with the temple flame kept alive through the centuries by oil seepage. As the oil well spudded on 26 May 1908, the British oil expert Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, in his pioneering work on West Asian oil, describes it as ‘one of the most significant events of all Persian history’.⁴⁸

Following this discovery, D’Arcy and his partners set up in April 1909 the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), with an initial capital of £2 million. A 138-mile-long pipeline from the site to the sea was completed in 1912, which could carry 40,000 tons of oil annually. A refinery was also constructed on the island of Abadan in the Shatt al Arab (the estuary of the Euphrates, Tigris and Karun rivers) in 1913. Persia thus joined the world’s major oil producers, with a production of 43,000 tons in 1912, 80,000 tons in 1913, and 273,000 tons in 1914.

The APOC was now the producer of an important commercial fuel that was slowly creating its own space on the global energy landscape that was, at the time, dominated by coal. One more player now entered the scene and reshaped this new fuel into a crucial strategic asset – the British navy.

Through the first decade of the twentieth century, there was an intense debate in Britain – between the ‘navalists’, who advocated an upgraded and expanded navy, and the ‘economists’, who wanted naval expenditures curtailed in favour of better-funded social welfare programmes. The debate

was intense: would Britain surrender her naval supremacy to provide higher old-age pensions, the navalists asked.

Upgradation of the navy centred on the question of moving from coal to oil. This would bring great advantages – oil located east of Suez was cheaper than coal; oil would make the ships faster and give them superior manoeuvrability; oil was also more efficient, while its use would release more space on board and reduce personnel required for stoking. Winston Churchill, the first lord of the Admiralty from October 1911, backed the shift to oil – the building programmes of the navy in only provided for oil-fired ships.

As Germany under the Kaiser pursued competition with Britain and embarked on a major naval construction programme to obtain modern oil-fuelled ships, Britain now had to address the issue of the security of oil supplies in the event of war, given that the oil world was then dominated by two powerful monopolies – Standard Oil in the US and Royal Dutch Shell in Holland. The British foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey stated, ‘What we must do is to secure under British control a sufficient oilfield for the British Navy.’⁴⁹ There was need to locate a more reliable supplier and under British influence.

The reliable partner identified was APOC. Two considerations were important for the foreign office: one, given that Britain’s importance in the Gulf was founded on its dominant commercial presence, the oilfields in Persia should not come under foreign control; and, two, that securing the British government’s control over APOC’s oil would require some degree of ‘pecuniary assistance’. This translated into the government, through the Admiralty, acquiring a majority stake in APOC and entering into a contract with the company for long-term supply. The latter was achieved in May 1914 through a twenty-year contract between APOC and the government to supply fuel oil.⁵⁰

In June 1914, after a heated parliamentary debate, skilfully steered by Churchill, the House of Commons voted overwhelmingly in support of the government investing £2.2 million to acquire a 51 per cent stake in APOC. The strategic importance of this decision was apparent within a few months

as Britain went to war with Germany: by late 1916, APOC was supplying 20 per cent of the oil needs of the British navy.

The First Hundred Years

This chapter has provided an overview of the Arab engagement with modernity, as represented by European military, political and cultural encroachments, in the first century of the modern era. This interaction constituted a comprehensive defeat for the Muslims – not just military, but affirming the comprehensive superiority of the new aggressors from the West.

The Islamic world was traumatized by these defeats, for being believers in the message of Islam, they had been assured by Allah of the resilience of their faith in the face of all non-believers – an assurance that had been repeatedly proven accurate over several centuries. With this defeat, the search for an explanation instigated a profound introspection, when the region's best minds applied themselves to obtain answers.

The consensus that emerged was that the Islamic order – doctrinal, political, cultural – needed to be reviewed in the face of the challenge posed by the obviously superior forces they faced. The validity of the core messages of Islam was upheld; indeed, it was in Islam that the Muslim savants found their answers. Yes, reform was urgently required, but the bases and sanction for this change was readily available within Islam itself – the faith only needed to be understood afresh in the light of the new discoveries, inventions and thoughts that the Europeans brought before the region's people.

Within this broad understanding, there were diverse pathways recommended by different intellectuals, stretching from the quietly conservative to the clearly radical – but, taken together, they injected a fresh sense of confidence among the defeated people that they had, in their beliefs and traditions, the ideas and institutions that would enable them to imbibe the innovations of the new world and, over time, even match, if not supersede, the antagonists that had vanquished them.

They were eager learners – they travelled widely, learnt new languages, read and wrote extensively, spoke and advocated enthusiastically. The best minds among the Arabs – now rejuvenated and excited – produced comprehensive solutions to their predicaments, inspired by the past and looking confidently at the future.

Why then did this effort falter, this excitement wither away, so that, as the century ended and the world stood at the edge of war, the Arab appeared much worse off than when Napoleon had clambered on to Egypt's shores in 1798?

The serious error the intellectuals made was to believe that the Europeans would be their partners in progress, would actually facilitate the required reforms. However, this was never part of the Western agenda: as the decades of the nineteenth century moved forward, European avarice for territory, raw materials and natural resources increased, so that trade was quickly replaced by imperial domination.

Local resistance was robust and consistent and produced several heroes across the region – Abdel Qadir, Khayr al Din, Mohammed Ahmad, Ahmad Urabi – all of whom were ultimately cut down. The sense of racial and civilizational superiority now pervaded the Western world, represented by hard governors and ruthless armies.

Again, the Arabs aspiring for change were rarely well-served by their rulers. These were hereditary monarchs, anxious to retain their crowns, however chipped and weathered they might be. But here again, the commentator must note the chicanery of the new colonial masters – for, even in respect to these fragile local rulers with limited capacity, the imperialist wanted to ensure that only the worst of them – only the weakest, the most pliable enjoyed his moment on the throne.

From the vantage point of 1914, as we look back at the preceding century, we note that the pattern of imperial domination of the region was now established in terms of intentions, institutions and interventions; for the Arabs, the coming decades would be much worse – for their freedom, aspirations and self-respect. Destiny would remain unkind to them.

2

Five Decades of Upheaval (1900–50)



THE NINETEENTH CENTURY HAD BORNE WITNESS TO THE TRAUMATIC encounters of the traditional societies of West Asia with the military, political, economic and cultural prowess of Western powers. These had overturned centuries-old beliefs, systems and institutions, had challenged local leaders with alternative visions of state order, and, above all, had begun to intrude into and ultimately dominate not just the order in Arab polities, but also in Istanbul, the heart of the Ottoman Empire itself.

West Asian intellectuals, although shaken by these encounters, still retained enough ability to seek to understand the contours and content of the challenges posed by Western interventions, and to develop ideas and advocate institutions that would accommodate these fresh concepts, while remaining true to traditional beliefs and experiences. West Asia, though humbled, was not – at this point – swept off its feet. It retained the capacity to rejuvenate itself and even flourish in a new order shaped by debate, experiment and reform.

The challenges before the votaries of change were formidable. There was, of course, resistance from the old order – the rulers, the aristocracy, the landed gentry, the clergy, even ordinary communities intimidated by changes that might overturn their familiar lives. But these obstacles could

perhaps have been managed, for several sections of the old order themselves recognized the urgent need for change if they were to retain a large part of their autonomy in the face of the multifaceted Western onslaught.

The more formidable challenge was external. It came from imperialist powers – Britain and France – that saw West Asia as the last space that was still outside their political control. They had so far avoided large-scale political intervention in the region, mainly to ensure that their own forces did not come into conflict with each other. The First World War, which saw the Ottoman Empire side with Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, provided the opportunity for the development of plans that would carve up the Arab territories of the Ottomans and distribute them between the two colonial states – impelled by still-unsatiated dreams of imperial glory, buttressed by the desire for strategic and economic advantage.

The story of West Asia through the twentieth century is thus one of the imperialist shaping of the region through intervention and the colonial domination of the region, the upheavals – political, economic and social – that these interventions caused, and the legacy of animosity, competition and bitterness that those initiatives of a century ago have left behind that continue to animate regional conflicts to this day.

British interests in West Asia were both economic and political: it needed oil from Iran and Iraq, and cotton from Egypt for its mills, and markets for its manufactured items across the region. Politically, a presence in West Asia would make it a major naval power in the Mediterranean, give it control over the Suez Canal, and ensure that the sea route to India and the Far East would be under its command. These routes would be protected through a series of naval bases in the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, just as the land route to India was kept under Britain's control through residencies and agencies across the Persian Gulf.

France's principal interests were in North Africa, but in West Asia, it coveted control over 'Greater Syria' that today comprises the states of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel and Jordan. Despite the setback during Napoleon's expedition, France had maintained close links with the

Christian community, particularly the Maronites in Mount Lebanon, and had even come to their rescue in 1860, when they were attacked by the Druze. Besides this religio-political interest in the well-being of the Christians, like the British, French presence in the region would affirm its status as a Mediterranean power, besides providing it with bases for sea and later air routes to its colonies in Africa and Southeast Asia.

British interests in West Asia after the war were set out in a report prepared by an inter-ministerial committee, chaired by the diplomat Sir Maurice de Bunsen, that recommended in June 1915 that Britain retain its influence over the sheikhdoms across the Persian Gulf. In addition, the report recommended that the British Empire bring all of Mesopotamia – made up of the three provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul – under its control, and establish a ‘land bridge’ from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean port of Haifa, then in Palestine.¹

To realize their interests, during the war, Britain and France entered into two agreements: one, an agreement with Sharif Hussain of Mecca in terms of which he would lead an ‘Arab Revolt’ against the Ottomans and, in return, would be rewarded with the rulership of an ‘independent’ Arab kingdom in West Asia. Two, a bilateral agreement between the two colonial powers, referred to as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, setting out the distribution of Ottoman territories between them after the war. Britain also announced a third commitment, the Balfour Declaration of November 1917, in which the then British foreign secretary Arthur Balfour promised ‘a national home for the Jewish people’ in Palestine.

Obviously, the commitments made under these agreements could hardly be reconciled with each other. The two colonial powers were mainly interested in giving primacy to their imperialist interests in the region, an aim that could certainly not accommodate an ‘independent’ Arab state promised to Sharif Hussain. And the promise of a ‘national home’ for the Jews from Europe was hardly consistent with the civil and religious rights of the Arab Muslims and Christians then living in Palestine for two millennia.

We will now examine how the three agreements were pursued during and just after the war.

‘The Great Arab Revolt’

Sharif Hussain (1853–1924) held a centuries-old office – the emirate of the holy city of Mecca – that was occupied by the descendants of Prophet Muhammad, through which they exercised control over the holy city and managed the annual Hajj pilgrimage. This imparted to the office considerable influence as Islam’s principal religious authority after the Ottoman sultan who was also caliph. The incumbent was appointed by the Ottoman sultan, who, by manipulating the ambitions of rival branches of the family, ensured that no Sharif ever got too strong or influential.

At the start of the war, the Ottoman ruler declared a jihad against the European Allied powers. The British, therefore, thought of getting the Sharif on to their side to dilute Muslim support for the Ottomans and transfer it to their protégé instead. British officials in Cairo thus entered into a protracted correspondence with Sharif Hussain and his sons (Faisal and Abdullah), in which the terms of Hussain’s backing for the British were spelt out, including his status as ruler and the territories he would rule as sovereign in return for his support for the Allied cause.

In regard to Hussain’s status, the British officials affirmed their pledge of support ‘for the independence of Arabia and its inhabitants, together with our approval of the Arab Khalifate when it should be proclaimed’.² In terms of territory, while Hussain claimed all of Greater Syria, Mesopotamia and the Arabian Peninsula (minus Aden), the British side made small modifications in October 1915 – retaining the coastal areas of Syria (for France) and proposing a joint Anglo-Arab administration for the three provinces of Mesopotamia. The British also agreed to Hussain’s claim on the Arabian Peninsula, with the caveat that this would be ‘without prejudice to our existing treaties with Arab chiefs’, thus retaining British interests in the Persian Gulf.³

Following setbacks to the British forces in the battles with the Ottomans at Gallipoli (April 1915) and in Mesopotamia (April 1916), Sharif Hussain began to describe his territories as an 'Arab kingdom' and himself as its chosen ruler. He also claimed full control over the three Mesopotamian provinces, while allowing the British to temporarily hold on to territories under their military occupation, in return for a suitable compensation.

Sharif Hussain called for an 'Arab Revolt' against the Ottomans on 5 June 1916. All through his correspondence with British officials in Cairo, Hussain projected himself as the consensual leader of the Arabs of West Asia. However, with tight Ottoman control over Syria and Iraq, the only forces Hussain could mobilize at this point were Bedouin irregulars, who had little interest in Arab nationalism, were notoriously undisciplined, and were principally interested in booty.

The British, then facing severe pressures both in Europe and against the Ottomans, still needed Sharif Hussain's religious authority among the Muslims, but could not spare much firepower to back him militarily. Still, by September, Hussain's forces had taken Mecca, Taif, Jeddah, Rabigh and Yanbu from the Ottomans, with only Madinah remaining with the latter. Hussain now styled himself 'King of the Arab lands', while his sons became amirs. Playing on Arab sentiment, the Sharif's forces were augmented with Egyptian soldiers, Arab officers and some soldiers from the Ottoman forces (most of them prisoners-of-war in British camps in India and Egypt), and North African soldiers from French colonies.

A central figure in the Sharif's army from October 1916 was Captain T.E. Lawrence, who later became renowned as 'Lawrence of Arabia', both in literature and cinema. Under his guidance, the Sharifian forces made steady headway against the Turks, in the process driving them out of most of Hijaz, besieging the Ottomans at Madinah and taking the port of Wajh. By March 1917, they also destroyed large parts of the Hijaz railway, thus disrupting the movement of Turkish troops and supplies. In early July, the port of Aqaba fell to the Sharifian army.

All this was achieved without the deployment of any British or other Western troops, though the royal navy made a major contribution by

attacking the Ottomans along the Red Sea coast with heavy gunfire. Following these Sharifian successes, a 'fateful link' was established between the Arab revolt in Hijaz and the British campaign in Palestine.⁴ Hussain's troops joined the British forces under General Sir Edmund Allenby in the capture of Jerusalem on 11 December 1917, and later played a part in the campaign to take Syria. On 29 September 1918, Sharifian troops led by Hussain's son, Amir Faisal, entered and occupied Damascus.⁵

As large parts of West Asia had now been freed from Ottoman rule and sought self-governance, British commitments to Sharif Hussain now came up against the rock of the Anglo-French Sykes–Picot Agreement that envisaged a very different fate for these liberated lands.

The Sykes–Picot Agreement

In 1915-16, while British officials in Cairo were in correspondence with Sharif Hussain, another set of officials was meeting secretly to discuss the distribution of Ottoman territories between Britain and France after the war. The British diplomat at these discussions was Sir Mark Sykes, while France was represented by François Georges-Picot. The two diplomats conducted negotiations in London between November 1915 and January 1916; their agreement received approval from the two governments in February 1916.⁶

It should be noted that this agreement did not define the map of modern West Asia – many changes in the borders proposed in the agreement took place after the war. For instance, Turkey was able to shape its present-day borders as a result of the brilliant military leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and the prowess of its soldiers, who were able to repel encroachments on their territories on several fronts. They shaped the borders of modern-day Turkey which are quite different from what the Sykes–Picot Agreement had contemplated.⁷

What the agreement did achieve was to broadly delineate the areas that would come under the control of Britain and France, respectively, with actual borders being drawn painstakingly after their administrations were in place. Thus, under the agreement, France would take control of the

territories of Syria and Lebanon, while Britain would get the three provinces of Mesopotamia (now called by its traditional name, Iraq), and Transjordan, i.e., territory east of the Jordan river.

The two European diplomats could not, at this stage, agree on the future of Palestine; both wanted it for their country. The compromise was that Britain would have the ports of Acre and Haifa, and a territorial belt for a railway line from Haifa to Mesopotamia. The rest of the territory was left undetermined, with the suggestion that it could be placed under 'international administration' till its final status was decided through negotiations with Russia, 'other Allies and representatives of the Shareef of Mecca' – the only place where Sharif Hussain is mentioned in the agreement.⁸

The Balfour Declaration

The background to this declaration lies in the increasing migration of Jews persecuted in Europe to Palestine from 1882 onwards. During, about 30,000 Jews migrated to Palestine – their movement was supported by prominent Jewish business persons in Europe. In 1897, the First Zionist Congress set up the World Zionist Organisation (WZO) 'to create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law'.

After the outbreak of the First World War, the WZO moved its headquarters from Berlin to London. It was headed by the chemistry professor Chaim Weizmann, who rendered considerable wartime service to the Allied cause, while working hard to obtain the British government's support for the Zionist project. This effort culminated in the letter dated 2 November 1917 from the British foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, for transmission to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland in which Balfour declared:

His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their

best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.⁹

It appears that in issuing this declaration, Balfour, besides being deeply sympathetic to the Jewish cause, was also motivated by Britain's immediate war interests – he hoped to mobilize considerable Jewish support for his country in Russia and the US, where, he noted in his remarks to the Cabinet, 'the vast majority of Jews ... appeared favourable to Zionism'. Whatever the motivation, what the declaration did obtain for Britain was the support of the Zionist movement for Palestine, whose status had not been agreed upon in the Sykes–Picot discussions, to come under British control.¹⁰

It is important to recall that while Arthur Balfour was the public face of the declaration, David Lloyd George, who became prime minister on 7 December 1916, had very decided views on Palestine – both in terms of its religious significance and its strategic importance for British interests in West Asia. He was unhappy that the Sykes–Picot Agreement had 'mutilated' the integrity of Palestine, and that a large part could go to France after the war or to a vague international administration. The American authority on the post-war peace process relating to West Asia at Versailles, David Fromkin writes that Lloyd George 'wanted to acquire Palestine for Britain. He also wanted to encourage the development of a Jewish homeland in Palestine'; these were strongly held views, which his 'colleagues failed to understand'. In April 1917, he told the British ambassador in France that Britain would take Palestine by conquest 'and shall remain'.¹¹

Lloyd George also saw considerable geopolitical value for Britain in acquiring the country. Palestine, with Iraq, would provide Britain with an uninterrupted land route to India; but, with British control of territory from Cape Town to the Suez, Palestine would also link Britain's African and

Asian colonies, going across to Persia, India, Burma, Malaya, and thence to Australia and New Zealand. Thus, Palestine was the ‘missing link’ that joined the British Empire from the Atlantic to the middle of the Pacific.¹²

The combined value of faith and geopolitics ensured that the declaration was viewed favourably by almost all British decision-makers at the time. The French Foreign Office also gave a vaguely worded letter that pledged French support ‘to defend a people wrongly attacked’, a reference to the Jews who had been expelled from Palestine ‘so many centuries ago’.¹³ Lloyd George told his cabinet that the government had informed Sharif Hussain and Amir Faisal of the declaration, but could not discuss it with the Palestinian Arabs ‘as they are fighting against us’.¹⁴

While the Balfour Declaration was a public statement, the Sykes–Picot Agreement had been confidential. However, after the Russian Revolution in October 1917, the Bolsheviks released the terms of the agreement to discredit the former czarist regime and its allies. This was used by the Ottomans to try to win back Sharif Hussain; the Ottoman commander reminded Hussain that he had ‘bartered the dignity conferred on him by the Caliph [the Ottoman sultan] for the state of enslavement to the British’. Though badly shaken, Hussain and his sons decided to stay on with the British.¹⁵

The Mandates System

When the leaders of the victorious powers met at Versailles to discuss peace arrangements, including the fate of the West Asian territories, their discussions were overshadowed by the ‘Fourteen Points’ promulgated by US President Woodrow Wilson. Point 12, relating to the Ottoman territories, said, ‘[The non-Turkish] nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.’¹⁶

Britain and France, knowing well that their plans were hardly in accord with these principles, hastened to assure their negotiating partners and the West Asian peoples through a joint declaration that their objective in

pursuing the war was ‘the complete and definite emancipation of the peoples so long oppressed by the Turks and the establishment of national governments and administrations deriving their authority from the initiative and free choice of the indigenous populations’.¹⁷

The two colonial powers discovered the instrument to realize their ambitions in the Covenant of the League of Nations. Article 22 stated that ‘those colonies and territories [recently liberated] which are inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world’, their ‘well-being and development’ would ‘form a sacred trust of civilisation’ through a ‘Mandate’ of the League.

For the peoples of the former Ottoman Empire, it was further provided that ‘their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognised subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory till such time as they are able to stand alone’.¹⁸ Thus did colonial powers clothe their imperialist interests in the mantle of a ‘sacred trust of civilisation’ and assume the responsibility of certifying whether and when their subject people were fit to govern themselves.

Arab Nationalism

Before we examine the implementation of the Mandates System in the five new states of West Asia, a look at the spread and strength of nationalistic aspirations among the Arabs would be profitable.

As noted earlier, at the end of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, the Arabic-speaking peoples of West Asia effortlessly carried several identities: they saw themselves as subjects of the Ottoman Empire, they had a religious identity, they were Arab in terms of language and ethnicity, they were attached to a traditional homeland – Syria, Iraq or Palestine – and belonged to a tribe, clan and family. At this stage, no one specific identity had pride of place over others.

In fact, for Arab Muslims, their Islamic faith and their link to a particular region was far more important than their being ‘Arab’. Though in the Ottoman Empire the state language was Turkish, Arabic was viewed as

the sacred language of Islam, and the language used for law and religious education. As Arab intellectuals in this period called for the rejuvenation of their faith and society in the face of Western onslaught, their principal concern was to reform the practice of Islam to accommodate the Western values of reason and science – in short, to purge from Islam the intellectual backwardness it had acquired due to foreign influence and internal disunity.

Rashid Rida anchored this reform of the faith in a separate Arab statehood and the restoration of Arab authority in the Muslim realm. But this advocacy too gave primacy to Islamic reform and his principal interest remained achieving global Islamic solidarity. In fact, he derided the idea of ‘Arab nationalism’, seeing it as a source of disunity among Muslims and perhaps even apostasy.

Writing in 1938, the celebrated Arab historian, George Antonius had asserted that, by the eve of the First World War, Arab intellectuals and the masses had come to espouse ‘the Arab will to freedom’. He traced it back to early nineteenth-century Egypt and claimed that these aspirations had been thwarted by British interventions. More recent scholarship believes that Antonius had taken a romanticized view of Arab history and that, before the war, ‘the majority of the Arab population were not ready for a break with Istanbul’;¹⁹ their main concern was to improve their political and social status within the empire.

Thus, modern scholarship also points out that the ‘Great Arab Revolt’ launched by Sharif Hussain and his sons ‘had little to do with Arab nationalism’.²⁰ Dawisha, in his seminal work on Arab nationalism, quotes the distinguished modern scholar Aziz al Azmeh, who says that the Arab Revolt ‘was Arab only in the narrow ethnological, pre-nationalist sense. It was an Islamic rebellion, undertaken in the name not of the Arabs, but of a Meccan Caliphate under the Sharif Husayn bin Ali’.²¹

Only after the end of the Ottoman Empire do we see the emergence of the ‘Arab nation’ as an idea and a movement. The debates and actions around the implementation of the Anglo-French Mandates in the new ‘states’ of West Asia played a catalytic role in shaping this ‘national’

identity, by giving Arab leaders their first opportunity in centuries to shape their destiny.

Implementing the ‘Mandates’ System

The Ottoman lands in West Asia had three clearly defined territories: Egypt, Iraq and ‘Greater Syria’ (Al Shaam, in Arabic). Thus, the post-war territorial arrangements covered two geographical areas that were largely distinct – Egypt and Iraq – and the most disruptive interventions were seen in Greater Syria, which was divided into Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel–Palestine.²²

The first challenge before the mandatory powers was to delineate national borders where none had existed. This was a daunting task, since very diverse peoples in terms of ethnicity, faith, sect and language had lived together for several centuries and could not be separated on the basis of shared ‘identity’ within well-defined geographical features. Borders were now drawn to accommodate imperial interests, and, with officials lacking local knowledge, the national boundaries showed little respect for the shared history and culture or even the aspirations of the peoples themselves.

The next challenge was to impart to these nascent ‘states’ the institutions of governance – laws, assemblies, the provision of security, and municipal, educational and welfare services. Given that an external colonial authority was seeking to impose its will against the wishes of vast majorities of the governed, this exercise in enforcing governmental authority was frequently met with opposition, organized dissent and, at times, violent uprisings. The latter was put down with extraordinary force, thus fomenting even greater resentment and anger.

Thus, the twenty-year period of the Mandates, while it shaped the states of West Asia, also ensured sustained instability in every single one of them. This was because every aspect of the colonial state order, indeed every principle of the Mandates System, compared unfavourably with the alternative ideas of popular unity and freedom that had been engendered by aspirations of Arab nationalism that transcended the borders that the

colonial masters had constructed and imposed on the unwilling populace. Thus, Arab aspirations for broader unity and greater freedom were in constant conflict with the jackboot of colonial domination.

A survey of what happened to the West Asian polities after the First World War will be instructive.

Syria

As noted above, Arab troops led by Amir Faisal entered Damascus with the victorious British troops on 1 October 1918. In accordance with the commitment made by the British to his father, Faisal proceeded to set up his government in Syria. He justified his rule on the basis of the shared Arab identity that united the people of ‘Greater Syria’, the Al Shaam of history, and the territory that bordered Turkey – Iraq, Najd and Hijaz of the Arabian Peninsula, and Egypt. He extolled Arab identity over faith, pointing out that the Arabs had been Arabs ‘before Moses, Christ and Mohammed’, and that Muhammad had been ‘an Arab before he became a prophet’.²³

Faisal’s government was both nationalistic and secular, with Christian and Muslim ministers working together to shape the world’s first modern state founded on Arab nationalism. Faisal’s education minister, Sati al Husri, was particularly ardent in shaping an education system that would foster Arab identity through textbooks that celebrated Arab history and culture, and developed the language by coining Arabic terms for scientific terminology.

But the terms of the Sykes–Picot Agreement quickly ended this political experiment in Arab self-governance.

In Syria, just after the war, a Syrian General Congress was already in place, with delegates selected on the basis of old Ottoman procedures, representing all of Al Shaam, including delegates from Lebanon and Palestine. The Congress, in July 1919, voted in favour of a constitutional monarchy, with Amir Faisal as the ruler. It rejected the Mandate in principle, but was willing to accept an American or even British Mandate for technical and economic assistance – but not a French Mandate.

In November 1919, Britain withdrew its troops and transferred authority to the French. In March 1920, the Syrian Congress declared independence and announced Faisal as the king of Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. However, the San Remo Conference in April 1920, after six days of discussions, affirmed the terms of the Sykes–Picot Agreement and decided that Britain would be awarded the Mandate for Mesopotamia and Palestine (including Transjordan), while France would have the Mandate for Syria (including Lebanon). Thus, the Ottoman territories of West Asia were divided into five separate states: Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq.

In July, to implement the Mandate, French troops marched towards Damascus. A small band of Syrian volunteers, led by Faisal's defence minister Yousuf al Azma, faced the French forces at Khan Maysalun. They, together with the defence minister, were annihilated, and the French entered Damascus on 24 July 1920 to commence their twenty-six-year colonial rule. Faisal was expelled from Syria. A year later, he reached Baghdad where, in August 1921, he was crowned king of Iraq under the British Mandate.

Faisal's twenty-month rule in Syria was the first attempt to found an Arab state on a nationalist basis. Though short, this experience had considerable significance, as Dawisha says:

The purposeful efforts of the government to publicly carry the Arab nationalist torch and consciously endeavor to instill its sparks in the hearts and minds of the Syrian population would become the blueprint for later nationalist thinkers and activists. And Azma's martyrdom ... gained in myth and heroic proportions to become the nationalist staple for Syrian youth.²⁴

In power in Syria, the French applied divide-and-rule principles to sustain their governance of the resentful population. Syria was divided into four administrations – Damascus and Aleppo, and two communal entities, the Alawite in western Syria and the Druze in the south. The intention was to keep the people divided: minority communal entities were expected to

support colonial rule, while staying away from the waves of broader nationalist fervour. All attempts at nationalist mobilization were ruthlessly crushed with police firings, mass arrests and prolonged imprisonment.

However, France was quite inept in handling local sensitivities: clumsy manipulations of Druze affairs ignited a major uprising in July 1925, which then spread to other parts of Syria, including Hama and villages outside Damascus. These uprisings were crushed with brutal violence – artillery and aerial bombardments destroyed entire villages, while hundreds were summarily executed. The rebellion then spread to Damascus in October, which was also put down through aerial bombings over several weeks.

The uprising ended only in October 1926, when the French had deployed about 95,000 soldiers. Sporadic low-key uprisings continued over the next years, but the back of national resistance was broken and, over the next decade, awaited a new generation of leaders.

Lebanon

From 1840, following the withdrawal of Egyptian forces, France maintained a deep interest in the welfare of the Christian community in the coastal areas of Greater Syria, particularly the Maronites in Lebanon. After the massacres of Christians in 1860, the Ottomans and European powers had created a Christian-majority province, Mount Lebanon. It was cut off from the sea by the port towns of Tyre, Sidon, Beirut and Tripoli, which remained under Ottoman control. In 1888, these towns were brought together to form the province of Beirut.

After the First World War, the Lebanese Christians were perhaps the only Arabs who were enthusiastically looking forward to the French Mandate. The twelve-member Administrative Council that governed Lebanon informed the Paris Peace Conference that it wanted Lebanon's complete independence, within its 'natural boundaries', under the French Mandate. Its boundaries were to include all the port cities in the west and the Bekaa valley in the east. What the Administrative Council wanted was not to become a French colony, but only sought French assistance towards

final independence. But France decided to see this as an invitation for colonial control.

There were other opinions in Lebanon as well. Some did not want the French Mandate to be confined to Lebanon alone: the Lebanese diaspora, numbering 100,000, saw Lebanon as part of the historic 'Greater Syria' and demanded independence for the entire territory, under French guidance. Another group supported Amir Faisal's government at Damascus and backed his position in Paris to set up a constitutional monarchy for all of Greater Syria.

As France began to assert its control over Lebanon in terms of the Sykes–Picot Agreement, affirmed at San Remo, the Administrative Council realized that France was going to enforce colonial rule; seven of its members now turned to the Faisal government and asked for complete independence for all of Syria. They were all arrested by the French.

In August 1920, France shaped 'Greater Lebanon' as per its 'natural boundaries': to Mount Lebanon were added the port cities of Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon and Tyre; the Druze areas; and the Bekaa valley, which had a large Shia population. The French succeeded in obtaining a state which then had a 52 per cent Christian population and provided a Constitution that was based on 'confessionalism', i.e., political offices were divided among different groups on religious/sectarian basis. This system ensured that faith-based differences would define state affairs.

An elected Representative Council was set up, but it could meet for only three months in the year and could not discuss political matters; all legislative power was vested in the high commissioner. Even pro-French elements were appalled, viewing these arrangements as a 'decree of enslavement' that made France a 'conquering power'.²⁵ Till its departure in 1943, France ruled Lebanon as a colony.

Iraq

The country called 'Iraq' today owes its geographical shape entirely to oil. The Sykes–Picot Agreement had granted Mosul, the northern province of

Mesopotamia, to France. Earlier explorations had indicated that the province had considerable oil potential; hence, British officials worked strenuously to undermine this 'surrender' and retain Mosul for themselves. In August 1918, Foreign Secretary Balfour affirmed that Mesopotamia should be under British control; he said, 'I do not care under what system we keep the oil, but I am quite clear it is all-important for us that this oil should be available.'²⁶ As war ended, British troops in Mesopotamia occupied Mosul after the armistice with Turkey.

After heated discussions between the British and French delegations at the Paris Peace Conference, it was finally decided at the San Remo Conference in April 1920 that Mosul would be part of the British Mandate, while France would get 25 per cent of the oil produced in Iraq. Thus, the story of Iraq under the British Mandate runs in two parallel courses: one, political developments within the country; and, two, the complex aspects of Iraq's oil-related story.

Before the enforcement of the Mandate, many Iraqis had believed that they would secure independence. Within British counsels, opinion was divided between those who advocated direct colonial control – as in British India – while others thought a more effective (and less expensive) arrangement would be to have a monarchy in Baghdad, which would avoid direct British confrontation with nationalist forces.

The formal announcement of the British Mandate in April 1920 energized the recently set up 'Guardians of Iraqi Independence', made up of both Shias and Sunnis, to begin widespread protests. After peaceful demonstrations in May, which were firmly put down, the Iraqi Uprising of 1920 began in June in the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, and then spread across the country, with the main resistance occurring in the territories between Baghdad and Basra. Many towns and villages were 'liberated', local administration was set up and civic services provided.

Using troops already in the country and bringing in fresh soldiers from India, taking the total force to 100,000, the British reconquered Iraq by October with overwhelming force, backed by artillery fire and aerial bombardment. Najaf and Karbala were retaken by end-October. British

casualties were about 2,200, while the Iraqis sustained about 8,500 dead or injured. The 'Revolution of 1920' soon acquired an iconic status in Iraq's national memory and mythology.

As noted above, Amir Faisal was installed by the British as king of Iraq in August 1921. His appointment, however, made it impossible to shape a distinct Iraqi identity. While the Iraqis saw him as a nationalist leader who would steer them to independence, his link with the British and his dependence on their support diluted his credibility throughout his reign till 1933. He was, from the very outset, compromised by the Anglo-Iraq Treaty of 1922 imposed on the kingdom by the British, which made the king and his government entirely subordinate to British 'advice' in all matters pertaining to the economy, diplomacy and law, and to British guidance in regard to international and financial obligations, and British interests, for the full period of the treaty – twenty years. Clearly, this was an assertion of colonial rule, not the march towards independence.

Continued British domination and absence of self-rule meant that the nascent state's fault lines were aggravated rather than fused, so that every matter of governance was weighed in terms of its impact on ethnic or sectarian interests. The Kurds disliked being part of an 'Arab' state, while the Shia, though in the majority, chafed against Sunni domination. Just before his passing away in 1933, King Faisal criticized the Iraqis for being 'devoid of any patriotic idea' and 'prone to anarchy',²⁷ but failed to note that the root cause lay in the colonial domination of his state and his own failure to lead his people to freedom.

The treaty of 1922 was replaced by a new agreement of June 1930, which maintained British military presence in the country, but otherwise loosened its authority; the latter's principal interest then was to control Iraqi oil, which it did by acquiring, in 1928, a 47.5 per cent share in the Iraq Petroleum Company. In October 1932, Iraq entered the League of Nations as an independent, sovereign state, but Britain continued to maintain informal civilian and military influence, thus eroding the standing of the ruler until he was violently overthrown in the revolution of 1958.

- *Ideas of Nationalism*

Before we leave this short survey of Iraq under the British Mandate, it is important to recall one significant contribution of the Faisal monarchy – the launching, development and promotion of what Dawisha has described as ‘a coherent theory of Arab nationalism’. This was under the direction of Faisal’s education minister, Sati al Husri, who had moved with the king from Damascus to Baghdad.²⁸

Al Husri was the most influential Arab thinker, who, through the 1950s and 1960s, shaped the region’s national aspirations and inspired major political leaders in this tumultuous period. His contribution to the development of a pan-Arab ideology was important for King Faisal – being from Hijaz and having no connection with the history and people of Iraq, he needed to base his rule on a ‘big-tent’ ideology that would impart legitimacy to his claim to the Iraqi throne.²⁹

Al Husri’s effort over two decades in Iraq was to inculcate in the people, through education, a sense of Arab identity that would supersede other claims, such as place of origin, tribe, faith or sect. He founded his ideas of Arab nationalism on the thinking of nineteenth-century German political philosophers and anchored his concept on cultural nationalism, based on shared language and history. History, al Husri said, inspired:

... [M]ovements for resurrection and the struggle for independence and unity ... by recalling the past and searching for revelation from history. ... Love for independence is nourished by memories of the lost independence; the longing for power and glory begins with a lament for the lost power and diminished glory; faith in the future of the nation derives its strength from a belief in the brilliance of the past; and the longing for unification is increased by the renewal of memories of past unity.³⁰

Al Husri's notion of Arab nationalism was entirely secular – he rejected the idea that religion could be the basis of Arab nationalism, even though the vast majority of the Arabs were Muslim. Arab and Islamic history were not co-terminus, he pointed out; Arabs had existed long before Islam, and if Arabs ceased to be Muslim, they would still be Arabs.³¹

There were two aspects to al Husri's pan-Arab nationalism that would have long-term influence on the region's politics. One, his thinking on nationalism was deeply influenced by the ideas developed in Europe in the late nineteenth century. He opted for the idea of 'cultural nationalism' from the German philosophers Johann Gottfried Herder, Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Ernst Moritz Arendt, as against the French model promoted by Ernest Renan.

While Renan stood for a voluntary decision of people to live together, with the 'nation' being challenged through a 'daily plebiscite', the Germans saw the 'nation' as a 'pre-determined and eternal' identity based on shared language and history. Thus, the German nation-building experience of the nineteenth century was akin to that of the Arabs who were united by language and history, but living in different states.³² This approach imparted to the 'nation' a superior status to that of the individual, and subordinated personal freedom to the fatherland. As al Husri explained, 'He who refuses totally to extinguish himself within the nation to which he belongs might in some cases find himself lost to an alien nation that may one day conquer his fatherland. ... patriotism and nationalism come before and above all ... even above and before freedom.'³³

This illiberal tradition obtained a boost from the second implication of Arab nationalism in Iraq – its resonance among officers of the armed forces. In an attempt to control the opposition from the Shia and Kurd populations in Iraq, King Faisal promoted the idea of Arab nationalism among army officers. This was particularly successful when, after earlier failed efforts, he could introduce conscription in the country after the Kurdish revolt of 1930 and the Assyrian bid for independence in 1933. This inculcated a strong sense of nationalism among the Sunni military officers and soon spread to the armed forces in other Arab countries as well.

Thus, the nationalist ideology of al Husri, combined with the strong sense of nationalism in the military, prepared the ground for nationalist and illiberal revolutions in a succession of Arab countries after the Second World War.

Al Husri's secular Arab nationalism put him in competition with assertions of other identities – religious, ethnic, sectarian or even pharaonic, as in the case of the Egyptian intellectual, Taha Hussein, who rejected Egypt's linguistic and historical affinities with other Arabs, and extolled Egypt's pharaonic past, which he said made his people truly 'exceptional'. Al Husri challenged this position by reminding Taha Hussein that at present and for many centuries earlier, the Egyptians have spoken Arabic like those in other Arab countries. These ideas would be realized under Egypt's leadership a few years later.

- *Oil in Iraq*

We can now briefly take up Iraq's oil-related story that involves hardly any of the players mentioned above (except British officials, and only occasionally at that), but brings together a bewildering array of international exploration, corporate and political personalities with competing interests that struggle to produce oil in Iraq.³⁴

British oil interests in Iraq were represented by APOC, which as we saw in the previous chapter, was 51 per cent owned by the British government, and played a central role in the discovery and production of oil in Iran before and during the war. After the war, in Iraq, APOC became a 47.5 per cent stakeholder in the Turkish Petroleum Company (TPC), whose other major shareholder was a French company in which the French government had a 35 per cent stake. A new player in the scenario was a group of American companies, collected together as Near East Development Company, with a 25 per cent share; this was achieved with the other shareholders reducing their shares proportionately.

After a number of false starts, the TPC (which was renamed 'Iraqi Petroleum Company' or IPC in 1929) struck oil at the Baba Gurgur oil field, about 10 km north-west of Mosul, on 15 October 1927. Longrigg, writing in 1954, describes this event as 'destined profoundly to alter both the economic fortunes of Iraq and the oil-history of the world'.³⁵ This well was so rich that for some years, the TPC stopped all operations in other areas. Later, from March 1931, the IPC (as TPC was now called) took up the Mediterranean pipeline project that went from Kirkuk to two destinations on the Mediterranean – Tripoli in Lebanon, 850 km away, and Haifa then in Palestine, about 1,000 km away. The pipeline was officially opened in January 1935.

Transjordan

In 1923, the British separated the territory of Palestine east of the Jordan river and the state of Transjordan was born. It was placed under Amir Abdullah, who became king. Nazih Ayubi describes this curious entity as a 'corridor' country that was 'without a distinct history, or focal point, or even a native royal family'.³⁶ Since it had no resources to sustain it, Britain, Ayubi says, was 'not only the creator and protector of its king, but, to a large extent, its financier and commander of its armed forces'. The country was renamed 'Jordan' after it occupied the West Bank in the 1948 war that followed the creation of Israel.

Palestine

Britain obtaining the Mandate over Palestine also meant that it became responsible for the application of the Balfour Declaration in this territory. This ensured that, in Rogan's words, 'the mandate in Palestine was doomed from the outset',³⁷ because, while the Mandate required that Palestine be guided towards self-rule, the declaration made Britain the facilitator of a 'national home' for the Jews from Europe.

Britain prioritized the implementation of the Balfour Declaration and presided over a massive movement of Jewish people to Palestine: Jews had started coming to Palestine to escape czarist persecution from 1882, joining a population that was 85 per cent Muslim, 9 per cent Christian and 3 per cent Jewish. During, the Jewish population went from 24,000 to 85,000. Not surprisingly, the Balfour Declaration of 1917 was viewed with great alarm by the Arabs in Palestine, who conveyed their strong opposition to it at the peace conference in Paris. These protests were ignored and, between 1919 and 1921, 18,500 Jews migrated to Palestine.

This led to a pattern of regular and increasingly bloody communal riots in Palestine. Though British governments would periodically protest that they had no intention of changing the demography of the state, the Zionist leaders in London were able to overcome these hesitations, and maintain the tempo of migration and land purchase that ensured that violence became endemic to the territory. Once the Nazis had seized power in Germany, there was a massive increase in Jewish migration, with 62,000 people entering Palestine in 1935. Between 1922 and 1935, the Jewish population went from 9 per cent to 27 per cent of the total population.³⁸

From 1931, some Palestinian Arabs commenced an armed struggle that was brutally suppressed by British security forces, with no sign of any movement towards self-rule or control over Jewish immigration. In 1937, the Peel Commission conceded that there was ‘an irrepressible conflict ... between two national communities’, with no common ground between them.³⁹ The commission proposed a partition plan that would give 20 per cent of the best areas of Palestine to the Jews, while the Arab territories would be linked to Transjordan, the territory east of the Jordan river that had been separated from Palestine in 1923 and made a state under King Abdullah, another son of Sharif Hussain.

The Palestinians rejected these proposals and, between 1937 and 1939, began the next stage of their armed struggle. The British used 25,000 soldiers to combat this uprising and inflicted severe reprisals: under emergency regulations, 2,000 homes were destroyed and several thousand Palestinians were incarcerated in concentration camps. As Rogan notes:

The use of overwhelming force and collective punishments by the British degenerated into abuses and atrocities that would forever stain the mandate in the memory of the Palestinians. ... Some 5000 Palestinians were killed and 10,000 were wounded – in all, 10 percent of the adult male population was killed, wounded, imprisoned or exiled.⁴⁰

Palestine has been viewed as Britain's 'greatest imperial failure' in West Asia, one that has condemned West Asia to sustained violence and conflict to this day.⁴¹

Egypt

Though Egypt was not a part of the Mandates system, its politics was closely linked to West Asian developments and it soon became deeply influential in the region. After the war, Britain saw Egypt as crucially important to maintain its interests in West Asia – a region that was at once turbulent due to the implementation of the Mandates, and also facing grave uncertainties after the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of new states. Egyptians, on the other hand, expected the grant of full independence, being encouraged by promises of self-governance that Britain had made to Sharif Hussain.

To pursue national interests, some members of the country's national assembly, led by Saad Zaghloul, set up Egypt's first political movement, the Wafd (Delegation), to negotiate Egypt's freedom with the British in London and later at the Paris Peace Conference. Being rebuffed in London, the country erupted in nationwide protests, known as the '1919 Revolution' that brought to the streets people of all denominations and classes, as well as large numbers of women. Much to the disappointment of the Egyptians, the Paris Conference recognized Egypt as a British 'protectorate'.

In November 1922, Britain issued a declaration granting 'independence' to Egypt, while retaining responsibility for communications, foreign nationals and non-Muslim minorities, the Copts, Egypt's defence and the

protection of Sudan. These provisions were included in the Constitution promulgated in 1923, with King Fuad as the nominal head of state. None of this was acceptable to Egypt's Wafd politicians who wanted an end to Britain's special status in the country.

In the general elections, the Wafd did well and Zaghloul became prime minister. But the government's inability to get the British to move towards real political reform and the king's machinations to maintain his own authority further undermined the credibility of the political process. Following Zaghloul's death in 1927, the freedom movement lost steam.

The political process was revived in 1936, after the death of King Fuad and as concerns relating to Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 arose. In August 1936, a twenty-year Anglo-Egyptian 'Treaty of Preferential Alliance' granted Egypt formal independence, which enabled the country to join the League of Nations. It also allowed Britain to maintain military bases in Egypt and retain control over Sudan.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

We left the story of Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rehman Al Saud in the previous chapter when, on the eve of the First World War, he had captured Najd and Al Hasa, and had been accepted as the wali (governor) of these territories by the Ottoman sultan. There is some dispute as to whether Abdulaziz had entered into a formal treaty with the sultan or not. While one scholar, Gary Troeller, believes that a formal agreement had been concluded on 15 May 1914, Harry St John Philby, who spent many years with Abdulaziz and wrote extensively on his career, says there was only a 'verbal obligation' to the Ottomans which Abdulaziz generally ignored through the war.⁴²

As war began, Abdulaziz attempted to bring together his neighbouring rulers – Sharif Hussain, Sheikh Mubarak of Kuwait, Saud ibn Saleh of Hail – in a conclave to discuss their role in the conflict. He wanted to ensure that they did not get embroiled in the war and that, afterwards, the Arab peoples would get the chance to determine their own future. This meeting did not take place as the interests of the rulers were quite divergent: Sharif Hussain

and Sheikh Mubarak were aligned with the British, while the Al Rashid ruler of Hail was associated with the Ottomans.

Abdulaziz paid lip service to the Ottomans and even allowed supplies to reach the Turkish armies from Najdi merchants, but his principal contacts were with the British officials in the Gulf, whom he recognized as the most powerful force in the region. The British, on their part, wanted Abdulaziz on their side to keep the Hail rulers in check as, being aligned with Turkey, they could threaten British forces in southern Iraq. This concern saw the British for the first time playing an active role in the affairs of central Arabia.

In December 1915, Abdulaziz and the British entered into an agreement: the British recognized Abdulaziz as the ruler of the territories of Najd, Al Hasa and the towns of Qatif and Jubail; in return, Abdulaziz agreed not to grant any concessions to any foreign power or to have any dealings with other foreign powers, except on the advice of the British government. He also agreed not to interfere in the affairs of Kuwait, Bahrain, and the sheikhs of Qatar and the Oman coast. The British promised Abdulaziz a monthly subsidy and weapons. Thus, a British protectorate was established over Najd, even as Abdulaziz relinquished his old claims on the sheikhdoms of the Gulf and confined himself to the coastal areas of the Eastern Province.⁴³

Through the war, while there were occasional skirmishes between Abdulaziz and his foes – Sharif Hussain and the Al Rashid – there was no decisive action by him against any of them. This changed with the end of the war.

Abdulaziz's military actions were now transformed by the incorporation of a new fighting force on his side – the Ikhwan (Brethren). The Ikhwan were a spiritual-military movement made up of Najdi Bedouin, who, recently converted to Wahhabiyya by local clerics, moulded themselves into fierce fighters for the cause of their faith. From early 1913, they settled on tribal basis at different hijra (settlements) in different parts of Najd, where they were led by charismatic chiefs and practised agriculture, studied Wahhabi doctrine, and went on raids into neighbouring areas to supplement

their income, while chastising ‘polytheists’, i.e., all those who were not part of Ikhwan ranks.

Over time, the number of such hijras increased – going from 52 in 1920, to 72 in 1923, to 120 in 1929. The Ikhwan were firmly committed to the tenets of Islam, they believed in the highest obedience to the amir, support for each other, and avoidance of all contact with non-believers.⁴⁴ Fired by the zeal of new converts, the Ikhwan were fanatics in war and perpetrated several atrocities on their enemies. With this formidable force, Abdulaziz continued the expansion of his domain after the First World War.

Abdulaziz’s first target was Hail. Najdi operations against the Al Rashid began in August 1921. After two months, the ruler surrendered and was imprisoned in Riyadh. He was treated honourably, with his daughter marrying Abdulaziz. Another independent emirate that fell to Abdulaziz was the Asir province, that was taken in September-October 1922.

Previously, in November-December 1921, with British encouragement, Abdulaziz also agreed to finalize borders with Iraq and Kuwait – a difficult process since nomadic tribes had no notion of fixed ‘national’ borders and moved seasonally, with their sheep and camels, across vast desert spaces, asserting traditional rights of free movement to these territories and water wells. Out of respect to these traditional movements, two ‘neutral zones’ on the Iraqi and Kuwaiti borders were agreed to where the Bedouin from both countries could graze their animals.

The only emirate that now remained outside Abdulaziz’s realm was Hijaz. Sharif Hussain, as noted above, had backed the British against the Ottomans in the world war and had expected to become ‘king of Arabia’. What he saw instead was his sons becoming rulers of Iraq and Transjordan, while he remained head of the Hijaz province. So, from March 1924, he proclaimed himself caliph. He was perhaps seeking to claim a certain leadership over other Muslim rulers and communities; this title, however, in no way enhanced his power or prestige in the peninsula, but only further alienated the British who saw in this an attempt on Hussain’s part to wriggle out of their control.

Abdulaziz began his campaign to take Hijaz with the capture of Taif in September 1924. The Ikhwan plundered the town for three days, and indulged in widespread violence and massacre – all told, about 400 persons were killed at Taif. Sharif Hussain abdicated in October in favour of his son Ali, and left Hijaz for Cyprus. While Ali barricaded himself in Jeddah, Abdulaziz entered Mecca in mid-December. Conscious of the sanctity of the holy city, he cautiously stated that its final status would be decided through ‘consultations among Muslims’, on the basis of the holy texts and the pronouncements of the ulema.

To avoid casualties, Abdulaziz preferred to besiege Ali at Jeddah, rather than mount a major frontal assault on this populous port city and business centre. Ali surrendered Jeddah in December 1925. Abdulaziz now called himself ‘King of Hijaz and Sultan of Najd and her dependencies’. In twenty-five years, he had restored the Al Saud as the overlords of most of the Arabian Peninsula.

In 1926, Abdulaziz formalized his control of the holy cities of Mecca and Madinah by convening a congress of leaders of Muslim countries; here, he proclaimed that he was in control of Hijaz and would brook no interference from outside elements. The participants recognized him as the ‘custodian of the holy mosques’, a title last held by the Ottoman sultans.

This event marked the culmination of the process of centralization of political authority across the peninsula under King Abdulaziz, signifying a fundamental departure from the feudal–tribal order that had prevailed here earlier. This also put the king in conflict with the Ikhwan, the very force that had ensured his victories.

The role of the Ikhwan in Hijaz was particularly alarming both for the king and the local residents. To ‘purify’ the holy cities, in Mecca, the Ikhwan had destroyed the monuments associated with the votaries of early Islam, including those of Prophet Muhammad, his wife, Khadija, and the first caliph Abu Bakr. While excluding Ikhwan leaders from senior government positions, the king sought to placate them by enforcing rigid Wahhabi norms, first in Hijaz and later across the rest of the country – enforcing prayer and fasting, prohibiting the consumption of tobacco and

alcohol, and penalizing all transgressions from these strict rules. These were enforced through the Commission for the Promotion of Good and Prevention of Vice, set up in 1926. These actions did little to win over the Ikhwan, and the stage was soon set for conflict between the king and his fanatical warriors.

Ikhwan leaders, used to a great degree of autonomy of action, found the centralized control of the Saudi state most irksome, particularly when they felt that the state had emerged entirely as a result of their prowess and they had not been rewarded with the governorships they had expected. They were also frustrated by the king prohibiting them from conducting raids into neighbouring Iraq, Kuwait and Jordan, which had been their traditional areas for plunder, particularly since those people, not being Ikhwan, were deemed as 'infidels'.

In 1926-27, ties between Abdulaziz and the Ikhwan deteriorated; the latter prepared a 'chargesheet' against the ruler, finding fault with him for his ties with 'infidels' (the British, the Kuwaitis and the Shia), polluting the land of Islam with Western gadgetry (the telegraph, telephone and motor car), and encroaching on their traditional rights by imposing customs duties in Najd. The Ikhwan brought a number of fighters to their side and posed a serious challenge to the new ruler; a local observer noted that, in 1927, Abdulaziz 'was no longer in complete control'.⁴⁵ By 1928, as the Ikhwan mobilized against him, they also drew plans to divide his realm between them.

In March 1929, Abdulaziz put together a force of Najdi fighters and began the offensive against the Ikhwan in which the latter were routed. A leader who had escaped attempted a second uprising in late 1929 with some associates. They were once again defeated and all of them died in prison.

In February 1930, under British auspices, Abdulaziz met King Faisal of Iraq, and entered into a treaty of friendship and good neighbourliness with his erstwhile Hashemite foe. The two rulers recognized each other's sovereignty over their own territories.

In September 1932, Abdulaziz changed the name of his realm to the 'Kingdom of Saudi Arabia', with himself as malik (king). As King

Abdulaziz changed the destiny of his family and the political face of the peninsula, the economic and strategic value of the kingdom, and, indeed, the entire space of WANA was transformed by a new development – the discovery and development of oil.

Oil in the Gulf

Despite successful oil discoveries in Persia and Iraq, there was little interest among oil companies in the territories across the Gulf – the Arab sheikhdoms were seen as too far, with poor local climate and infrastructure, and too prone to internecine conflicts. There was also the concern that the British would sternly discourage non-British entry into the region. The British-controlled companies, APOC and IPC, were doing so well in Persia and Iraq that they had little interest in developing other sources of oil, which might compete with their own production and create a glut in the market.

In the event, Bahrain, the smallest sheikhdom in the region, became the first place where serious exploration was undertaken. This was done by Standard Oil of California (SOCAL). To overcome British insistence on a ‘British nationality clause’ in any concession agreement, SOCAL set up a subsidiary in Canada, the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO). Following intense pressure from the US government, Britain accepted that US investments in Gulf oil would provide fresh funds to the local rulers and new oil for its navy. It agreed to exploration and development by BAPCO, while retaining its political primacy – it insisted that all of BAPCO’s correspondence with the ruler go through the political agent in Bahrain.

Oil was struck in Bahrain in May 1932 and exports began in 1934. Starting with a modest 40,000 tons, exports reached over a million tons in. This discovery opened up prospects across the region. SOCAL now turned its attention to the newly set up kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

At the start of negotiations in early 1933, King Abdulaziz demanded a down payment of £100,000 on the signature of the concession. IPC, which was a participant in these early discussions, offered £10,000 and exited;⁴⁶

SOCAL agreed on £50,000 and won the concession in May 1933, an arrangement that was greatly facilitated by St John Philby.⁴⁷ Vasiliev believes that, besides the financial factor, the king opted for the Americans since he ‘mistrusted the British and was reluctant to allow British companies in his country’.⁴⁸

The concession was for sixty years and covered about 1.036 million sq. km of Saudi territory in eastern Saudi Arabia (the Eastern Province). On the corporate side, in 1936, SOCAL and Texaco, a major American oil marketing company, merged to form CALTEX. This company struck oil in commercial quantities in 1938 and the first cargo was shipped from the port of Ras Tanura in May 1939. With this discovery, the kingdom increased the size of the concession to nearly 1.3 million sq. km, including 28,500 sq. km offshore.

Exploration and development activities were suspended during the Second World War, and resumed in 1946. In 1948, CALTEX expanded to include two more companies – Standard Oil of Jersey (later Esso, then becoming Exxon) and Mobil. The new entity was now called Arabian American Oil Company, or Aramco. Further discoveries over the next few years revealed that Saudi Arabia had the largest reserves in the world – a fact that placed it at the heart of regional politics and, over time, at the centre of global political, energy and economic affairs.

Various combinations of the APOC and American oil companies came together to explore and develop the oil potential of the sheikhdoms from the 1930s: APOC and the American Gulf Oil set up the Kuwait Oil Company, and began commercial production in 1938. In Oman, a subsidiary of the IPC, known as Petroleum Concessions (Oman), later Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), found oil in commercial quantities in 1962. In Qatar, a subsidiary of IPC formed Petroleum Development Qatar, that was later renamed Qatar National Petroleum Company (QNPC) that discovered oil in 1939.

Iran

This would be a good place to take forward the story relating to oil in Iran, which we had left with the first discovery in 1908 and the subsequent setting up of the APOC in 1913.

Through the 1920s and 1930s, oil in Persia was produced principally by two fields – the original Masjid-i-Sulaiman and, from 1930, the Haft Kel field, located 60 km south-east of the Masjid-i-Sulaiman field. Total production in Persia was 5.9 million tons in 1930, which came down to 5.7 million tons in 1931 due to the global depression, and then rose to 6.4 million tons in 1932.

As oil revenues increased and the strategic importance of oil rose, the British felt the need for a stronger ruler who would both centralize and modernize administration and ward off the Soviet Union, whose forces were threatening a southward advance on Persia, similar to what Russia had done in the nineteenth century.

The British found their protégé in Colonel Reza Khan, commander of the Cossack brigade, who mounted a coup against the last ruler of the Qajar dynasty in 1921. A prime minister was imposed upon the monarch, and Reza Khan first became war minister and then prime minister. In October 1925, the majlis (national assembly) deposed the monarch and, two months later, proclaimed Reza Khan as Shah-en-Shah (king of kings) of the country. He was henceforth known as Reza Shah Pahalvi.

The regime re-examined the concession that had been first awarded in 1901 and had led to the country's oil production by APOC, and the new ruler saw that the agreement was giving the Persian government a mere 16 per cent share in profits. What brought matters to a head was the fact that revenues paid to the Persian treasury, which were £1.44 million in 1929 and £1.29 million in 1930, were a mere £307,000 in 1931. This led to the abrupt cancellation of the concession in November 1932.

A new agreement was signed in April 1933 that provided a new basis to calculate the royalty – thus, on this basis, royalties paid were £1.34 million for 1931 and £1.53 million for 1932. As Reza Shah changed the name of his country to Iran in 1935, APOC became the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) from that date.

Stephen Longrigg, who was personally involved in all major discussions relating to oil exploration and development in the region in the 1920s and 1930s, writing in 1954, makes some interesting observations on the West Asian oil scenario and the prevailing political circumstances in this period which would impact the Western companies' operations in the region after the war.

He points out that West Asian production in 1920 was a mere 1 per cent of global output; in two decades, the total production was 15 million tons per year, but still just 5.5 per cent of global production. But what was significant about West Asian oil, even at this early period already apparent in Iran and later to be affirmed in Iraq and the Gulf, was 'the extraordinary size of its oil-bearing structures, the vast scale of the reservoirs, and the productivity of single wells compared with the fields of North America or the Caribbean'.⁴⁹ Longrigg points out that, in 1947, a few dozen wells in Iran were producing 280,000 tons per year per well; the average for all of West Asia then was 180,000 tons per year per well. As against this, the comparable figure for the US, with half a million wells, was 610 tons and for the Caribbean, 7,850 tons.

The other matter he discusses cautiously but gets his view across quite clearly was the increasing divide between the Western oil companies and the local rulers and their populations. Here, as was the custom then, Longrigg exalts the contribution of the companies to local human development and financial advantage in very difficult circumstances,⁵⁰ while disparaging local populations in racist terms. He speaks patronizingly of how 'European tutelage and, by Mandate or treaty, partly restrained the cruder manifestations of local patriotism', though 'the emotional, unstable elements in the Middle Eastern character' remained an obstacle in ensuring constructive communication. Financial advantages, he soberly concludes, 'can never on any level compete with emotional appeals in the Middle East', particularly when nationalist appeals had 'a specifically anti-foreign element'.⁵¹

These 'crude manifestations of local patriotism' would define much of West Asian politics after the war, and would most often centre on the role of

oil companies in the country.

Reflections on the Mandates

The institutionalization of European control over West Asia through the Mandates system marks the completion of the Western colonial enterprise; opposition to Western political, economic and cultural encroachments that had begun a century earlier now ended in the abject subjugation of the Arab peoples – but, at the same time, ignited fresh resistance based on nationalism and constitutionalism.

The three agreements that shaped West Asia after the war have remained controversial over the last century. Most Arabs see them as evidence of British perfidy and as ‘a startling piece of double-dealing’.⁵² The situation may have been more complex. Several different British offices handled various parts of the agreements, at times without coordination with each other. To complicate matters further, important positions, both official and ministerial, were held at various times by different incumbents, and consistency in policy and continuity in action were frequently compromised.

The exigencies of war, including the changing fortunes that were seen in that period, also encouraged officials and ministers to seek immediate advantage or to commit themselves, as in the case of the Balfour Declaration, to unreconcilable positions. It should also be noted that where positions could not be readily reconciled, there were deliberate attempts at obscurity in the language used in documents. For instance, when British officials promised ‘independence’ to the Arabs in their correspondence with Sharif Hussain, they did not perhaps mean full sovereignty, but the limited independence as enjoyed by the Gulf sheikhdoms at that time on the basis of treaties with the British. Hussain, of course, did not see the commitment in this light, nor did the British make any attempt to clarify matters to him.⁵³

Then foreign secretary Viscount Grey understood well the contradictory commitments that Britain had made; he noted in Parliament in March 1923:

I am sure that we cannot redeem our honour by covering up our engagements and pretending there is no inconsistency ... I think we are placed in considerable difficulty by the Balfour Declaration itself ... I do see that the situation is an exceedingly difficult one, when it is compared with the pledges which undoubtedly were given to the Arabs.⁵⁴

While Viscount Grey, at the end of his statement, called for doing ‘what is the fair thing to be done’, the commitments constantly clashed with each other then as they do now.

The Anglo-French powers shaped five new states in the region and provided them with borders, rulers, and institutions of modern governance – assemblies, councils of ministers, bureaucracies, and elements of local government and municipal services. And, whatever the dubious circumstances of their birth, these states have endured, with borders intact. This endurance is remarkable since the borders were drawn by discredited colonial masters with little local knowledge and even less sensitivity to the area’s conditions, so that communities with shared identities and interests were divided, and peoples with little compatibility and often deep hostility were placed together in one state.

These arrangements were usually pursued in the teeth of local opposition, when home-grown sentiment demanded the unity of a larger traditional entity; these entities were surgically dismembered to suit imperial interests or, later, to facilitate colonial governance through cynical divide-and-rule policies. Again, in at least two instances – Iraq and Transjordan – rulers with no local links were imposed on alienated and resentful populations. Still, the Hashemite dynasty in Iraq lasted for thirty-seven years, while the dynasty in Jordan is still in place.

While there have been civil conflicts within these five states and fierce interstate confrontations, the sanctity of the borders has been maintained alongside the sense of a *national* identity linked with the state, rather than to a larger Arab or Islamic identity or a narrower ethnic or sectarian bond. Iraq was made up of Shia, Sunni and Kurdish populations who were forced

together in the hastily constructed state and were in frequent confrontations then (as they are now), even as the Sunni and Shia communities were pulled by the allure of a larger ‘Arab’ nationhood. Meanwhile, the Kurds contemplated the prospect of a region-wide cohesion that would bring together their compatriots in Turkey, Syria and Iran in a united ‘Kurdistan’. And yet, despite these pulls and pressures, Ayubi points out that in Iraq, during the Mandate, ‘the political rhetoric was becoming progressively more concerned with one Iraqi people and one Iraqi state, although reference to “Arab brotherhood” was sometimes to be heard’.⁵⁵

The case of Lebanon is even more curious. Here, the French deliberately carved out a Christian majority state; the Christians had a bare majority of 52 per cent at the outset, but were privileged by the Constitution. In this order, the Maronite was a unique community; it was an ancient one that had always emphasized its ‘distinctiveness, perseverance and resistance to assimilation’.⁵⁶ In Lebanon, this community has been compelled to live with Sunnis, Shias, Druze and Orthodox Christians.

Initially, the Muslims saw themselves as part of the broader ‘Syrian’ and Arab community, while the Christians viewed Lebanon as a Christian state. But, by the 1930s, as Hourani notes, ‘the idea of a state based on accord between the various Christian and Muslim communities began to gain strength’.⁵⁷ Thus, despite frequent discord and at least one major civil conflict later in the century, the state has endured with the same borders the French had created, sustained by periodic inter-communal compromises and accommodation of each other’s interests.

A hundred years later, we see today that national identities – Syrian, Lebanese, Iraqi, Jordanian and Palestinian – are firmly in place. But, while states and their borders have proven resilient, what the region has never experienced for any length of time is stability. The order imposed on West Asia was essentially an imperialist project that was conceived in a different era from the one in which it was being implemented. Now, in the post-war scenario, even in the imperialist states themselves, the colonial enterprise had little resonance. As David Fromkin points out, ‘Europe itself, its *antebellum* world swept away in the cataclysm of 1914-18, was changing

more rapidly in weeks or months than it had before in decades or centuries, and to a growing number of Europeans, imperialism seemed out of place in the modern age' [Emphasis added].⁵⁸

After the war, this absence of enthusiasm for imposing an imperialist order, coupled with absence of adequate resources to manage and maintain such an order, meant that the West Asia enterprise was built with an extraordinary slapdash approach, in which politicians and diplomats pursued ideas they no longer believed in or which had become outdated, having been overtaken by new knowledge, fresh understandings or reordered priorities.⁵⁹

Three of the most important commitments the British were saddled with after the war were the result of bargains struck to obtain immediate advantage in the exigencies of conflict, but were now viewed quite differently.

One, it was agreed that France would obtain Syria and Lebanon, though, by 1922, British officials realized this would be a disaster.

Two, the promise of an 'independent' West Asia to be ruled by Sharif Hussain and his family was again influenced by wartime considerations. This meant that, after the war, Britain was forced to accommodate Hussain's sons as rulers in Iraq and Transjordan, even though it viewed the family as treacherous and ineffective, and its role in backing the Allied war effort half-hearted and of limited value. Britain reaped a double disadvantage: imposing this family on the disgruntled Arabs gave no advantage to them, even as it remained tarnished as 'perfidious' and disliked for imposing colonial control on the Arabs.

Three, the Balfour Declaration compelled Britain to back unbridled Jewish migration to Palestine, which its officials had no enthusiasm for in the early 1920s; by then, they had understood that there was no scenario in which the interests of the resident Palestinians and the immigrant Jews could be accommodated in the same geographical space.

The final question that needs to be addressed is whether the state-building exercise in West Asia to shape secular political entities was the wisest course to follow. Fromkin points out that 'the modern belief in

secular civil government is an alien creed in a region most of whose inhabitants, for more than a thousand years, have avowed faith in a Holy Law that governs all of life'. He then notes 'Islam's hold on the region' and points out that 'European officials at the time had little understanding of Islam'.⁶⁰

What Fromkin misses out is that it was not the 'Holy Law' that made the West Asian soil infertile for Western institutions; it was the fact that these institutions imposed by Western powers were not really modern, secular, democratic entities, but were fake imitations of Western order – hollow structures without the informing spirit of freedom, equality and justice. In fact, the literature of the period from Arab sources is replete with proclamations, petitions, pamphlets and journalistic outpourings calling on Western powers to grant to the Arabs the very ideas and institutions they had at home. The nationalism of the Arabs at this time, as Hourani notes, was secularist and constitutionalist; to be modern 'was to have a political and social life similar to those of the countries of western Europe'.⁶¹

The Western response to these aspirations was intolerant and violent – firepower, incarceration, torture, executions and exile. This, rather than Holy Law, should be held responsible for the legacy of insecurity and instability that has been bequeathed to the region. Fromkin is however right when he says, 'The settlement of 1922, therefore, does not belong entirely or even mostly to the past; it is at the very heart of current wars, conflicts, and politics in the Middle East.'⁶²

3

Arab Nationalism (1950–79)

THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH MARKED A SEA CHANGE in global politics, as also in the political scenario in West Asia. Colonial powers now began a slow retreat, and nationalist ideas that had emerged earlier began moulding the imagination of the Arab peoples and shaped movements to capture power and promote ‘unity’ among the states in the region. Another force, largely subdued during this period, but slowly gathering political resonance, was that of political Islam – the movement to imbue state order with Islamic values and shape it on Islamic principles.

West Asia was not a battleground in the war. British troops first entered Iraq and overthrew its pro-Axis prime minister, Rashid Ali al Gaylani, in May 1941 and restored the pro-British government. Then, following the fall of France, British forces secured Syria in June. By end-1945, despite French protests, Syria and Lebanon became independent.

North Africa did see military action in 1942-43 when, first, Alexandria was threatened by Axis armies, and then, in a quick reversal, Allied forces pushed across the North African desert and took all the territory up to Libya, while an Anglo-US force occupied Morocco and Algeria in 1942.

Palestine

Palestine witnessed increased Jewish immigration after the war. Given US backing for the Zionist cause, particularly encouraged by the horrors of the Holocaust, Britain had no choice but to accept this movement of Jews, and 300,000 of them came to Palestine – 10 per cent of the total Jewish community in Europe. By October 1945, in the face of massive Jewish sabotage and violence, Britain had to accept that a unitary state of Palestine, accommodating both Arabs and Jews, was no longer a feasible prospect. In February 1947, Britain decided to end its Mandate in Palestine and leave it to the UN to determine its future.

In November 1947, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) approved a partition plan for Palestine, while Britain declared it would leave the territory on 14 May 1948. On this day, the Jewish community in Palestine announced the emergence of the independent state of Israel, after which Arab military forces from Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria entered the Arab parts of the new country. In the course of the conflict, the victorious Israeli forces occupied more territory and made two-thirds of the Palestinians (750,000 persons) leave their homes and become refugees in neighbouring countries.

In the agreements that followed the Second World War, Israel obtained 75 per cent of former Palestine; a small strip of land on the Mediterranean, Gaza, was given to Egypt, while the West Bank went to Jordan. The city of Jerusalem, venerated by Jews, Christians and Muslims, was partitioned, with the West going to Israel and the East to Jordan.

Egypt

The defeat of the Arab armies in 1948 had immediate reverberations across Egypt. Given the country's strategic importance for British interests in West Asia, it wished to retain its military presence in the country. However, as Rogan notes, in this era of decolonization, 'the British had long outstayed their welcome'.¹ The Wafd government, that had come to power in the 1950 elections, firmly opposed the British armed forces' continued stay in the country, abrogated the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty in October 1951 and

demanded immediate British withdrawal from the Suez Canal zone. The British refused to recognize this abrogation. With tacit government support, there were several attacks on British facilities in the canal zone and guerrilla attacks on UK personnel.

In a major escalation, in January 1952, about 1,500 British troops besieged Egyptian police at the canal zone and demanded the surrender of their weapons. In the fighting, forty-six policemen were killed. In response, on 25-26 January, referred to as 'Black Saturday', there were strikes, riots and arson attacks in Cairo on British, Jewish and other foreign properties; fifty Egyptians and seventeen foreigners were killed, and the Wafd government was dismissed.

A group within the Egyptian army, many of them veterans of the 1948 war with Israel, calling themselves 'Free Officers' and representing different political affiliations, had been plotting for some time to rid the country of imperialist control. After 'Black Saturday', they added to their agenda the overthrow of the king, and his corrupt and ineffectual government.

The Revolution of 1952

On 23 July 1952, military officers carried out their near-bloodless coup d'état; King Farouk abdicated and went into exile. These officers were native-born Egyptians from rural backgrounds, who had obtained their education and social position through military service. Their average age was thirty-four; their leader, General Mohammed Naguib, was the oldest at fifty-one. While initially they installed a civilian government, the revolution was supervised by a Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), headed by Col. Gamal Abdel Nasser. The RCC banned all political parties as sources of discord, and set up a state-sponsored party, the Liberation Rally.

In June 1953, Egypt was declared a republic, with Naguib as its first president. Among the first acts of the new order were the abolition of Turkish titles enjoyed by the aristocracy and landed gentry, and expropriation of their land for redistribution among small farmers.

After prolonged discussions with the British, an agreement was finalized in October 1954: Britain would withdraw all its troops over a two-year period, while retaining 1,200 civilian experts in the canal zone. Egypt also relinquished all claims on Sudan, which became an independent country. Following this agreement, the rivalry between Naguib and Nasser came to a head; it ended with Naguib's removal and his house arrest for the next twenty years.

Recognizing that agricultural production needed to be boosted with increased water supply, the government decided to construct the Aswan Dam, which would increase acreage under cultivation from 6 million acres to about 9.5 million acres. Funding for this project brought the Egyptian revolution face-to-face with the realities of post-war global politics.

In seeking funds for the dam and weapons to upgrade its armed forces, Egypt first turned to the US. The US insisted that Egypt join a regional defence pact – the Middle East Defence Organization (MEDO) – before military supplies could be considered. Nasser rejected this proposal, seeing it as another avenue for continued British presence in Egypt.

Israel, on its part, viewed the British in the canal zone as a buffer between itself and Egypt, and was apprehensive about its end. McHugo points out that Israel's prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, had long-term concerns as well: he thought that Nasser would modernize his country, unite the Arabs and finally destroy Israel. He, therefore, committed himself to destroying Nasser before he became too powerful.²

The Suez Crisis

In July 1954, Israeli intelligence attempted to create enmity between Egypt on one side and the US and Britain on the other by sabotaging the latter's facilities in Cairo, but its agents were exposed and apprehended. Then, in February 1954, to exhibit their military superiority, Israeli personnel attacked the Egyptians in Gaza and killed thirty-seven soldiers.

In February 1955, the US sponsored the 'Baghdad Pact' that brought together a regional alliance against the Soviet Union. It included Turkey

and Iraq, and was joined later in the year by Britain, Pakistan and Iran. Nasser condemned the pact, thus ensuring that no other Arab country would join it. Instead, he found his niche in the Non-aligned Movement, joining India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Yugoslavia's Josip Broz Tito at the helm of this grouping of developing countries which were inspired by anti-colonialism and the rejection of the ideological and political divisions of the Cold War.

Nasser, like India, also obtained his military equipment, denied to him by Western powers, from the Eastern bloc. This action, coupled with Egypt's diplomatic ties with China in May 1956, further alienated the US; in July 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower announced that the US was withdrawing all financial assistance for the Aswan Dam project. Viewing this as a direct threat to his regime, Nasser announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal on 26 July.

This led Britain, France and Israel to plot a joint intervention: Israel initiated the military assault on the Suez Canal on 29 October 1956, and France and Britain entered the field with their troops the next day. While calling on the two sides to cease hostilities, they bombed Egyptian air bases and dropped paratroopers into the canal zone, making it clear that the three nations had colluded in planning and executing this joint attack.

The US was the surprising opponent of this misadventure. Rogan explains that the US administration saw Britain and France acting like old-style imperialists at a time when the main priority of the West should have been the containment of the Soviet Union.³ Under sustained US pressure, all British and French troops were withdrawn by 22 December; the last Israeli troops left by March 1957, and a UN peacekeeping force was placed in the area. Thus, as Rogan says, for Egypt, 'a military defeat turned to a political victory'.⁴

The Suez crisis brought to the fore a new hero in West Asia; for the frustrated Arabs, Dawisha writes, Nasser was 'a second Saladin, turning the table on Western imperialism'.⁵ There was a surge of popular pro-Nasser sentiment in Arab nations, though their leaders viewed with concern his encroachment into their populace's sentiments: there were pro-Nasser riots

across monarchical Iraq, such that special forces needed to be deployed and martial law declared.

By the end of 1956, pan-Arab nationalism was the ‘dominant ideology’ in the Arab world, with Egypt at its centre. During Nasser’s time between 1954 and 1970, there were eight proposals for unity involving Egypt – three from Syria, three from Iraq and two from Yemen. These initiatives were made not only because the leaders concerned believed in Arab unity; they also obtained legitimacy for themselves through this affiliation with Nasser’s Egypt.⁶

Nasser and his supporters believed that ‘revolutionary Arab nationalism’ had priority over all other interests and commitments, including state sovereignty. Nasser’s confidant, Mohammed Haykal, explained that while, as a state, Egypt respected national borders, Egypt as a revolution ‘should not halt before these boundaries, [but] initiate its revolutionary mission for a unitary Arab future’.⁷ Nasser’s ‘victory’ in the Suez crisis marked him out as the charismatic harbinger of transnational Arab unity, projecting an appeal that King Hussain of Jordan described as his ‘mystique’. It pulled together the student, the professional, the poet, the business person into one spiritual Arab fraternity – a sense of shared belonging so that ‘in the minds of each lived the image of their communion’.⁸

This transnational fraternity saw its only concrete realization in the Egypt–Syria unification to form the United Arab Republic (UAR).

Before looking at the political manifestation of Arab nationalism in the shape of the UAR, we could briefly examine another influential intellectual and political force in Arab affairs – Ba’athism.

Ba’athism

Al Husri’s ideas on Arab nationalism, examined in the previous chapter, found concrete expression in the Ba’ath (Rebirth) Party, founded in 1943 by two intellectuals and activists, Michel Aflaq (1910–89) and Salah al Bitar (1912–80), together with a small group of Syrian intellectuals who had all

studied at Sorbonne in Paris in the 1930s. With other groups joining them in later years, their organization, based in Damascus, was renamed Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party (ABSP) in 1952. Aflaq, the ideologue, described Arab nationalism as a '... tolerant spirituality that will open its heart and will shade with its wings all those who shared with the Arabs their history, who lived for generations in the atmosphere of their language and culture until they became Arab in thought and sentiment.'⁹

Aflaq's Arab nationalism was founded on shared language, though, at times, he referred to other factors, such as ethnicity (though as part of remote history), Islam as part of the Arabs' cultural heritage (not faith), and common history; in the contemporary period, this meant 'a unity of suffering and hopes', and a sense of shared destiny.¹⁰ This 'nation' had been divided by colonialism, which had also severely damaged the Arab spirit of solidarity.

For Aflaq, the Arab nation was encapsulated in the 'party' that represented 'the whole of the nation which is still slumbering in [a state of] self-denial of its own reality, and forgetfulness of its own identity'.¹¹ The role of the Ba'ath party was to rejuvenate the Arabs to achieve 'one Arab nation with an eternal mission'. The party's programme included: land reform and government control over natural resources, heavy industry, transport, finance and trade unions. It advocated a constitutional and representative government, and freedom of speech and association within the framework of Arab nationalism.

While Aflaq was the secretary general of the ABSP and its ideological driving force, the organizational responsibilities devolved on Akram Hourani, who built up party membership among students, professionals and army officers. In 1954, it won thirteen seats in the 141-member Syrian national assembly. In the early 1950s, it clandestinely spread its activities to the neighbouring kingdoms of Iraq and Jordan.

In Iraq, it expanded its membership, going from 200 in 1954 to 1,000 active members in 1963, together with 15,000 sympathizers. While the Ba'athists played a relatively low-key role in the 1958 revolution in Iraq, they did topple the ruling regime in 1963 and even held power briefly from

February to November of that year. They had gained popularity with their support for Nasser after the 1956 Suez crisis, since their nationalist vision was in line with Nasser's views. In mid-July 1968, the Ba'ath party overthrew the regime of Abdul Rehman Aref in Iraq and began Ba'ath rule there, which continued till the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

- *The 'United Arab Republic' (UAR)*

In Syria, the Ba'ath party was an active player in national affairs, benefiting from Nasser's appeal. To enhance its status among other political rivals in the country, particularly the Syrian Communist Party, the Ba'ath party became a strong advocate of Syria–Egypt unity: the Ba'athists called for an 'organic unity' of what they saw as 'the artificially separated regions of the eternal and indivisible Arab nation'.¹²

The UAR, bringing together Egypt and Syria into a single political entity, came into being on 1 February 1958. It caused great surprise across the region since, while there was widespread discussion relating to Arab unity, no one seriously believed that an actual merger would take place. In early 1955 itself, in response to the Baghdad Pact, the then Syrian prime minister, Khalid al Azm, had proposed the integration of the two countries' military and economic sectors, but found the Egyptians unenthusiastic. This did not change when the Syrians proposed this again in 1956. Recent research confirms that Nasser was a reluctant participant; he was conscious that such unity projects would not meet with either Western or Soviet support and would also alarm pro-West Arab states, like Saudi Arabia and Jordan.¹³

Even in 1958, the Syrian leaders found that Nasser was not keen to accept their unity proposal. To win him over, the Syrian military leaders who met him explained how politically divided Syria was (into Ba'athists, Nasserites, communists and the old feudal oligarchy). They feared that if Syria did not merge with Egypt, it would implode or the country would be taken over by communists. On this basis, the consent of a very

unenthusiastic Nasser was obtained and merger of the two countries was proclaimed to delirious popular celebrations across the Arab world.

The unity project that Aflaq had in mind but did not pursue had been a loose federal arrangement, with the two entities having separate parliaments and their own governments. However, the organic unity that emerged under Ba'ath insistence did not work out as planned. It meant straightaway the dissolution of the Ba'ath party in Syria in October 1958, followed by a rapid decline in its electoral fortunes in the July 1959 elections. As seen earlier in Egypt, in Nasser's dispensation, there was no place for other political parties. Ba'ath ministers, having lost all power in their own country, resigned from the national and regional cabinets, and the party became a harsh critic of the union.

Syria

During Syrian–Egyptian unity, other Syrian politicians also became increasingly resentful: their parties were banned and they were placed under Egypt's single state-sponsored entity. They were poorly represented in the cabinet and had relatively less important portfolios. All official matters had to be settled in Cairo. Again, Egypt had opted for a centrally planned economy, while Syria had a free market system, and now, Syrian private business persons lost their businesses. Land reforms initiated by Egypt hit large Syrian landowners, who lost a million acres that were redistributed among small farmers.

Syrian military officers were also unhappy because they had become subordinates of Egyptian officers. It was the Syrian military that initiated the break-up of the union by detaining the Egyptian commander of the UAR armed forces, Field Marshal Abdel Hakim Amer, and then expelling him to Cairo. This was followed by the deportation of all Egyptians – soldiers, civil servants, and labourers. The dissolution of the UAR was announced on 28 September 1961.

The coup leaders said on radio that they had acted against those who had 'humiliated Syria and degraded her army'. But this had little resonance

with the average Syrian – there were widespread demonstrations against the coup, which ended only when Nasser announced he would not intervene militarily in Syria.

The leaders of the 1961 coup were ousted in another coup on 8 March 1963, which was mounted by army officers backed by diverse nationalists, including Nasserites and Ba’athists, and brought a Ba’athist government to power in Damascus. Effective authority lay with the Military Committee of the Ba’ath party (made up of Ba’athist military officers) and other officers, who exercised power through the National Revolutionary Command Council.

To enhance the legitimacy of the coup, the Ba’ath leaders turned to Nasser once again with unity proposals. This time, he was not only mistrustful, but even hostile, describing the Ba’athist role in the earlier secession as a ‘crime’. He agreed to an accord in April 1963 that provided for a two-year transitory period of cooperation, after which a federal Constitution would be finalized.

However, as the Syrian Ba’athists saw with concern the rising tide of support for Nasser, they once again turned against him: they purged Nasserites from the army and political leadership, and then suppressed a pro-Nasser coup in July 1963. Nasser responded by describing the Syrian government as a ‘fascist regime’ and broke all ties with the Ba’athists, whom he called ‘fraudulent and treacherous’ as also ‘inhuman and immoral’.¹⁴

In February 1966, the Military Committee, backed by younger members of the Ba’ath party, ousted the top Ba’ath leaders, Aflaq and al Bitar, and established a Marxist, neo-Ba’athist leadership under Salah Jadid. Their ideology was a mix of Arab nationalism and Marxism, calling for mass struggle and the liberation of Palestine. This included support for cross-border raids by Palestinian guerrillas into Israeli territory. Nasser was wary of Syrian radicalism, but, given his ongoing competition with the traditional Arab monarchies, he felt compelled to back the Syrians. He entered into a defence agreement with Syria, which provided that an attack on one country

would be considered an attack on the other. This made them partners in the 1967 war with Israel.

In November 1970, the Corrective Movement, led by defence minister Hafez al Assad, ousted Salah Jadid and his supporters, and brought al-Assad to power in Damascus.

Egypt

Instead of admitting that Egypt had caused the rupture of the UAR by ruling over Syria in an imperialist manner, Nasser blamed the failure of the unity project on ‘reactionary’ elements in the Arab world, and committed himself to pursuing ‘Arab socialism’ – a combined political–economic approach that brought together Arab nationalism and Soviet-style socialism.¹⁵ In May 1962, he issued a ‘National Charter’ affirming that Egypt ‘must propagate her call for [Arab] unity’ and added that this would be pursued ‘without hesitating before the outworn argument that this would be considered an interference in the affairs of others’.¹⁶ However, despite these brave words, the idea of pan-Arabism was no longer viewed as a realistic proposition; it was only to be given lip service by successive regional leaders, since they knew that Arab unity still resonated strongly in their people’s hearts.

Nasser’s appeal to Arab masses, above the heads of their ruling regimes, encouraged the alarmed leaders of Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Jordan to mend ties with one another. This had the full support of the Americans. In April 1957, Saudi Arabia sent its troops to Jordan to back the Hashemite ruler, long a sworn enemy of the Al Saud family, against his pro-Nasser prime minister, Sulaiman Al Nabulsi, who was dismissed later that month. However, as noted above, the country that felt the aftershock of the Suez crisis most powerfully was Iraq.

Iraq

Here, Nasser’s popularity following Egypt’s union with Syria engendered a deep divide between the Hashemite monarchy and its citizens, causing ‘a

wave of fear and confusion among Iraq's rulers [and] the Western supporters of Iraq'.¹⁷ After the emergence of the UAR, Jordan's King Hussain entered into dialogue with Iraq, and created a federation of the two Hashemite monarchies – 'The Arab Union' – in February 1958 to challenge Nasser's unity project.

However, Iraq's monarchy was overthrown in a bloody coup on 14 July 1958. After the murder of the royal family and senior ministers, Iraq was declared a republic under the leadership of General Abdel Karim Qassem and Colonel Abdel Salam Aref. In its first days, the revolution leaders proclaimed, to ecstatic popular support in Iraq, an early unity with the UAR. This marked the apogee of pan-Arab nationalism.

In September 1958, the first indication of the downward trend in pan-Arab unity occurred when Qassem dismissed Aref from all posts at home and then, in November, had him arrested. Their divide reflected two competing visions of Arab destiny – al-qawmiya (pan-Arab unity), backed by Aref, and al-wataniya (state-based nationalism) that Qassem espoused. While Aref was an unabashed Nasserite and proclaimed 'unity now', Qassem's slogan was 'Iraq first'. In this, the latter was backed by a coalition of socialists, communists, nationalists and the Kurds.

An Egypt-supported coup attempt against Qassem in November 1959 led to a final divide between Nasser and Qassem, marked by exchanges of sharp mutual recrimination on state radio. Later, in June 1961, when Qassem publicly claimed Kuwait as Iraqi territory, Nasser supported Kuwait (a feudal monarchy backed by Britain) against his co-revolutionary in Baghdad.

Qassem was overthrown in a military coup in February 1963 led by the Iraqi Ba'ath party, which backed Nasser's pan-Arab sentiments. However, before any unity proposals could be seriously pursued, the Ba'ath, in turn, was overthrown by Aref in November. Aref, in his new incarnation, had no interest in a unity project, being content with economic and military coordination with Egypt. After his death in a plane crash in 1966, Iraq was headed for about two years by Aref's older brother, Abdul Rehman Aref,

who was overthrown in another Ba'athist coup in July 1968, led by General Ahmad Hassan al Bakr.

Yemen

In West Asia, the last major drama of the nationalist unity project was played out in the region's eastern extremity – Yemen. Yemen emerged as an independent kingdom in 1918, ruled by the imam of the Zaidi sect of Shia Islam. A semi-feudal entity, divided by clans and tribes, Yemen, in the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, was largely cut off from mainstream Arab affairs by mountains and deserts. It shared a 1,400-km border with Saudi Arabia, which remained undefined through the century as Yemen claimed the Saudi kingdom had in 1934 seized Aseer, Jizan and Najran provinces from 'historic' Yemen.

In 1961, Yemen's ruler, Imam Ahmad, earned Nasser's wrath by publicly criticizing the nationalizing of private companies in Egypt as a crime against Islamic law. A week after Ahmad's death in September 1962, his successor, Imam Badr, was overthrown in a military coup led by Brigadier Abdallah al Sallal and the 'Yemen Arab Republic' was declared. In the civil conflict that ensued, Saudi Arabia backed the royalists, while Egypt supported the revolutionaries – largely to affirm Nasser's revolutionary leadership in the Arab world after the Syria debacle.

Thus, Egypt got embroiled in a conflict that continued for over the next five years and required the deployment of increasing numbers of Egyptian soldiers: from 20,000 in 1963, it went to 40,000 in 1964 and reached 70,000 in 1965 – half the Egyptian army. The impression in Egypt was that this was a popular revolution. The fact was that, while it enjoyed the support of the city-dwellers and of the population in the south, people in the northern mountains and the western deserts remained loyal to the imam, whom they considered both a political and spiritual leader.

The war drained Egypt's meagre resources, while causing the deaths of about 20,000 soldiers; the royalists were backed by Saudi coffers and received covert British assistance. Nasser, motivated by his commitment to

Arab nationalism, could not contemplate withdrawal. The Yemen misadventure found him totally ill-prepared for the confrontation with Israel in 1967 which gave a final burial to the Arab nationalism project.

Algeria

Before we continue with our story relating to Nasser's ill-fated war with Israel in 1967, we need to take a diversion and briefly discuss a major area where nationalist sentiment emerged in a different historical context, and its expression was also different from the Arab nations of West Asia and Egypt – here, there was an extremely violent encounter between the colonial masters and the subject Algerian people of North Africa.

The year 1930 marked a century of French rule in Algeria and was celebrated by the local French government with a sense of triumphalism at the success of France's 'civilizing mission'. An inscription commemorating the occasion noted that France had given Algeria 'prosperity, civilisation and justice' for which 'a grateful Algeria pays homage of undying attachment to the Motherland'.¹⁸

Algeria had some unique features: in 1848, it had been declared French territory; its three provinces – Oran, Algiers and Constantine – were declared *departments* of France and provided elected deputies to the Chamber in Paris. But these were French nationals, since Algeria attracted settlers from France who numbered over 800,000 by the 1920s.

The other feature of French rule was that, though Algeria was French territory, Algerians were not seen as equal to French citizens – to be considered for citizenship, Algerians needed to give up their Muslim faith and accept French civil law. In Algeria itself, laws discriminated between French nationals and the native population, providing for penalties for actions that were not deemed criminal for Europeans, for instance, criticizing government officials or the French republic. Hence, in the first decades of the twentieth century, the agitation in Algeria was not for national independence but for equal rights.

Civil rights movements in Algeria had two principal streams – the assimilation movement and the multicultural movement – reflecting similar debates in Europe a hundred years later. The assimilation movement, led by Ferhat Abbas (1899–1985), called for the extension of French rights and values to all Algerians, so that ‘the different elements of this country [have] the same social rank and give the weak the means to raise their standing’.¹⁹ Ferhat Abbas denied there was a separate Algerian nation – Algeria was France, he claimed. The multiculturalists were from the Islamic movement, who insisted that there was, indeed, an Algerian nation and ‘this Algerian and Muslim nation is not France’.²⁰ But neither group called for independence.

In response to these strong expressions, an attempt was made to introduce new rules that would give French nationality to certain categories of Algerians – which saw just 25,000 possible beneficiaries in a population of 4.5 million. But this was vociferously opposed by the French settlers and their supporters in Paris, who argued (a century later, we still hear this argument) that this would lead to the loss of Algeria and even the Islamization of France. Rogan points out that the disillusionment caused by the failure of this minor measure marks the commencement of Algeria’s freedom movement that put the nationalists at war with France.²¹

Algerian nationalism was greatly buoyed by the fact that 25,000–80,000 Algerians had fought for France in the Second World War, and several thousand had been killed. But after the war, France was in no mood to countenance even modest demands for independence. A demonstration in the town of Setif in the east in early 1945 was met with brutal force that left scores dead. The French boosted their forces with fresh deployments – 10,000 soldiers, backed by aircraft and warships that, from May 1945, attacked the demonstrators, killing nearly 8,000.

This spurred the nationalist movement, the National Liberation Front (FLN, in its acronym in French) to commence attacks on French-settler communities, so that harsh French retaliation would expand the appeal of the movement. Hoping to crush the movement, in turn, the French followed

the policy of strong retribution for all attacks. But this encouraged further resistance from the nationalists.

Thus, a pattern of 'terrorism and counterterrorism' was established from 1954 onwards up to the end of the war of independence in 1962. A settler community in Philippeville was attacked in August 1955, in which over a hundred persons were killed. In their retaliation, the French admitted to 1,200 civilian deaths; the FLN claimed 12,000 died. French forces in Algeria, which were 60,000 in 1954, became 500,000 by 1956.

The FLN took the fight to the capital, Algiers, in September 1956, with confrontations marked by terrorist attacks and harsh retaliation by the French. An Algerian observer described the scene as being marked by 'desperate cries, atrocious screams of pain, agony. Nothing more.'²² The 'Battle of Algiers' ended in September 1957 with the death or arrest of the top leaders, and decimation of the cadres through torture and mass arrests.

From 1956, the French began the policy of mass displacement of rural communities and their forced settlement in internment camps, so that by 1962, about 3 million people had been forcibly displaced in this effort at eroding FLN support in rural areas.

From 1957, the Algerian freedom struggle started gaining international support, when it was placed on the agenda of the UNGA. In 1958, the FLN set up a provisional government in Cairo. On the other hand, within France, deep divisions were emerging: the settlers, backed by the French armed forces in Algeria, had become a powerful force in French politics, and forcefully opposed any attempt at compromise with the independence movement.

Hardliners among the settlers organized themselves into the 'Secret Armed Organisation' (the OAS, in its French acronym) that carried out terrorist attacks on Arab civilians, and even plotted the assassination of President Charles de Gaulle after he began to speak about self-determination for the Algerians in September 1959. The head of the French forces in Algeria, General Raoul Salan, threatened a military-led coup d'état not just in Algeria, but even in France itself, if the idea of independence was pursued.

From January 1960, de Gaulle began direct negotiations with the provisional government of Algeria at Evian, culminating in the Evian Accords of March 1962 that provided for full independence for Algeria. A plebiscite in Algeria on 1 July 1962 had 5.9 million voting in favour of independence and only 16,000 opposing it.

On 5 July 1962, following exactly 132 years of French colonialism, Algeria became a free nation and a republic. In its war of independence during, a million people had been killed – a scale of death and destruction that was without precedent in Arab history.²³

We take leave of the story of Algeria and return to our main narrative – the confrontation between Nasser and Israel in 1967.

Arab Politics and the Six Day War

While Nasser promoted his vision of pan-Arab nationalism from 1956, he was opposed fiercely by three monarchies – Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Iraq (till 1958). While the monarchs accepted that special ties linked the Arab people, Saudi Arabia believed that these ties were founded as much on faith – Islam – as on Arabism; its view was that bonds of religion superseded those of Arabism. This ideological divide between two major Arab powers truncated the region into two camps – revolutionary and conservative.

The failure of unity with Syria made Nasser even more radical; as the renowned scholar of West Asian history and politics Malcolm Kerr notes, he was now a ‘militant revolutionary dedicated to the overthrow of all its conservative neighbours’.²⁴ Nasser also appeared to dilute his earlier approach of ‘unity of ranks’ (i.e., political unity) with the more moderate ‘unity of purpose’ (i.e., Arab solidarity); he explained his position thus:

Unanimity over purposes is more important than unity of ranks. ... Unity of ranks based on different purposes would drive the entire Arab nation into danger. ... We should achieve unity of purpose in the first place. Such unity can lead to unity of ranks, because unity of purpose constitutes unity of all Arab peoples.²⁵

This divide shaped an 'Arab Cold War' regionally,²⁶ and was also reflected globally, with Saudi Arabia and Jordan affiliating themselves with the Western camp in the Cold War, while the revolutionaries (Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Republic of Yemen and Algeria) were closer to the Soviet camp. The two camps inevitably took opposite positions on intra-Arab disputes as well, as in the Yemen civil war from 1962 and later, the Algeria–Morocco dispute over Western Sahara, where Egypt backed Algeria.

It was Yemen that remained the principal bone of contention between the Arab cold warriors. Both sides made efforts to end the conflict – at the Alexandria Arab League Summit in September 1964, at the bilateral Jeddah Conference in August 1965, and in November–December 1965 at Harad at the Saudi–Yemen border – but the divisions between the Yemeni parties and their Arab mentors could not be bridged. In March 1966, Nasser asserted that his army would remain indefinitely in Yemen and also threatened to bomb Saudi bases.

What further aggravated the intra-Arab divide was Saudi King Faisal's initiative to organize a conference of Islamic states at Mecca. To promote this project, from December 1965, Faisal began visiting Muslim countries, starting with Iran and then going on to Jordan, Turkey, Sudan, Pakistan, Morocco and Tunisia – all conservative states and, in most cases, hostile to Nasser. Nasser saw this as a political, rather than spiritual, initiative aimed at countering the influence of the revolutionary countries. As a result of his opposition and the reluctance of the invitees to alienate Egypt, by the end of 1966, the kingdom's Islamic initiative withered away.

Thus, as 1967 opened, the principal rivalries and contentions in West Asia involved Arab states feuding with each other, rather than them pursuing their dispute with Israel. Even in early May, just a month before the fateful Six Day War with Israel, the prospect of a war involving Arab revolutionaries and conservatives was more likely than one with Israel. Kerr writes, 'The old quarrel with Israel seemed irrelevant: the Arabs were preoccupied not with her but with one another.'²⁷ The liberation of Palestine was not a priority – it had to wait till the unification of the Arab

states, for the preparation of the Arab armies, for the spread of the socialist revolution, and for the divide between Israel and the US.²⁸

Syria had no enthusiasm for a fight with Israel – its main concern was to confront Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and, in alliance with Egypt, maintain pressure on the two monarchies. Jordan too had little interest in joining Egypt in a war with Israel. King Hussain realized that in defeat he would lose the territories that Israel coveted (West Bank and East Jerusalem), while victory would further enhance Nasser's status at his own expense, perhaps even leading to the demise of his precarious regime.

How then did the three Arab states – Egypt, Syria and Jordan – find themselves at war with Israel in the early days of June? It now seems that Nasser was very likely driven by his own rhetoric. The leadership of the Arab nationalist project and the delirious support of the adoring Arab masses (if not their leaders) ignited further linguistic enthusiasms: in 1962, he described Israel as a 'cancer in the Arab region'; in 1965, he said, 'progress for us is death for Israel'.²⁹ As border skirmishes between Syria and Israel escalated, mutual rhetoric became more inflammatory, while conservative countries taunted Nasser's inaction in the face of Israeli provocations.

This pushed him into a strategy of provocations – the removal of UN forces from the Sinai, the blockade of the Tiran strait in the Red Sea that prevented access to Israel's port of Eilat, and loud radio proclamations that the liberation of Palestine was at hand. Nasser truly believed that, as in 1956, the international community, led by the US, would intervene to prevent war and arrange a settlement.

Rogan notes that Nasser, perhaps against his better judgement, succumbed to pressure from his Arab neighbours, who urged him to choke Israel by closing the Tiran strait and Eilat port. A defence pact was concluded with Syria and then with Jordan, though there was no joint meeting of their commanders, nor was any joint strategy or coordination of action ever discussed between them. Rogan writes:

War with Israel must have been the last thing Nasser wanted in 1967, yet he was hostage to his own success. The people of Egypt and the Arab world at large ... had every confidence in his stewardship and felt confident that he would deliver. Nasser's credibility and his claim to leadership in the Arab world were at stake.³⁰

Albert Hourani points out that 'in the early 1960s there were signs that the claims and pretensions of Nasirism [sic] went beyond its power.'³¹ In early 1967, as ties with Israel deteriorated, Nasser came under pressure from all sides: the conservative regimes, recalling his involvement in Yemen, said caution in the face of Israel was not an acceptable approach since it indicated that he did not believe in his own cause. Revolutionary Syria, on the other hand, was convinced that only war would settle the Palestine issue and create a new Arab nation.³²

Israel, meanwhile, was keen on war: McHugo says its military and much of its government were 'itching for war'; they wanted the 'destruction of the Egyptian army'.³³ Rogan explains that, while the Arabs were anxious to correct the humiliation of 1948, Israel too 'needed one good war to secure defensible boundaries and inflict a decisive defeat on the Arabs'.³⁴ Israel knew it was militarily superior to its Arab neighbours. While Nasser may have thought that US intervention would lead to a settlement, Israel was 'not prepared to give Egypt a political victory which did not correspond to the balance of power between them'.³⁵ After his troops entered the Sinai, Nasser sent several messages to Tel Aviv and Washington seeking a political settlement, while indicating he was ready for war. This misjudgement cost him dearly.

Though it was not known then, there was a divide in Israel at the highest level – Prime Minister Levi Eshkol was anxious for a diplomatic settlement, while the chief of staff, Yitzhak Rabin, recommended a quick military initiative. Even the retired former leader, David Ben-Gurion, firmly advocated that war be avoided. With the former army chief Moshe Dayan

being brought in as defence minister at the end of May 1967, the war party was strengthened.

As Nasser escalated the confrontation with Israel and increased the vehemence of his rhetoric, Israel did not wait to check if he was bluffing; nor was it interested in an external diplomatic initiative to obtain a temporary truce. On 5 June 1967, Israel launched a pre-emptive strike and destroyed the Egyptian air force on the ground. This was followed by attacks on Syrian and Jordanian air forces, and ground action on three fronts – Sinai, Syria and Jordan.

The war ended on 10 June 1967. It was an unmitigated disaster for the Arabs: Egypt suffered the deaths of 10,000 soldiers and 1,500 officers. In terms of territory, Egypt lost the Sinai and Gaza; Jordan lost East Jerusalem and the West Bank, while Syria lost the Golan Heights. Moreover, Egypt lost control over the Suez Canal.

The shock of military defeat led to some painful soul-searching among Arab intellectuals. They identified several persisting defects in Arab character and culture lying at the root of this catastrophe, such as: romanticism, swagger, aversion to objective facts, self-centredness, giving precedence to rhetoric over performance, and, above all, having a ‘penchant for conspiratorial factionalism’.³⁶

Nasser’s major concern after the war was that the longer a peace agreement was delayed, the more the international community would come to accept Israel’s occupation of Egypt’s territories. Hence, there was need to keep alive the fact of occupation – Egypt did this through the ‘War of Attrition’, a series of constant pinpricks against Israeli positions in the occupied areas through raids, artillery firings and air attacks, between March 1969 and August 1970. Israel barricaded itself with heavy fortifications along the Suez Canal, known after its military commander as the Bar-Lev line, and through retaliatory military action.

This ‘war’ brought little advantage to the Egyptians, since Israel mounted air attacks deep inside Egypt, reaching Cairo and the cities in the Nile delta. A US initiative brought about a ceasefire in August 1970. Nasser

passed away in September, with no sign of peace between Israel and its neighbours.

Though he lingered for three years after the debacle of 1967, the charisma had dimmed and the dream of Arab unity had died. As newsreaders choked with emotion while announcing their leader's departure, they mourned for themselves and their nation, for with Nasser their hope, their sense of destiny, died as well.

While Arab leaders continued to pay lip service to Arab nationhood, the balance of regional influence shifted firmly in favour of the conservative regimes, powered by oil wealth. Home-grown tyrants and rapacious external powers made old fault lines bleed afresh and took the region to fresh internecine conflicts. They also ignited a new force – latent till now – that claimed centre stage in the region: political Islam.

Having examined the trajectory of Arab nationalism, with a focus on the thought and career of Gamal Abdel Nasser, we can now look at Saudi Arabia – Nasser's arch-rival and the legatee of the influence and authority that he relinquished in 1970.

Saudi Arabia

We left the Saudi story in Chapter II after Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rehman Al Saud had proclaimed the 'Kingdom of Saudi Arabia' in 1932 and was transforming his kingdom, still shaped on feudal-tribal lines, into a modern state, largely with the use of revenues generated from its oil resources.

During the Second World War, Saudi Arabia declared its neutrality, but it was clearly supportive of the Allies. King Abdulaziz was distrustful of Britain, and unsure of its intentions during and after the war – he feared it would locate its troops on Saudi territory, as it had done in Egypt, Syria, Iran and Iraq, and could even seek to encroach on his country's independence after the war (as had occurred in West Asia after the First World War). Amidst these concerns, the king found comfort in building relations with the Americans.

American companies were already developing the kingdom's oil resources and these entities carried considerable influence in Washington. On their advice, the US government was persuaded to extend considerable assistance to Saudi Arabia to meet its budgetary requirements and to ensure that the king did not feel compelled to turn to the British for help. In March 1942, the US established a resident diplomatic mission in Jeddah. In November 1943, a group of American oil experts estimated that, given the Persian Gulf's oil potential, the centre of global energy would shift from the Americas (the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean) to West Asia. The US government thus became an active partner of its companies in maintaining close ties with Saudi Arabia.

This relationship was cemented at a meeting at the Suez Canal between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz on board the *USS Quincy* on 14 February 1945. The king offered the use of his ports to both the US and British navies on the condition that no British troops would be located on Saudi territory and no part of Saudi Arabia would be alienated. Even for the Americans, the land offered for deployment of US personnel was leased only for five years. He asked that the light weapons stored in Iran be transferred to Saudi Arabia after the war. He also sought an American guarantee for Saudi independence, possibly to pre-empt any British mischief after the war.

After his death in November 1953, King Abdulaziz was succeeded by his eldest son, Saud. Under Saud, there was continuity in oil and foreign policy – close ties with the US oil companies and government, distance from Britain, deep concerns about the Soviet Union, and opposition to Zionism. In fact, one of the tasks given to King Saud when he was still crown prince was to attempt 'to liberate US policy from the influence of the local [US-based] Jewish elements and Zionist propaganda'.³⁷

King Saud and members of the Saudi royal family shared concerns with other monarchies about Nasser's increasing popularity. The wave of Arab nationalism and socialism also entered the Saudi space, though, given the dominant traditional religious and cultural mores of the kingdom, they were largely confined to foreign-educated youth in the Eastern Province and

Hijaz. Funded by oil revenues, Saudis were sent to study abroad from the 1940s, first to Cairo, Baghdad and Beirut, and then, to curb the allure of nationalism and socialism resonating in these Arab capitals, from the late 1950s, they were sent to Western universities, though this did little to dilute their radicalization.

There are reports of an attempted coup by Saudi military officers in May 1955; they had been trained in Egypt and were seeking to overthrow the royal family with the help of Egyptian advisers.³⁸ In April 1958, the 'National Liberation Front of Saudi Arabia', made up of Saudi nationalists, demanded wide-ranging reforms in the country, including a Constitution, free elections, and freedom of speech and association.

These reformists were joined by a group of princes, all sons of King Abdulaziz, who were influenced by Nasser. They included Princes Talal, Nawwaf, Abdul Mohsin and Badr, and were later joined by a few others. They were known as 'Free Princes', who called for a constitutional monarchy and even submitted a draft Constitution to King Saud in early September 1960. In 1962, they made their way to Cairo and met Nasser. Prince Talal, their most authoritative member, proclaimed socialism as the main principle of Islam.

Through the 1960s and early 1970s, there were several attempts by left-wing groups to effect a governmental change – an attempted coup that was foiled in December 1962; a leftist effort in February 1963; another in December 1965; and sustained labour unrest during. In January 1967, hundreds of 'trained saboteurs' were arrested and accused of planned bombings of military, royal, and US targets. In June 1969, a major assassination conspiracy, mainly by military officers, was foiled.

Though these left-wing dissidents paid a heavy price for their futile efforts to reform their nation, they could never garner popular support. In fact, the royal family co-opted several of these foreign-educated youth into government structures and, pursuing an overt meritocratic system, enabled them to rise to the senior-most positions in different ministries. As oil revenues increased after 1973 (see below), the socio-economic impulse for reform, as the French scholar of religion and politics in Saudi Arabia,

Stephane Lacroix notes, became less relevant and, over time, gave way to domestic debates relating to culture and identity, setting up divisions such as ‘liberal’ versus ‘Islamist’.³⁹

While King Saud maintained a public posture of amity with Nasser, he remained wary of the nationalist leader, and found himself drawn towards the monarchs of Iraq and Jordan, despite their being Hashemites. In August 1962, King Saud and King Hussain of Jordan concluded an agreement to boost political, economic, military and cultural ties, a coalition clearly directed at Nasser.

However, the biggest issue before the kingdom was not Nasser but dissent within the royal family. Saud was increasingly viewed by his senior princes, led by Crown Prince Faisal, as profligate and grossly self-indulgent; he had emptied the national exchequer and surrounded himself with sons appointed to senior positions to the exclusion of other royal family members. Faisal and his supporters demanded that full authority be passed on to the crown prince, with Saud remaining a titular ruler. After a series of complicated manoeuvres between the two senior royals, Saud, under pressure from other royal family members, abdicated and left the country in January 1965.

Yemen

The struggle between Saud and Faisal went on from March 1958 all the way to Saud’s abdication and Faisal’s accession to the throne. As noted above, through most of this period the proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Egypt continued in Yemen. While Egyptian troops were directly involved in the war, Saudi Arabia funded the deployment of thousands of mercenaries backing the royalist cause from the north, as well as fighters from South Yemen organized by the British.

Amidst the military stalemate, a third force emerged from the ranks of the Yemeni revolutionaries – a conservative wing made up of tribal sheikhs and sections of the ulema and business, who, though anti-monarchy, were also uncomfortable with the left-wing socialism of the Egyptians.

Following Egypt's defeat in June 1967, the ground was prepared for the withdrawal of Egyptian forces and a peace agreement.

This agreement was signed by Nasser and Faisal in Khartoum in August 1967. As Egyptian troops began to leave Yemen, the balance of power shifted in favour of the conservative elements, who took control of Yemen in November 1967. Saudi Arabia accepted this development and worked closely with the new government to get rid of leftists and accommodate some royalists in the administration.

The Gulf and Iran

Even as both Egypt and Saudi tried to assert their dominance in Yemen, the British shocked the region by declaring that it would withdraw 'East of Suez'. In January 1968, Britain announced that it would end its protectorate agreements with the Gulf sheikhdoms, a process that was to be completed by the end of 1971. During this period, seven sheikhdoms – Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al Quwain, Fujairah and Ra'as al Khaimah – agreed to become part of one federation, the United Arab Emirates, which came into existence on 2 December 1971. Two sheikhdoms, Qatar and Bahrain, opted to remain independent and sovereign entities.

Oman, a sultanate with its capital at Muscat, had British political agents deputed from India since 1800. It was a British protectorate, like other Gulf sheikhdoms, but, unlike the others, as the British withdrew from the region from the late 1960s, they continued to retain a military and security presence in Oman. The British facilitated the accession of Sultan Qabous to the throne in 1970 in a peaceful coup d'état.

As these territorial changes were taking place, Saudi Arabia is said to have claimed as its sphere of influence 'every state bordering on her, except Iraq'.⁴⁰ This put Saudi Arabia in competition with the shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Shah, across the Gulf waters. Vasiliev says that the Saudi approach to Iran 'was an intricate combination of rivalry, fear and cooperation'.⁴¹ Through the 1960s, the two monarchies were united by their shared alliance with the West in the Cold War and, closer home, their

hostility to Nasser's Egypt. They were brought together in the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), where they cooperated to ensure a moderate approach to production and prices (see below).

What worried Saudi Arabia was Iran's military capabilities and the shah's territorial claims in the Gulf. He claimed Bahrain as Iranian territory, a claim he finally relinquished only in August 1971 when the country became independent.

In early 1971, the shah announced that Iran would assume responsibility for the defence of the Gulf after British withdrawal, which added to the uneasiness of the emerging Arab states. Later, he forcibly took control of the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs at the mouth of the Gulf, which were claimed by the emirates of Sharjah and Ra'as al Khaimah, respectively, on the eve of the UAE emerging as a sovereign, federal entity in December 1971. However, Saudi Arabia quietly countenanced Iran supporting Sultan Qabous in his fight against the separatist movement, People's Liberation Front of Oman, a Marxist entity, in the southern province of Dhofar.

Islam in Saudi Foreign Policy

From the early 1960s, Saudi Arabia under Faisal, first as crown prince and then as king, made itself the centre of opposition to Nasser. The instrument that Saudi used to combat the allure of the Egyptian president's evocative messages of Arab nationalism and socialism was Islam, specifically 'Islamic solidarity', which transcended the narrower identity of Arabness and had global appeal. To compete with Nasser's pan-Arab reach, Lacroix points out that Faisal had to shape Islam into a 'counter-ideology'.⁴² This was done by the intellectuals of the Muslim Brotherhood, who, expelled from Egypt and later Syria, had found sanctuary and professional opportunity in Saudi Arabia.

The Muslim Brotherhood had been founded in Egypt in 1928 by an educationist, Hassan al Banna, to preserve Muslim faith and belief in the face of challenges from Western secularist and materialist blandishments.

The Brotherhood had supported the revolution of 1952 in Egypt, but fell out with the new rulers as the latter failed to shape their revolution on an Islamic basis and instead pursued a secular order. Following a crackdown by Nasser after a failed assassination attempt, the group migrated to Saudi Arabia, where they were joined by their co-members from Syria in 1963, when the Ba'athists turned against them. From the late 1950s, as the Saudi–Egyptian divide widened, King Faisal turned to the Brotherhood for help, as they were themselves victims of Nasser and capable of taking him on ideologically by using the instrument of Islam.

In response to the powerful radio messages broadcast by Egypt's Sawt al Arab (Voice of the Arabs), the Saudis aired Sawt al Islam (Voice of Islam); as the Egyptian press referred to Saudi rulers as 'agents of imperialism', the Saudis called Nasser 'Egyptian Stalin'. Beyond mainstream media, the Brotherhood took the competition to the doctrinal level as well, with the Islamic University in Madinah, set up under their guidance, seeking to match the influence of Al Azhar University in Egypt, which Nasser had brought under his control.⁴³

In May 1962, Saudi Arabia convened a conference in Mecca to discuss how secularism and socialism could be confronted. This led to the establishment of the Muslim World League (MWL) as the platform to propagate Wahhabiyya through contacts with like-minded organizations set up or supported by Saudi Arabia in South and Southeast Asia and Africa. Later, in 1972, the MWL was backed by the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), which took the message of Wahhabiyya to the next generation of Muslims.⁴⁴

Despite the severe blow caused by the 1967 defeat to Nasser and his charisma, the allure of revolution did not wither away – there were military coups in Iraq (July 1968), Sudan (May 1969) and Libya (September 1969, see below). The coup in Libya, which overthrew the ruling royal family, was particularly worrying for the kingdom since the political and social situations in the two countries were very similar. With Nasser's death in September 1970, Faisal 'stepped up his struggle for leadership of the Arab world'.⁴⁵

In 1965, Faisal first suggested an 'Islamic Pact' to compete with the Nasser-dominated Arab League and to convene an Islamic summit to realize it. But, besides the shah of Iran and the king of Jordan, he got no support from the other Arab states, who viewed the shah as a threat to Nasser and friend of Israel. Nasser condemned it as being created 'by imperialism and reactionaries'.⁴⁶

The 1967 war yielded certain advantages for Saudi Arabia. The Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem, with the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and the expulsion of thousands of Palestinians from their homes resonated across the Muslim world as an affront to Islam. The kingdom seized the opportunity to affirm itself as the guardian of Islam's holiest shrines, and defender of the Palestinians and other Arabs who had lost their territories.

The attempted arson at the Al-Aqsa Mosque in August 1969 provided Saudi Arabia with the appropriate occasion to assert its new role on the Islamic stage. It convened an Islamic summit at Rabat in September 1969, and then held the first conference of foreign ministers of Islamic countries in Mecca in March 1970. It was chaired by King Faisal and was attended by twenty-three countries. The next conference, held in Jeddah, two years later was attended by thirty-one countries. Saudi Arabia thus took central position in both Arab and Islamic worlds.

Egypt's Peace with Israel

Nasser was succeeded by Anwar Sadat, a comrade of his predecessor in the 1952 revolution, but much more low-key and much less doctrinaire. Unsaddled by any larger dream of Arab renaissance through unity, Sadat's focus was on getting back his country's lost honour and its lost territories, impelled not by Arab nationalism but by 'Egyptian patriotism'.⁴⁷ This shaped his two initiatives: the war with Israel of October 1973 and his peace process with Israel during.

On 6 October 1973, after detailed planning, as also coordination with Syria, the two countries opened a two-front assault of Israeli positions in the Sinai and the Golan Heights. The Israelis were initially caught by surprise –

in the Sinai, the Bar-Lev line was broken and Israeli soldiers fell back with heavy casualties. On 16 October, Egypt's Arab allies deployed the oil weapon against Israel's Western ally, the US. They imposed a price increase and then announced major cuts in production, thus reducing supplies to 'countries which demonstrate moral and material support to the Israeli enemy' – this meant the US and the Netherlands.

The use of the oil weapon was very timely: at that time, the US and other developed countries had become very dependent on oil supplies from Arab producers – the US imported 28 per cent, Europe about per cent, and Japan about 44 per cent. Hence, though Israel mounted a largely successful counter-attack that threatened both Cairo and Damascus, the US took the lead to arrange a ceasefire through the UN Security Council (UNSC) on 22 October 1973.

This was followed by a hectic 'shuttle diplomacy' by US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, which led to agreements between the belligerents in early 1974: Egypt got back the western bank of the Suez Canal, while Syria got a small slice of the Golan Heights. After extensive clearing operations, the Suez Canal was reopened to international shipping on 5 June 1975.

Having secured Egyptian honour, Sadat now implemented the second part of his vision – peace with Israel. He began on 19 November 1977 by landing at Tel Aviv airport and addressing the Israeli Knesset the next day. Here he called for 'permanent peace based on justice' – which meant recognizing the existence of the Palestinian people and returning all territories occupied in 1967; in return, Israel would obtain 'the full acceptance and recognition of all its Arab neighbours'. This initiative was followed by meetings between Sadat and the Israeli prime minister, Menachem Begin, brokered by the US president, Jimmy Carter, at Camp David in September 1978.

The framework for the peace treaty signed on the White House lawns on 17 September 1978 was followed by the final treaty on 26 March 1979. Egypt got back all of the Sinai; Israel agreed to a five-year transition at the West Bank and Gaza, to be followed by the withdrawal of the Israeli military and a freely elected, self-governing authority in the Palestinian

territories. The ‘final status’ of the Palestinian territories was left to future negotiations between the Arab states, Palestinian representatives and Israel.

The peace agreement ensured that Israel’s most powerful enemy in the Arab camp had accepted a separate peace and detached itself from Arab ranks. All Arab countries snapped diplomatic ties with Egypt and shifted the headquarters of the Arab League from Cairo to Tunis. While Egypt had been rewarded with the return of its territories, the Arab side had been so weakened that it could never put sufficient pressure on Israel to get it to relinquish the other occupied territories.

Sadat finally and firmly buried his predecessor’s vision of pan-Arab unity and asserted that national interest alone would guide his policies. This approach was not that different from that of his colleagues in other Arab states – they understood his pursuit of national interest; what they minded was that, in his peace negotiations with Israel, he had failed to consult with them and take their interests into account.

While the defeat of 1967 led to Egypt’s peace process with Israel and its prolonged exclusion from Arab affairs, the defeat also saw reverberations in other Arab states – marked by the emergence of new republics headed by authoritarian rulers and bloody civil conflicts centred on the dispossessed in the region: the Palestinians.

Authoritarian Rule

While the catastrophe of 1967 led to Egypt distancing itself from broader Arab causes, it also created a churn in many other parts of the Arab world in which new authoritarian rulers came to the fore and kept their place for several decades, becoming increasingly harsh and tyrannical, and heading polities that were defined by intolerance of dissent and rampant corruption.

Iraq

Iraq was the first to witness political change. The nationalist secular Ba’ath party had penetrated the armed forces. In 1965, General Ahmad Hassan al

Bakr became the secretary general of the Iraqi branch of the party and brought the different factions under his control. In mid-July 1968, he and his Ba'ath supporters mounted a coup against the government led by Abdel Rehman Aref. Al Bakr now became president, prime minister and chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). In 1969, his relative, Saddam Hussein became a member of the RCC and then vice-chairman.

By the mid-1970s, Saddam Hussein began to overtake the president in authority over national issues through his organizational capacity and ruthlessness. In 1975, he concluded the Algiers Accord with Iran's ruler, Mohammed Reza Shah, ending a long-standing feud with Iraq's neighbour. In early June 1979, he overruled attempts by al Bakr to conciliate Shia dissidents. In mid-June, he intercepted a message from al Bakr to Syria's president Hafez al Assad to expedite unity between the two countries and forced al Bakr to resign. Finally, in July 1979, Saddam Hussein took over as president and chairman of the RCC. He ruled Iraq till 2003.

Sudan

Sudan became independent from British and Egyptian control in 1956. On 25 May 1969, together with four other officers, Colonel Gaafar Nimeiry (1928–2009), commanding the Khartoum Garrison, overthrew the civilian government of [Ismail al-Azhari](#), his coup being termed the 'May Revolution'. He created and chaired Sudan's [Revolutionary Command Council](#) (RCC). On 26 May, he suspended the Constitution, dissolved the Supreme Council, the national assembly, the Civil Service Commission, and banned all political parties. That day, he also promoted himself to major general, purged the armed forces of his opponents, and appointed his own supporters to senior positions.

Nimeiry became [prime minister](#) on 26 October 1969. He tried to reform the economy with the nationalization of banks and industries, and through land reforms. In 1970 and 1971, he survived two coup attempts, one representing Islamic groups, the other mounted by the communists, who made another unsuccessful effort at toppling him in 1975.

In 1971, he was elected president by winning a referendum with 98.6 per cent of the votes. He then dissolved the RCC and founded the [Sudanese Socialist Union](#), which he declared to be the only legal political organization in the country. In 1972, he signed the [Addis Ababa Agreement](#), whereby autonomy was granted to the non-Muslim southern region of Sudan, which ended the [First Sudanese Civil War](#), and ushered in an eleven-year period of peace and stability in the region.

In 1973, he drafted a new Constitution, which declared Sudan to be a democratic, socialist state and gave considerable power to the office of the president. In the mid-1970s, he launched several initiatives to develop agriculture and industry in Sudan, and he invited foreign companies to explore for oil. Oil was discovered in south-central Sudan in 1979.

In 1977, Nimeiry accommodated the Islamists through a National Reconciliation Agreement with his opponent, Sadiq al Mahdi, that brought the latter's supporters into the national assembly and made the Islamic scholar Hassan al Turabi justice minister. Nimeiry was ousted in a military coup in 1985 that brought Sadiq al Mahdi to power as prime minister.

Libya

Control over Libya in North Africa passed from Italy to the Allied powers, Britain and France, in 1943. In 1951, its three provinces – Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan – were united into the kingdom of Libya under Sayyid Mohammed Idris al Sanussi (1889–1983). The government of King Idris awarded oil exploration contracts to several independent oil companies. By 1965, Libya had become the sixth-largest oil exporter outside the Soviet bloc.

A group of young military officers led by Captain Muammar al-Qaddafi, motivated by Nasser's brand of Arab nationalism, overthrew the monarchy on 1 September 1969. In their first public statement, the revolutionaries condemned the Idris regime as 'reactionary and corrupt', and promised the Libyans a society in which all would be free, equal and prosperous. Al-Qaddafi modelled his revolution on the Egyptian precedent:

he made himself colonel, Nasser's rank in 1952, and set up a Revolutionary Command Council. After Nasser's death in September 1970, he declared himself his ideological successor.⁴⁸

Al-Qaddafi ruled Libya till he was overthrown in 2011 in the early days of the Arab Spring uprisings in his country.

Yemen: North and South

Following the 1967 war, Egypt withdrew its troops, leaving Sallal and his republicans to fight the Saudi-backed royalists on their own. Sallal was overthrown by his associates in November 1967; a five-member Republican Council was formed, which was headed by Abdul Rahman al Iryani, who became president of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). Al Iryani negotiated the end of the civil war, obtained Saudi recognition of YAR, and, under a new Constitution, remained president till June 1974. He was removed in a bloodless coup led by Colonel Ibrahim Hamdi.

Hamdi ruled for just three years: he moved his country towards the Soviet Union and thus alienated the tribal chiefs and Saudi Arabia as well. He was assassinated in October 1977. Hamdi was replaced by his deputy, Lt Col. Ahmad Hussain Ghashmi, who reached out to the tribal chiefs and Saudi Arabia, and therefore fell foul of the communist leaders of South Yemen. He was killed in a bomb blast – an emissary from the South had carried the bag containing the explosive into a meeting with him.

Ghashmi was replaced by Ali Abdullah Saleh in July 1978, who was president of YAR till 1990 and then president of united Yemen, called Republic of Yemen, till 2012.

The territory loosely referred to as 'South Yemen' was in the early twentieth century made up of two parts – the Aden Colony, governed initially from British India and then from London, and the Aden Protectorate, made up of twenty-three provinces headed by local rulers. In 1967, Britain handed over South Yemen to the National Liberation Front (NLF), a militant left-wing freedom movement, that named the territory the

People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). On 22 May 1990, the two Yemens were united to form the Republic of Yemen.

Syria

Political changes in Syria were largely the result of domestic politics, particularly infighting within the Syrian Ba'ath party, which had the air force officer and fervent Ba'athist, Hafez al Assad, at its centre.

Al Assad, like other Syrian Ba'athists, was unhappy with the dissolution of his party after the UAR came into being. In early 1960, while posted in Egypt, he and other Ba'athist officers set up a secret Military Committee that was activated after Syria seceded from the UAR. Al Assad became a member of the high command of the Syrian Ba'ath party in late 1963 and commander of the air force in December 1964, with the rank of major general.

At this point, al Assad got embroiled in the divide between the moderate and radical factions of the party, in which he placed himself on the radical side. In February 1966, the Ba'ath took power in the country and al Assad became defence minister. In November 1970, he succeeded in taking control of the party and becoming prime minister and secretary general of the Ba'ath party. In February 1971, al Assad became president – the appointment being approved in a national referendum that gave him 99.2 per cent support.

Being an Alawi, who follow what traditional Muslims view as esoteric beliefs and practices, al Assad affirmed his Muslim identity to placate Islamic groups in the country by inserting a provision in the Constitution that the president would be Muslim,⁴⁹ declaring the 1973 war with Israel as a jihad, and then going to Saudi Arabia for umrah (small pilgrimage).

Civil Conflicts

Palestinian interests were mortally wounded by the wars of 1948 and 1967. Not only did hundreds of thousands of people lose their homes and become

refugees in neighbouring countries, their very identity as a people was in danger of being permanently obliterated. UNSC Resolution 242, that was passed after the 1967 war, makes no mention of the Palestinian people with legitimate claims and aspirations, while giving Israel a permanent status in the global comity of nations. The 'land-for-peace' formula that is at the heart of the resolution does not provide for Palestinian statehood, but only a claim to land that would place the Palestinians under Egyptian or Jordanian trusteeship.

In 1964, the Arab League had set up the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the platform to fight for the Palestinian cause, but till 1967 it remained a moribund institution, while the Palestine Liberation Army only existed on paper. But, separate from the Arab states, a group of Palestinians headed by a young engineer, Yasser Arafat, set up their own activist organization, Fatah, in Kuwait in 1959.

After the 1967 war, the Palestinians freed themselves from the control of Arab states and decided to pursue their interests through their own resources. Fatah joined the PLO and, in February 1969, Arafat became chairman of the PLO, the position he held till his passing away in 2004.

Jordan

From 1968, Fatah began operations against the Israelis from Jordanian territory. These hit-and-run operations did little damage to the Israelis, but invited harsh reprisals. In the absence of any significant achievement, the ambush of Israeli soldiers at the village of Karamah in March 1968, in which twenty-eight Israeli soldiers were killed, was touted as a great victory, despite the fact that 116 Palestinians and sixty-one Jordanians had been killed as well. Its significance was that Arab fighters had steadfastly faced the Israelis and had proven that Israel was not invulnerable.

The Karamah episode boosted the status of the Fatah and brought in hundreds of new fighters. It increased the number of operations against Israel from fifty-five in 1968, to 199 in 1969, and 279 in early 1970. However, the presence of Palestinian fighters became, first, an irritant, and

then a threat to Jordan. The fighters, describing themselves as *fidayeen* (martyrs), began to intrude into Jordan's civic life with arrogant and aggressive behaviour. Often, they showed themselves as hostile to Hashemite rule and contemptuous of its armed forces; as Kerr notes, by the end of 1968, 'they represented a political force parallel to that of the Hashemite monarchy'.⁵⁰

Many of these provocations were the handiwork of the more radical sections of the Palestinian movement, particularly the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), led by George Habash. Some of the acts committed by this organization included spectacular aircraft hijackings and hostage-taking that tainted the image of Palestinians in Western opinion, and they were branded as 'terrorists'. The PFLP also publicly asserted its aim to overthrow the monarchy and use Jordan as the base against Israel.

Provoked beyond endurance, on 17 September 1970, King Hussain ordered his soldiers to attack the Palestinians. Nursing deep grievances for earlier humiliations, Jordan's armed forces were ruthless in their assault, which lasted over ten days. A ceasefire was arranged on 28 September with Nasser's personal intervention.

In this conflict, referred to as 'Black September', about 3,000 Palestinian fighters and civilians had been killed, several thousand injured, and most of the camps housing their refugees were destroyed. The bulk of the fighters were expelled from Jordan, and those in remaining pockets were hunted down in coming months. The Jordanian army, it has been noted, killed more Palestinians than Israel had done in the 1967 conflict.⁵¹

Lebanon

The French had left behind a fragile state order in 1943, one that was based on 'confessional' quotas and privileged the Christian communities, even though the Muslims (with the Druze) outnumbered the Christians from the 1950s. This arrangement was challenged in a civil conflict in May–July 1958 when a Maronite militia, known as *Phalange*, fought the mainly Muslim Socialist National Front (SNF), led by Kamal Jumblatt. The US

intervened with 14,300 troops, with the political status quo being restored after the appointment of the moderate army commander, Fuad Chehab, as president.

What changed the Lebanese scenario was the arrival of about 300,000 Palestinian refugees into the country. After the 'Black September' events in Jordan, Lebanon became the operational headquarters of the PLO, even as the Palestinian refugee camps became more militarized. While the Christians saw the Palestinians as encroaching on their national sovereignty, the Muslims viewed their presence as a national duty owed to fellow Arabs.

The Palestinian camps in south Lebanon were used to mount operations on Israeli targets and hence, all of south Lebanon suffered from Israeli reprisals. Many of the people from this area resettled in shanty towns in Beirut. The Palestinian presence was only a catalyst for the impending conflict. At its centre was the Muslim desire to go in for normal democratic politics in place of the outdated sectarian arrangement, while the Christians were anxious to retain Lebanon's identity as the only 'Christian' state in West Asia.

Civil conflict in Lebanon began on 13 April 1975, with an attack by the Phalange on Palestinian camps in East Beirut. The PLO united forces with Kamal Jumblatt and were ranged against the forces of Camille Chamoun and the Maronite militia of Bashir Gemayel. The Christians demanded the expulsion of the Palestinians before any fresh political changes could be discussed.

In June 1976, Syria sent its troops into Lebanon to protect the Christian fighters. President al Assad's logic was that a Muslim triumph in the fighting would encourage Israel to intervene, avowedly to protect the Christians; once in Lebanon, the Israelis would turn on Syria, its real target. Thus, its entry on the side of the Christians saved Syria itself.⁵²

Other observers, of course, saw the entry of Syrian forces into Lebanon as an affirmation of Syria's traditional claim on the country, and reassert its old vision of 'Greater Syria'. Partly to resist these Syrian aspirations, King Khalid of Saudi Arabia convened a mini-summit in Riyadh on 18 October 1976. A ceasefire was agreed upon along with the stationing of a 30,000-

strong Arab peacekeeping force. The PLO was directed to withdraw to its allotted areas. However, other countries hardly sent any troops, and thus, Syrian troops continued to be the dominant presence in the country.⁵³

Between April and October 1976, there was a short-lived cessation of hostilities – till then, 30,000 people had died and 70,000 were wounded in a country of just over 3 million.

Oil in West Asia

Before we end our survey of West Asian affairs at the end of the 1970s, an overview of matters relating to oil would be useful here – as Rogan tells us, ‘... oil more than any other commodity has come to define Arab wealth and power in the modern age’.⁵⁴ Oil, as the two world wars had shown, was a strategic asset and crucial for military success. It was also the essential fuel to energize the global economy, being indispensable to power recovery in Europe after the devastation of the Second World War.

The abundance of this resource in WANA provided the producing countries with the wealth to transform their physical infrastructure and the well-being of their people through access to education and health facilities they had never known before. It also provided the ruling regimes with the ability to co-opt their populations into the authoritarian order and silence the demand for political reform; education, health, employment and enhanced quality of life substituted for popular participation in the political order.

Oil also imparted to the regions a global strategic significance: through the Cold War, it was a US priority to ensure the Soviet Union did not acquire influence in West Asia. At the same time, intra-regional competitions also brought in external role players backing one side or the other, so that these contentions obtained an extraordinary length and ferocity than might have been the case otherwise.

As we have noted above, oil was discovered by Western corporations in different West Asian countries on the basis of ‘concessions’ – legal arrangements that allowed the companies to prospect for oil in designated

territorial spaces for specific periods, develop the infrastructure for storage, transport and refining of oil when discovered, and then market it in different parts of the world. The rulers concerned were given annual royalties, while the companies controlled the production and marketing, including setting the price and retaining a large part of the profits.

These arrangements were generally fair and worked well up to the 1940s. The oil companies assumed all the risks involved in exploring, they worked in arduous conditions, brought to the enterprise a unique technical expertise, and bore all the expenses of infrastructure development. The rulers, on their part, were generally satisfied with the revenues received, for they now got more money than their economies had generated earlier, with no expenditure on their part.

The situation began to change from the early 1950s. Now that infrastructure was in place and the availability of oil had been confirmed in the regions concerned, the companies began to reap enormous profits as compared to the royalties paid to the rulers. Again, in several instances, what the British and American companies paid their own governments far exceeded what was paid to the governments of the producing countries.

For instance, Aramco in Saudi Arabia, made up of four US companies, enjoyed three times the profits paid to the Saudi government in 1949. Again, the taxes these companies paid the US government was \$4 million more than what they paid to the Saudi exchequer. After prolonged negotiations, the companies agreed to a 50:50 sharing of profits, starting with Saudi Arabia in December 1950 and followed by other West Asian states.

A more serious problem emerged in the country where oil had first been discovered in the region – Iran. Hatred of the AIOC and of the British in general had become one of the most important manifestations of Iranian nationalism before and after the Second World War. The distinguished global energy expert Daniel Yergin writes:

Never had so much malevolence been attributed to a so rapidly declining power. The English were regarded as almost supernatural

devils, controlling and manipulating the entire nation. ... But the detestation centered, in particular, on the largest industrial employer in Iran, ... and the all-too-tangible symbol of the intrusion of the modern foreign world – the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.⁵⁵

Here, too, the distribution of profits and taxes was viewed as clearly discriminatory: between 1945 and 1950, AIOC made profits of £250 million, but gave royalties of only £90 million to Iran. In 1949, a group of nationalist politicians formed the National Front, a secular nationalist group that demanded from the shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, the ending of martial law and press freedom. Their most prominent member was Mohammed Mosaddeq (1882–1967) who made nationalization of the oil industry his priority.

The majlis passed the oil nationalization law in April 1951 and forced the shah to invite Mohammed Mosaddeq to become prime minister. The British contested the law at the International Court of Justice and later the UNSC, and imposed an embargo on the export of Iranian oil till the matter was settled. Mosaddeq responded by rousing popular support through strident nationalist appeals and breaking diplomatic ties with the UK in 1952.

Britain took a firm position in the face of the challenge from Mosaddeq, since it feared that there would be similar demands to nationalize British assets in other countries in the region, including the Suez Canal. An effective approach the British adopted was to win over US support by playing on the latter's anti-communist paranoia.

The well-known authority on Iranian history and politics Ali Ansari has pointed out that this outreach to the US and shaping a Western Alliance against Mosaddeq encouraged a 'certain circularity' in positions, in that Western concerns relating to communist influence on Mosaddeq made the latter even more obdurate and autocratic, and pushed him further towards the left, particularly the Iranian communists in the Tudeh party.⁵⁶ As the US moved closer to the British, Mosaddeq moved closer to the communists, hoping to pressure the Americans to extend to Iran the financial assistance

it needed – given that there had been no oil revenues for two years and the country was facing economic collapse. But this had the opposite effect of convincing the US about the imminent communist takeover of the country and the need to remove him from office.

The British and American intelligence agencies prepared a detailed plan for Mosaddeq's overthrow through 1952. The plan was implemented successfully on 19 August 1953, bringing an end to the oil nationalization crisis. In September 1954, a fresh oil agreement was signed between the newly set up National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) and a consortium of British and American oil companies, and Iranian oil began to be exported from October once again.

This new contract introduced some significant changes in oil contracting: it ended the system of 'concessions' and conceded that the oil belonged to the country, represented by the NIOC. At this point, though, the Anglo-US oil consortium remained an independent entity in terms of buying the oil from the national company and selling it in the global market.

The other change the Iran arrangements reflected was the premier position of the US in Iranian oil and in Iran in general and, very soon, the politics of West Asia. This expanding US presence took place in tandem with the increasing output of West Asian oil: it went from 1.1 million barrels per day (MMB/D) in 1948 to 18.2 MMB/D in 1972, overtaking the US to become the largest oil-producing region in the world.⁵⁷

As the 1950s ended, Arab producers began to experience the limitations of the 50:50 sharing of profits agreement. This was because international companies would occasionally cut the posted price of oil in response to market conditions without consulting the producer governments. British Petroleum decided on a 10 per cent cut in 1959, while Standard Oil announced in August 1960 a 7 per cent cut.

The then Saudi oil minister, Abdullah al Turayqi, encouraged the principal producer countries to put together a grouping of producer states to protect their interests from the arbitrary actions of the oil companies. On 14 September 1960, five countries – Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and

Venezuela – met in Baghdad and announced the setting up of OPEC. It was formally inaugurated in January 1961 in Geneva, and moved its headquarters to Vienna in 1965. Other WANA states that joined it later were: Qatar (1961), Libya (1962), Abu Dhabi (1967; membership transferred to the UAE in 1974), and Algeria (1969).

Reflections

We will pause our survey of West Asian developments at 1979 – a momentous year which effected significant changes in the content and direction of regional affairs which reverberate to this day. This short breather gives us a chance to reflect on the happenings in West Asia in the thirty-odd years since the end of the Second World War.

Much of what happened in the region up to this date is linked with Palestine and its people. The period began with the naqba (catastrophe) of the 1948 war, moved twenty years later to the bigger tragedy of 1967 when all prospects of Palestinian redemption was permanently lost, and ended with the Arab states resolutely moving away from the vision of transnational Arab fraternity. They shifted then to assertions of narrower commitments centring on the state – the very states that had been so casually drawn on paper by Sykes and Picot, and then given life by the Versailles Agreements during to suit the immediate aspirations and interests of the two imperial powers already experiencing slow decay: Britain and France.

The price for these assertions of state sovereignty was again paid by the Palestinians, for they were the ones without a state of their own and their presence, as freedom fighters or refugees, was resented by their hosts. The latter then exercised a self-given right to massacre the people seeking the comfort of proverbial Arab hospitality and the succour of brethren.

As the Palestinians became a lost cause for other Arabs, what did the non-Palestinian Arabs do with their new-found opportunity to shape independent statehood? The carnage of 1967 pulled away Egypt from the broader Arab fold as it replaced the dream of pan-Arabism with the

narrower celebration of the older pharaonic past. This was a cherished memory certainly, but surely it was much too far away to resonate with people desperate for the magic wand of political glory and economic miracle that Nasser briefly waved before them and then faded from history as his people placed on his shoulders alone the blame for the collective failure of the entire community.

Sadat sought peace with Israel and the return of lost territories, so that he could work on his real priorities – the political and economic advancement of Egypt. But the limited ‘victory’ in 1973 was not enough to wrest from Israel, whose soldiers had been a few kilometres from the capitals of Egypt and Syria that October, any real advantage – he got back the Sinai, the Abu Rudeis oilfields and an operational Suez Canal – but lost everything else for the Arabs.

Camp David was a strategic triumph for Israel (and its US partner, the wily Henry Kissinger) since it broke Arab ranks and Israel could now pursue what it really wanted – a united capital, Jerusalem, and space on the West Bank, where its people could settle in substantial numbers. Thus, the Balfour Declaration of 1917 found its final realization sixty years later – as Sadat bowed in prayer at Al-Aqsa in 1977, he bowed not before Allah, but before the State of Israel.

Israel in victory has displayed no magnanimity, no sense of accommodation with its foes; decade after decade, leader after leader, it has insisted on its maximalist claims – insensitive about the privation it inflicts on its Palestinian cousins, unmindful of the hoary wisdom that for triumph to last, it should be clothed in modesty. The sense of long grievance against vast sections of humankind for the pain of the pogrom, the humiliation of the ghetto, the 2,000-year experience of exclusion, and the crowning wound of the Holocaust – all of these have taken away from most Israelis the spirit of moderation, of tolerance, of charity, and placed them and their neighbours in a constant state of insecurity and fear, and the constant dread of war.

For the Arab person there is another torment – the experience of defeat and disaster has to be endured with the torment of tyranny. Whether

monarchical or republican, every ruler who occupied the throne in WANA has inaugurated a long reign of terror against his own people. Some rulers have been benign on occasion, but every velvet glove has camouflaged a mailed fist that has been displayed at the first hint of dissatisfaction, the first sign of dissent. And, entire families, communities and coteries have paid the price for disagreement or protest.

Arab nationalism was the panacea for the Arab predicament, for the loss of value and direction. But, as the British scholar of West Asian history Frederick Anscombe reminds us, its most ‘enduring achievement has been the creation of a military-security services network’.⁵⁸ As regimes moved away from the ideal of nationalism, the value and infrastructure they retained was ‘military autocracy’ that became an instrument for tyranny at home, rather than for defence of national interests abroad.

Hence, the Arab state, Nazih Ayubi told us twenty-five years ago, is a hard state, even a fierce state, but it is not a strong state. It has no capacity to move from the coercive level into something more elevated, more redeeming – the space of the moral and the intellectual.⁵⁹ This autocracy, alleviated by no defining value or belief system, shaped by no consistently held ideology, has ‘stunted any hope of political, social or economic development in the region’.⁶⁰

State repression, in tandem with consistent failures at home and abroad, has encouraged the search for alternative models. This had already commenced in 1967, when the ecstasy of transnational fraternity had collapsed ‘battered and benumbed’⁶¹ in the Sinai, the Golan Heights, West Bank and Jerusalem. After the 1967 debacle, the Arabs, Hourani pointed out, asked themselves if there was ‘something rotten in their societies and in the moral system’, and wondered where redemption could be found – they asked the same questions of themselves that their ancestors had done a century and a half earlier, when they had first experienced the encroachments and annexations of Western powers on their lands, their beliefs, their culture.⁶²

Their answers have been as diverse as they had been in earlier times: the need to depend on their own values, rather than rely on foreign

prescriptions; root out faith from public life or reform it thoroughly; and pursue a revolutionary path that would bring rulers and the masses on to the same platform.⁶³ In the face of the shame of defeat and the humiliation of state repression, the answer that appeared most self-evident was Islam – thoroughly reformed, wholly modernized, reshaped to be relevant and capable of responding to the contemporary predicament, but still the ancestral faith founded on morality, social justice and public welfare.

Sayyid Qutb, the ideologue of radical Islam, saw the opportunity most vividly and presciently noted, ‘The scientific revolution has finished its role, as have ‘nationalism’ and the territorially limited communities which grew up in its age. ... The turn of Islam has come.’⁶⁴

4

The Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979–90)



DESPITE MUCH ANALYSIS AND SCHOLARLY SCRUTINY, IRAN AND, particularly, Islam in Iran continue to remain an enigma for much of the world. Images of ‘mad’ mullahs, angry mobs and the detention of US diplomats in the early period of the blood-soaked revolution remain affixed in the minds of many in the West when they think of this nation – once at the pinnacle of global civilizational achievement – and the question remains the same: why would a nation having enjoyed the fruits of ‘modernity’ and Western secularism shrug them off so cavalierly in the latter part of the twentieth century and adopt the tenets of Islam as the basis of its ‘revolutionary’ political order?

Though a huge quantum of literature has been churned out since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, large sections of Western public opinion continue to be hostile to revolutionary Iran and its leaders for various reasons: its domestic political order that is viewed as dogmatic and intolerant, its overt hostility towards Israel, and its attempts to develop nuclear weapons that would threaten regional, and even global, stability. Arab states have, at the best of times, been most uneasy about their neighbour. Much of their concern emerges from its ‘otherness’ as a major Shia power that is believed to be covertly harbouring hegemonic designs

across West Asia by mobilizing Shia communities in the region and setting up militia groups to take forward its agenda for regional domination.

Persia under Monarchy

Persia, under the Sassanian dynasty (224–651), became Muslim after its armies were defeated by the Arabs at the battle of Qadissiyya in AD 637, but its pre-Islamic achievements in political administration and the diverse aspects of its cultural expression remained intact. In time, it was the Persian model of governance that became the norm in the courts of the Abbasid caliphs and it was Persian cultural achievement that provided richness, grace and finesse to the Arab empire.

The acceptance of Islam in Iran was a relatively easy process, since the religion shared many of the precepts of the earlier Zoroastrian faith in Persia: righteous thought and action, divine judgement, heaven and hell, ‘end of days’, the Messiah. But the process of conversion was still slow, and many Iranians remained non-Muslims for several centuries. The Abbasid court also adopted Sassanian practices, such as the hierarchical system of government (central, provincial, local), the office of the vizier (prime minister) and administrative departments called ‘diwans’.

The Persians under Arab rule cultivated *Shu’ubiyya* (the preservation of their language and culture), which came to be gradually assimilated by the Arabs, achieving what the distinguished authority on Iranian history, Michael Axworthy, has called ‘a cultural reconquest of the Arab conquerors by the Persians’.¹ Thus, the layout of the new city of Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasids, adopted the Persian model of a circular ground plan from Ferozabad in Fars.

As the Abbasid Empire went into slow decline from the ninth century, a number of regional dynasties emerged in the Persian territories. These became centres of Persian cultural revival, particularly in poetry. The great poet of this period was Abulqassem Firdausi (935–1020), the author of the *Shahnameh*. He focused on revitalizing Persian culture by avoiding use of Arabic words, eulogizing pre-Islamic Iranian kings, and even extolling

Zoroastrian heritage. His writings had a strong romantic content: chivalrous heroes, love, loyalty, betrayal, battles, music and feasting. The other great scholar of this period was Omar Khayyam (1048–1124/1129) – mathematician, astronomer and poet – whose *Rubayyat*, freely translated into English by Edward FitzGerald, is widely read and enjoyed today.

After a long period of turmoil following the Mongol invasions in West Asia (1221–58), Iran obtained its own dynasty and empire under the Safavids (1501–1736), founded by Shah Ismail I (1487–1524). After early successes in Azerbaijan and Dagestan, he declared himself King of Persia and brought the whole territory under his rule. He then conquered Armenia, Georgia, Mesopotamia, Syria, the upper Gulf, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and large parts of Anatolia. In 1501, he declared Twelver Shi'ism as the official religion of his territories. Besides having doctrinal significance, this was a deliberate political act: it added sectarian identity to the ethnic distinction the Persians had with their arch-rivals, the Ottomans.

The Safavid rulers maintained a close relationship with the Shia clergy. They provided generous endowments to support religious institutions – shrines, mosques and schools – so that the sect became an integral part of Persian religious, intellectual, cultural and political life.² During the succeeding Qajar dynasty (1785–1925), the Shia clergy shaped an integrated hierarchical structure for themselves based on the level of learning of the cleric, which would qualify him to interpret Islam's basic texts; these were *hojjatoleslam* (proof of Islam) and *ayatollah* (sign of god). The most learned among the clerics were referred to as *marja-e-taqlid* (source of emulation), a supreme guide for other clerics and ordinary Muslims in matters of faith.

The clerical order in Iran enjoyed wealth, social status and local authority. In towns, the clerics had close ties with traders and craftsmen, even marrying into prominent business families. From the late nineteenth century, as Qajar rule weakened in the face of Western economic and political encroachments, the clerics became the principal sources of dissent against the increasingly intrusive demands of Western powers and their local commercial representatives. Hence, unlike most other Muslim

countries, Iran developed a unique tradition of an activist role of clerics in national politics.

Thus, joint trader–clerical demonstrations in 1905-06 yielded an elected assembly and Iran’s first Constitution, which declared that the ruler derived his sovereignty from the people and ruled as the trustee of the peoples’ interests. It recognized the status of the clergy through the powers given to clerical courts and its right to scrutinize laws to affirm their conformity with Sharia. Though the assembly was forcibly closed in 1908, the Constitution remained as a model in people’s minds and was frequently invoked later to rebuke autocratic rulers.

In February 1921, Reza Khan, commander of the Persian Cossack Brigade, staged a coup d’état, and formally proclaimed himself Reza Shah Pahlavi in October 1925, setting up the new Pahlavi dynasty (1925–79). He focused on ending clerical influence, ethnic differences and tribal uprisings, and on promoting Western-style education, emancipating women and setting up modern economic structures, with state factories, banks, communications networks, and retail outlets.

From 1932, as oil revenues increased, his rule saw major road and railway projects, modern educational institutions and industrial plants. In 1935, he formally changed the name of his country to Iran, the ancient name used by the people themselves. However, his modernizing initiatives, particularly those relating to women, alienated the clergy.

Reza Shah was a harsh ruler who brooked no dissent, imprisoning and executing several clerics and secular intellectuals who criticized his authoritarian rule. By the 1930s, he had alienated large sections of his people – the clerics, the traders and the intelligentsia. The clerics were dismayed at their reduced role in the country, the traders were unhappy about his economic reforms that privileged state monopolies, and the intellectuals disliked his ruthlessness towards them.

In August 1941, Iran was occupied by British and Russian forces in response to the shah’s declaration of neutrality in the war, which would have denied the Allies a transport corridor to Russia. He was forced to

abdicate in favour of his son, Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, in September 1941, and go into exile in South Africa.

After the war, as the new ruler attempted to establish himself, Iranian politics was dominated by two influences – oil and the persona of its prime minister, Mohammed Mosaddeq. The issue that linked them was the nationalization of the oil industry. Mosaddeq put together the National Front, a coalition of individuals and groups espousing the liberal values of the earlier constitutional movement. He became prime minister in April 1951 on the platform of nationalization of the oil sector. On this, he enjoyed the support of diverse sections of Iranian opinion – liberal and traditional, the clerics and the traders. Later, he brought on board Iran's communist party as well, the Tudeh Party.

Mosaddeq's other interests were to provide Iran with a constitutional monarchy and modernize its economy, starting with wide-ranging land reforms. This agenda began to corrode the coalition that backed him, so that his dependence on Tudeh increased, giving the impression of expanding communist influence in the country's political order – a matter of deep concern for the US and its Western allies.

The passing of the Oil Nationalization Bill by the majlis on 28 April 1951 suffused the country with nationalistic fervour, but the nationalization programme was firmly resisted by the British government, the majority shareholder in the AIOC. Britain declared the nationalization illegal and initiated a global boycott of Iranian oil, while Mosaddeq projected it as a 'historic struggle' and a 'holy struggle' to liberate the East from Western tutelage.³ The British worked on the Americans against Mosaddeq's powerful messages by playing on their concern relating to communist influence, fusing this with safeguarding Western commercial interests.

British efforts in Washington were successful – a joint plan was developed by their intelligence agencies to overthrow Mosaddeq. In fact, all details of the plan were finalized nearly a year before it was operationalized on 19 August 1953.⁴ It was implemented with the help of Iranian army officers, sections of the clergy, and the (reluctant) support of the shah. Clerics were upset with the government giving women the right to vote and

lifting the ban on alcohol. Ayatollah Abol Qassem Kashani, earlier a supporter of Mosaddeq, left the National Front, and set up a separate Islamic grouping in the majlis.⁵

This overthrow of a democratically elected government by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) continues to poison the Iranian view of the US's role in Iranian affairs. Though the event is little-remembered by later US leaders, 'it remains a persistent negative reality in the modern Iranian political culture', as Ansari has pointed out.⁶

A number of myths have been built up around this episode, largely to support narratives developed by diverse forces competing with each other in the Iranian political arena later on. In Iran, the main disputes have been between the secular nationalists, who believe that, with Mosaddeq's fall, Iran was denied a chance to shape a liberal democratic order, and the religious groups, who, on the other hand, claim that their role had been crucial in elevating Mosaddeq and then justify their withdrawal from him on grounds of doctrinal principle. Western powers, of course, explain Mosaddeq's overthrow as a Cold War imperative, adding, for good measure, that he was not really a democrat; hence, they cannot be held responsible for the body blow delivered to Iran's nascent democracy.

Ansari, very rightly, has no time for this self-serving prevarication: while perhaps not a typical modern-day grassroots democrat, Mosaddeq did reflect Western liberal norms in his intellectual discourse and political practice to a far greater extent than the West-backed monarchical autocracy that ruled Iran after him and the Western alignments with authoritarian rulers in general across much of the developing world.⁷ The US remains condemned in Iranian eyes for this gross travesty against a democratically elected leader.

Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi in Power

With the fall of Mosaddeq, the shah now enjoyed untrammelled authority, supported by substantial oil revenues. The period saw considerable economic growth, averaging 7 per cent per annum, besides a massive

expansion in logistical infrastructure and educational and health services.⁸ Much of this was achieved in close partnership with the US: according to an estimate in 1961, from 1952, the US had provided Iran with grants and loans worth \$1.13 billion, of which \$631 million was for economic assistance and \$504 million was for military support.⁹

In 1962, the shah presented to his people a six-point plan for economic reform – referred to collectively as the ‘White Revolution’, to distinguish it from the communist ‘Red Revolution’. This included: land reform, privatization of state industry, suffrage for women, profit-sharing for workers, a literacy corps to educate the rural population, and nationalization of forests.

Land reform was the most far-reaching initiative: it called for the break-up of large estates, and the redistribution of land among small and landless peasants.¹⁰ In this process, about 2 million peasants became landowners, though there were complaints that many holdings were too small to be viable for mechanized farming. This, plus the fact that about a million farmers remained landless, led to a major shift of people to urban centres so that by 1976 Iran had become 46 per cent urban.

Land reform brought the shah into direct confrontation with the landed aristocracy and the clergy, who owned large tracts of land within Iran. Several clerics viewed the forcible expropriation of land as against Islamic principles. The opposition to the White Revolution was led by a then little-known cleric in Qom, Sayyid Ruhollah Khomeini. The direct opposition of the clergy, especially from Khomeini, who launched personal attacks on the shah, and the lifting of the ban on the National Front brought Iran to a halt as daily strikes become the norm.

Avoiding taking up issues like land reform and women’s suffrage, which could have proved divisive, Khomeini spoke about mass corruption, the alleged rigging of elections, the shah’s proximity with foreign powers, especially Israel – issues that resonated with popular opinion. Khomeini’s leadership of the anti-government movement pushed him to the top level of Shia doctrinal hierarchy as ayatollah and the highest echelons of political dissent.

This was affirmed when, in October 1964, the US sought ratification of the Immunities Bill, which would grant immunity to all US government personnel in the country from the application of local laws. For most Iranians, this bill recalled the humiliating ‘capitulations’ that had been imposed on the Qajar rulers by Western powers, which had been dismantled by the shah’s father in 1928. On 27 October, in Qom, Khomeini, in a fiery sermon, castigated the government as ‘traitors, guilty of high treason’.¹¹ A week later, he was arrested and deported. He lived in Turkey for a few months and then made his way to Najaf, in Iraq, where he remained till 1978.

Free from clerical dissent, the shah could now concentrate on economic reform. In the years, growth averaged at 8 per cent, while the non-oil sector grew at 8.6 per cent. Industrial production accelerated with the setting up of thousands of new factories, supported by the rise of new professionally qualified communities.¹²

Buoyed by these economic successes, the shah became even more autocratic. He did away with the existing two political parties and replaced them with a single party, the Rastakhiz (Resurgence) party that became the instrument for coercion across the country – particularly of traders and the clergy. To intimidate the latter, an effort was made to dismantle the existing Shia hierarchy with a new set up that would be loyal to the shah. This was to be achieved through closer regulation of religious endowments, the setting up of a religious corps to send officially approved messages to the countryside, and the use of vetted clerics to deliver Friday sermons.

In a symbolic gesture to distance the nation from its Islamic moorings, the shah created a new calendar which replaced the Hegira calendar – now, Year One would commence from the accession of Cyrus the Great, so that 1976 became year 2535.

Within Iran, besides the clerics who were the shah’s critics, organizations emerged from the secular side as well. They were: the Sazeman-e- Mujahedeen-e-Khalq, known by its English acronym, MEK, and the Sazeman-e-Cherikha-ye-Fedayen-e-Khalq, known as Marxist Fedayen or just Fedayen. Both organizations believed in armed struggle to

evict the shah, on the lines of the ongoing struggles in Cuba and Algeria. That many of the young and educated Iranians joined these parties reflected the profiles of those youth agitating in different parts of the world in the 1960s and 1970s. Both of them carried out sporadic acts of violence, but were gradually broken by the shah's security forces; by 1976-77, they had ceased to be effective forces. They were rejuvenated later when the revolution started and played a major role in the fall of the shah.

Another group that straddled religious and secular politics was the Freedom Movement, founded in 1961 by Mehdi Bazargan and Ayatollah Mahmud Taleqani. They advocated a liberal, democratic order that was accommodative of Islamic principles. The movement maintained low-key anti-shah activity at home through publications, but it was particularly effective abroad – in the US and France. Here, its efforts were supported by members of the overseas Iranian community, that, in France at that time, included those who would later become prominent in the early period of the revolution – Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, Ebrahim Yazdi and Sadegh Qotbzadeh. Due to their affiliation with political Islam, the Freedom Front leaders kept in touch with Khomeini in exile and were able to link the cleric with the non-religious groups opposing the shah in 1978-79.

In 1976-77, Khomeini and his supporters also set up a group of clerics to coordinate activity against the shah – the Combatant Clergy Association. This group, too, included clerics who would be at the helm of Iranian affairs both during and after the revolution – Ali Khamenei, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammed Beheshti and Mohammed Reza Mahdavi-Kani.

Influence of the Intelligentsia

The half century from the accession of Reza Khan to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was a period of great intellectual ferment in Iran, when writers with diverse views jostled in public space to influence popular opinion. Ahmad Kasravi (1890–1946) was a secular nationalist and constitutionalist, and a sharp critic of what he saw as the backwardness of the clergy whom he held largely responsible for the failures of his country. Sadegh Hedayat (1903–

51) was heavily influenced by contemporary Western intellectuals. A fierce nationalist, he became a critic of Islam and was sympathetic to the Tudeh party. Mohammed Ali Jamalzadeh (1892–1997) was a satirist, who poked fun at the clergy and also opposed foreign interventions in Iranian affairs.

These early writers were in the vanguard of intellectuals who, in diverse ways, opened up debates relating to national politics and culture, and prepared the ground for the next generation to shape the path to revolution.

The most popular voice that emerged from the next generation of intellectuals was that of Jalal Al-e-Ahmad (1923–69). From an early age, he was attracted to Marxism, but disliked the influence of the Soviet Union on the Tudeh party. In 1962, his seminal work, *Gharbzadegi*, was published. Translated as ‘Westoxication’ or ‘West-strickenness’, the work severely criticized Iranians for ‘aping a tribe of foreigners, with unfamiliar customs and culture, which has no roots in our own cultural environment’.¹³ He called for the shaping of an ‘authentic’ national culture based on its own values and traditions, rather than the uncritical acceptance of imported ideas.

He was, for a time, a political activist. A strong supporter of Mosaddeq, he helped found the Toilers Party, one of the components of the [National Front](#), and then, in 1952, a new party called the Third Force. After the overthrow of Mosaddeq in 1953, Al-e-Ahmad was imprisoned for several years, after which he announced his withdrawal from party politics. Later, he came to view Iran’s Shia Islam as the genuine expression of Iranian culture, and praised the clergy, who, he claimed, had hung on to traditional Iranian values and culture. In the early 1960s, he backed Khomeini’s attacks on the shah and gave wide publicity to his speech against the immunity law.

Al-e-Ahmad in turn influenced Khomeini, who, in 1971, echoed his thinking when he said, ‘The poisonous culture of [imperialism](#) [is] penetrating to the depths of towns and villages throughout the Muslim world, displacing the culture of the [Qur’an](#), recruiting our youth en masse to the service of foreigners and imperialists...’¹⁴

The [Iranian Revolution](#) later adopted independence in all areas of life from both the Soviet and the Western world as its central creed.

Ali Shariati (1933–77) was perhaps the greatest Iranian intellectual of the twentieth century. Familiar with Iran’s Islamic traditions, including mysticism, Shariati had deep knowledge of diverse Western thinkers, as also his contemporaries in France, such as Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre, when he was pursuing his doctorate at the Sorbonne (1959–64). On his return to Iran in 1964, he taught at various institutions and was frequently arrested by the shah’s police. His last imprisonment was in, followed by house arrest for another two years. He was then allowed to go to Britain, where he died in 1977. Fearing violent demonstrations against the shah if his body were to return to Iran, his family arranged for his burial at the shrine of Sayyida Zainab, outside Damascus.

Shariati’s thinking was based on a marriage of Shia doctrine with revolution. He distinguished between ‘Black Shi’ism’, which he also called ‘Safavid Shi’ism’, that was rigid, doctrinal and superstitious, and based on deference to monarchy, from ‘Red Shi’ism’ that was founded on the ideology of social justice and resistance to oppression. On these lines, he distinguished between those clerics who work for the poor and those who issue fatwas (formal Islamic ruling or interpretation given by a mufti) and support the capitalists; the latter, to him, were right-wingers in the service of capitalism.

Using Shia symbolism, he insisted that the return of the twelfth imam should not be passively awaited; his return should be actively expedited by fighting for [social justice](#), ‘even to the point of embracing [martyrdom](#)’; in his ringing words, ‘every day is [Ashoura](#), every place is the [Karbala](#)’¹⁵ (a reference to the annual ten-day commemoration by Shias globally of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain at Karbala in AD 680). Shariati opposed the removal of religious faith from the struggle against imperialist oppression. The struggle, he believed, had to be based on one’s cultural identity, and, in many societies, religion provided the basis of cultural identity.

Shariati’s legacy remains contested territory. During the early days of the Islamic Revolution, his portraits were paraded through the streets by

joyful demonstrators alongside those of Khomeini. Since then, the clerics in power have been careful to stress that Shariati was a product of his times and played a major role in enlightening the generation of his period.

They also acknowledge his role in using faith to mobilize a mass support base for political change, seizing power and then shaping an 'Islamic' revolution in the country where governance would be based on Islamic tenets and governmental authority – political, economic, military and foreign affairs – would be exercised by clerics. What seems missing from this acknowledgement is that the Islamic Revolution that Shariati prepared ground for was to be founded on an alliance of pluralist Islam with secular nationalists, which is what in fact led to the fall of the shah in 1979. However, the Islamic Republic that finally emerged from the shah's departure was entirely the handiwork of Ayatollah Khomeini. It is, in the words of a commentator, a polity 'exhibiting many features that he [Shariati] had characterised and thoroughly rejected as "Safavid Shi'ism".'¹⁶

In the battle of ideas, the thinking that would finally take centre stage and, indeed, shape the revolution and the Islamic Republic was that of Ayatollah Khomeini. In exile in Najaf from 1965, Khomeini developed his ideas on Islamic government while maintaining close links with his networks in Iran. From 1970, he gave lectures in Najaf that were later put together as a book titled, *Islamic Government*. Here, he set out the central idea of the Islamic Republic – the vilayet-e-faqih (the guardianship of Islamic law). He argued that since Muslim societies were governed by Sharia, in the absence of the 'Hidden Imam', only a mujtahid – one learned in Islamic law – was qualified to interpret the law and guide its application in the political order. Following this, the rightful ruler could not be a hereditary monarch; he could only be a cleric selected by the ulema as 'supreme leader'.

Khomeini said the decline of Islam had begun about 300 years earlier at the hands of external, imperialist forces that had 'plotted and campaigned against Islam by various means', while using 'agents' in national institutions – education, religion and the government – to subvert the faith

and take control of the state.¹⁷ This subversion included persuading Muslims that their faith had little to say on issues of political norms and governance, and was only concerned with matters of ritual purity. What was needed to correct this distortion was to install an Islamic government – one based on Islamic law.

As Axworthy has noted, Khomeini's book did not provide any details of what form this government would take. He speculates that Khomeini might have been seeking, at this early stage, to retain some freedom of action to deal with situations as they arose later, or, possibly, he just had no idea then what the shape and details of the Constitution should be.¹⁸ In any case, following the publication of *Islamic Government*, Khomeini's demand was for the removal of the shah and the installation of an Islamic order in the country.

Towards Revolution

The countdown to the revolution in January-February 1979 can be traced back to a date a year earlier: on 7 January 1978, the shah approved the publication of a scurrilous article attacking Khomeini and the clergy in general in the pro-government paper, *Ettela'at*. Titled 'Black and White Imperialism', the article questioned Khomeini's Iranian ancestry (his grandfather having been born in India), accused him of being a poet (and, hence, a cleric of dubious standing), and, more seriously, that he was plotting with the British and the communists to overthrow the shah's government.

This article ignited popular nationwide demonstrations. The commemoration of those killed in police action every forty days became a recurring nightmare for the government; as Axworthy says, 'The forty-day rhythm continued, breathing in indignation, breathing out more demonstrations and intensified radicalism like a great revolutionary lung.'¹⁹

In June 1978, the forty-day rhythm paused. However, a fire in a cinema house in Abadan on 19 August that killed about 370 persons was blamed on the shah's security forces. It reignited popular anger and demonstrations,

with nearly half-a-million people being seen in Tehran after Eid prayers on 4 September. These large demonstrations, often involving rioting and looting, now became a regular pattern during the balance of the year, along with savage attacks by the security forces. On 8 September, the police opened fire on demonstrators in Tehran, killing several hundred – the day is commemorated today as ‘Black Friday’.

The Paris-based scholar of Iranian history, literature and religion, Yann Richard describes the heady fervour of this period thus: ‘No open letter, no book, nor any speech of nostalgic Mosaddeq supporters ever attained the power to mobilize the population like the leaders of the mosques and the preachers of Ramadan.’²⁰ Thus, violence beget more violence as the country descended into chaos: there were numerous instances of arson in Tehran in early November, the sole demand from the street being that the shah should leave.

On 5 November, the shah addressed his nation. He pleaded for calm and promised basic freedoms, free elections and the restoration of the Constitution of 1906. He assured his people that he had heard ‘the message of your revolution’. Ansari has noted that, during this period of grave crisis, the shah was guilty of ‘a fatal inaction and inability to lead’.²¹ Axworthy says that while the shah did react quickly to events, he just did not know what to do, largely because he did not understand what was happening.²² Not known to the public then, Khomeini set up his Council of the Islamic Revolution to coordinate action against the shah and prepare to take power at the right time.

The demonstrations continued in December; on 11 December, over a million persons took part in protests in Tehran. According to a publicly announced manifesto, the shah had to go, Khomeini would be the new leader, and Islamic government would be established. Other points made were that the armed forces should unite with the people, exiles should return, minorities should be protected, agriculture revived and the poor given social justice.²³

On 31 December, the shah appointed Shapur Bakhtiar, a member of the National Front, as prime minister and said he would leave the country on

health grounds. Within a week, Bakhtiar announced his cabinet and some liberal reforms – lifting of the martial law, free elections and shutting down of the much-disliked intelligence service, SAVAK. Khomeini now publicly announced his Council of the Islamic Revolution, thus swiftly undercutting his secular allies, the Freedom Movement and the National Front. He also refused to recognize the Bakhtiar government.

On 16 January 1979, the shah and his family flew out of Tehran, creating a surge of joy across the country, with demonstrations over the next few days of over a million participants. On 1 February, Khomeini returned to Tehran. On 5 February, he nominated Mehdi Bazargan as the prime minister of a provisional government. Khomeini made his agenda clear when he said that the government would be ‘based on the Sharia’ and that ‘opposing this government means opposing the Sharia of Islam ... Revolt against God’s government is a revolt against God. Revolt against God is blasphemy.’²⁴

On 11 February, twenty-seven generals and other military commanders declared that in the matter of Bakhtiar–Bazargan governments, they would remain neutral. Without military support to back his government, Bakhtiar left office and went into hiding. The revolution was now complete.

The Islamic Republic

While the revolution had toppled the shah and brought an end to monarchy in Iran, its ‘Islamic’ character was not preordained. This was achieved largely as a result of initiatives emanating from Khomeini as he worked to instil his concept of vilayet-e-faqih into the political order, in which he had become the most influential figure. The moves that Khomeini made to achieve his vision, in the face of numerous challenges and obstacles, attest to the clarity and strength of his conviction, his ability to manipulate adroitly the levers of power to his advantage, and, above all, his ruthlessness in pursuing his goal. As Axworthy has astutely noted, he achieved his objectives ‘partly by letting others take responsibility for government, and by allowing *them* to be displaced’.²⁵

In February 1979, he set up the Islamic Republican Party, which would be the organized political platform to promote clerical interests in the prevailing turbulence and robust competition. All the prominent clerics who had been with him over the years now became senior office holders in this party – Beheshti, Rafsanjani and Ali Khamenei, along with the non-cleric, Mir Hossein Musavi.

Khomeini also ensured that his side had street power (and capacity for violence, when required) by organizing three bodies: the Mojahedin for the Islamic Revolution; the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), to protect the revolution from a military coup; and the Hezbollah, who would use strong-arm tactics on the streets. The cadres were recruited from the country's poorest classes who could be relied on to remain totally loyal to Khomeini and his Islamic vision.

The lethal instrument immediately used by the revolutionary vanguard was that of judicial executions – summary trials and swift executions of persons associated with the former regime. By October 1979, several hundred persons had been put to death, including senior generals and the former prime minister, Amir Abbas Hoveida.

With strong institutional support in place within the first few weeks, Khomeini commenced the Islamization of the revolution with the issue of the new name of the country: despite several suggestions that the 'democratic' and 'popular' character of the revolution be reflected in the name, he remained steadfast that the choice before the people should be Islamic Republic or 'monarchy'. In the referendum at the end of March 1979, 98.2 per cent of the vote backed the former, which thus became the new name of the country – 'Islamic Republic of Iran'.

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic posed the next challenge. The provisional government of Mehdi Bazargan prepared a draft in which the Islamic element was relatively mild; the country thus seemed poised to obtain a secular and democratic order. However, both Bazargan and his senior associate (and a close associate of Khomeini), Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, insisted that the draft be debated and approved by a body akin to a

constituent assembly. It was agreed that this role would be played by an Assembly of Experts made up of seventy-three elected members.

The clerics now took control – fifty-five clerics were elected to this assembly. Khomeini declared that the Constitution should be wholly Islamic and that non-clerics should not join the discussions relating to Islamic matters in the text. After detailed examination, the assembly approved the institution of the vilayet-e-faqih who would be ‘just and pious’ and ‘courageous, resourceful, and possessed of administrative ability’. He would enjoy sweeping powers – the appointment of heads of the armed forces and of the IRGC; ordering military mobilization; declaring war and peace; and vetting candidates for the presidency.

The Constitution then institutionalized ‘Islam’ and the sovereignty of God with ‘His right to legislate, and the necessity of submission to His commands’.²⁶ It added that the Islamic Republic had the duty to promote ‘the merging and union of all Muslim peoples’ in the political, economic and cultural domains, and that the IRGC would have ‘the ideological mission of jihad in God’s path’.

For the rest, the document provided for the normal institutions of government – directly elected president and assembly, both, however, subordinate to the supreme power of the vilayet-e-faqih. A twelve-member Guardian Council, with six members nominated by the faqih, would vet all legislation passed by the assembly to ensure its conformity with Islamic law.

Amidst the heated atmosphere generated by the hostage crisis following the takeover of the US embassy in Tehran by Islamic activists on 4 November 1979 (see below), the Constitution was approved by almost the entire electorate in the referendum on 2-3 December. As the US embassy was taken over, Mehdi Bazargan resigned as prime minister on 6 November. Khomeini’s eulogy said, ‘He was a little tired and preferred to stay on the sidelines for a while.’²⁷ Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr was elected president in January 1980, getting 10 million out of 14 million votes cast.

The ‘Hostage Crisis’

In the early months after the revolution, US diplomats in Tehran were confident that there would be smooth transfer of power in the country. There were strong recommendations from the embassy to Washington that the US engage with the leaders of the revolution and rebuild bilateral ties.²⁸ In the US, however, the government was under pressure from pro-monarchy exiles, who insisted that the revolution was a short-term development.

It was this view, or genuine humanitarian concern, that possibly led President Jimmy Carter to permit the ailing shah to come to the US for medical treatment on 22 October 1979. This was followed by a meeting in Algiers on 1 November between Bazargan and US Secretary of State Zbigniew Brzezinski to explore the possibility of normalizing relations and, perhaps, restoring defence ties.

These two events were read very differently in Tehran. Many of the student activists spearheading the revolution, harking back to the overthrow of Mosaddeq by the CIA in 1953, believed that a US-led coup to overturn the revolution was being planned. Several hundred unarmed students, who described themselves as Khomeini loyalists, took over the US embassy on 4 November, and detained the diplomatic personnel.

There is no evidence that Khomeini encouraged the takeover or even knew about it. However, it is clear that he took political advantage of it: on 5 November, he backed the students' action and described the embassy as a 'nest of spies'. Present-day commentators point out that the embassy takeover also served to unify the numerous groups leading the revolution by making the US the target of a shared and deeply felt anger.²⁹

It was initially thought that the occupation of the embassy would be a short-term affair, but it, in fact, extended over several months. During this period, diplomats would be blindfolded and handcuffed, and paraded before international television – even as they were regularly interrogated to discover their pernicious plans to undermine the revolution. Axworthy notes that their captors were usually very disappointed when they found that the staff had only four CIA officers, none of whom spoke Farsi and were quite confused about what was happening in the country.³⁰

In April 1980, President Carter approved a military operation to rescue the hostages. The operation failed due to a series of mishaps, but aggravated local paranoia that the US continued to have hostile intentions towards Iran. In the US, it deepened the sense of national humiliation, and perhaps led to Carter's defeat in the elections in 1980. The hostages were finally released in January 1981, having been incarcerated for 444 days.

Like the coup that removed Mosaddeq from office in 1953, the hostage crisis reverberates in US–Iran ties to this day. It marked the dramatic termination of earlier close relations between the two countries, when over 50,000 Americans had made Iran their home, largely for business reasons, but also to monitor and support the US's very extensive and diverse development assistance programmes, and nurture official political and military relations. The crisis 'stopped the process of reengagement', Ansari says, and ensured that 'both the United States and Iran were to become significant players in the domestic politics of the other'.³¹

Even as the revolution was attempting to celebrate its success in affirming the 'Islamic' character of the new republic, its 'triumph' over the 'Great Satan', the US, through the embassy takeover and the detention of its diplomats, Iran went through one more challenge that tested the resilience of the revolution and its adherents. It was a challenge that also came to influence several aspects of the country's strategic culture – Iraq's attack on Iran from 22 September 1980.

The Iraq–Iran War and the Aftermath

What led President Saddam Hussein to launch the attack on Iran is still a matter of debate. He had grievances relating to the Algiers Accord of 1975 that had divided the waters of the Shatt al-Arab between the two neighbouring countries.³² Saddam had always felt that the dividing line had been unfair to Iraq: in his view, this agreement had been forced upon his country when it was relatively weak as compared to Iran. An invasion of Iran would thus 'reverse previous humiliations', as Ansari puts it,

particularly as Iran, in the early throes of the revolution, appeared seriously enfeebled in military terms.³³

Linked with this assessment was a larger concern shared by Saddam with other Arab leaders – Iran’s cultural imperialism, i.e., its historic pattern of ‘Persian elites successfully surviving foreign conquest as the conquerors adopted Persian culture and appropriated existing modes of [Persian] governance to rule more effectively’.³⁴ An influential precedent was the experience of the Baghdad-based Abbasid Caliphate, noted above, that had co-opted Persians into the management of the empire and, over time, had incorporated Persian achievements in art, science, architecture and philosophy. Could this latest innovation from Iran – the shaping of its political order on the basis of Islam – not just influence emulation among neighbouring Arab populations, but even promote Iranian political hegemony in the region?³⁵

Iranian leaders, flushed with revolutionary fervour, also indulged in threatening rhetoric. Khomeini’s son, Ahmad, rejected the idea of confining the revolution to Iran’s borders and called for ‘all necessary efforts’ to export the uprising to other countries. Ayatollah Beheshti called Saddam ‘the butcher of Baghdad’, an accomplice of Menachem Begin, and a puppet in American hands.³⁶

The distinguished London-based scholar on Iranian politics, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam affirms that both sectarianism and Arab nationalism were crucial factors in propelling Saddam to war. He points out that Saddam certainly had grounds for concern in regard to the sectarian factor: not only were the Shia in Iraq a marginalized, even oppressed community, but Iran’s new leader, after long years in Najaf, was also known to have close ties with Iraq’s most prominent Shia cleric, Ayatollah Sayyid Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr. After the Islamic Revolution, this relationship would provide openings for close interaction between the Iranian and Iraqi Shia clerical networks.³⁷

In response to violent activity by Shia groups in Iraq, Saddam banned the al-Da’awa party, the principal Shia opposition group, in March 1980, and then executed al-Sadr and his sister Bint al-Huda; about 40,000 Iraqis

of Iranian extraction were also expelled to their country of origin. Khomeini responded by calling for Saddam's overthrow and described the government as the 'monstrous and perverted regime of Iraq's Ba'ath Party, a veritable Little Satan' that is serving the 'Great Satan', the US.³⁸

Adib-Moghaddam points out that the Saddam regime's 'self-perception as the main pan-Arab force in the region' is the 'primary cause' that explains the initiation of the war. The war would thus serve two purposes: one, make Iraq the leader of the revival of the pan-Arab project; and, two, consolidate the 'Arab-Sunni-Tikriti' leadership of the country at home. In this way, concerns relating to Shia agitations in Iraq, the animosity towards 'Persia' as a political and cultural hegemon, and the leadership of the pan-Arab people coalesced into the idea of an 'Iraqi state identity' that would confront the nascent Islamic Revolution in Iran.³⁹

The First Phase of War (1980–82)

In March 1980, Iraq severed diplomatic ties with Iran; on 17 September, Saddam declared that Iraq no longer accepted the Algiers Accord, and on 22 September, launched 45,000 troops across the border in four sectors. The military balance appeared to favour Iraq: it had 200,000 troops, as against Iran's depleted force of 160,000, down from 265,000 in 1979. Iraq was also better equipped, with weaponry from the UK, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia. Iran had equipment from the UK and the US, but its forces had been debilitated in the early period of the revolution—about 10,000 officers had been purged, many of them being either executed, imprisoned or exiled. Khomeini favoured the IRGC and its sister militia, the Basij, to do the fighting for Iran, thus setting up a divided phalanx of forces at the front.

Saddam's view was that the conflict would last just a few weeks, or just days;⁴⁰ with the Iranian military in complete disarray and as ill-prepared as it was, its leaders would sue for peace to avoid a major defeat. In the early days, the Iraqi objective was to take the major towns in the border province of Khuzestan that had a majority Arab population and housed Iran's

important oil facilities. Saddam also saw that the bedraggled Iranian army was busy confronting domestic separatists – Kurd, Azeri, Arab and Baloch.⁴¹ Iraqi generals felt that Khuzestan’s flat terrain would facilitate the movement of tanks, while Saddam assumed that the province’s Arabic-speaking population would welcome his soldiers as liberators.⁴²

However, the Arab uprising that Saddam had expected in Khuzestan did not materialize: an Arab from the region, quoted by Axworthy, has said that, while the Arabs had several grievances with the Islamic regime, still ‘when the war started it was our duty to defend our country’. The interlocutor also disliked Saddam as ‘a Ba’athist and not a very good Muslim’, while the Arabs of Khuzestan were ‘better Arabs and better Muslims than them [Iraqis]’.⁴³

After a month of fighting, the Iraqis took Khorramshahr, and came to the outskirts of Dezful and Ahvaz, and besieged Abadan in October. Their advance was then halted by some grim resistance from the Iranian forces and the damage that was inflicted on the Iraqi oil facilities by the Iranian air force. The siege of Abadan was broken in September 1981, after which the Iranians counter-attacked from November.

On 22 March 1982, ‘Operation Fatah’ was initiated by Iran, which consisted of massive ‘human wave’ attacks by the IRGC and Basij fighters, followed by the regular troops, that pushed the Iraqis close to their border. In May 1982, Khorramshahr was retaken by the Iranians, and by end-June the Iraqis were back at their pre-war borders. Saddam made a peace offering at this stage, even suggesting later that the two countries could come together against the Israeli incursions into Lebanon that started from 6 June.

The Second Phase (1982–88)

At this stage, Khomeini and his close advisers faced a difficult choice – to end the conflict or fight on till Saddam was overthrown, the latter having been Khomeini’s stated aim from the start of the war. The military seem to have advocated continuation of the war, particularly those from the IRGC,

while Khomeini's own view was that even if the war continued, Iranian troops should not enter Iraqi territory. The military commanders convinced him that entry into Iraq would be necessary to put pressure on the latter's forces. Khomeini then approved the continuation of the war, but directed that Iraq's populated areas be avoided to minimize harm to the people.

The main argument in support of continuing the war was that Saddam was 'inherently untrustworthy, given to military adventures, unprincipled and disposed to using extreme measures in pursuit of his ends'.⁴⁴ Iranian leaders were hopeful that continuing the conflict could perhaps encourage hostile action against Saddam Hussein within Iraq, while more ambitious ideas thrown up included the liberation of the holy shrines of Najaf and Karbala, and the freedom of Iraq's Shia community.⁴⁵

Later, the decision to carry on the conflict was explained on the basis that the protection of the revolution needed its export; the London-based authority on West Asian affairs, Dilip Hiro has quoted then President Ali Khamenei (later 'supreme leader', after Khomeini) as saying, 'If the revolution is kept within the Iranian borders, it would become vulnerable.'⁴⁶ Hiro points out that, besides unseating Saddam, the Iranians at that time were also backing dissident groups in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

The second phase of the war (1982–88) was marked by heavy fighting and long periods of lull. During this period, both sides thoroughly reorganized their forces, receiving weapons from diverse sources and building up a formidable fighting capacity. The war was also destructive: towns were indiscriminately bombed on both sides (the 'War of the Cities'); oil tankers were attacked in the waters of the Gulf ('Tanker War'); and the Iraqis erroneously hit an American warship, *USS Stark*, killing thirty-seven US naval personnel. Surprisingly, President Ronald Reagan blamed the Iranians for this strike, and described them as barbaric and the real villains.⁴⁷

From 1983, Iraq began to use poison gas against Iranian troops, increasing the intensity of its use from the next year. In March 1988, after the Iranians took the Kurdish town of Halabja, the Iraqis bombed the town

with chemical weapons, killing about 4,000 Kurds. Through the war, Iraq used 110,000 chemical munitions against Iran.⁴⁸

At this time, Iraq enjoyed the backing of the US and its European allies. From the US, Iraq obtained satellite imagery that showed Iranian troop movements. The US also threw its weight behind Iraq at international fora, while ignoring its development and use of chemical weapons through much of the war. After the horrific Halabja episode, the US insisted that both sides had used chemical weaponry and, under US influence, the UNSC Resolution failed to identify Iraq as the sole culprit. These experiences fed into Iran's deep distrust of the Western powers, particularly the US, which it came to see as 'duplicitous and hypocritical'.⁴⁹

The war also included a bizarre episode, referred to as the 'Iran-Contra' affair. This convoluted deal involved complex transactions: Israel would supply weapons and spares to Iran; in turn, it would be paid by Iran and also have the military supplies replenished by the US. From 1985, US officials arranged with Israel to use the payments from Iran to supply weapons to the 'Contras' in Nicaragua, the pro-US militia that was then fighting the Sandinista government. In return for these weapons, Iran agreed to facilitate the freeing of hostages taken by pro-Iran Shia militants in Lebanon. Thus, the Iran-Contra arrangement became a weapons-for-hostages trade – a violation of US law. Other violations included the supply of weapons to Iran and to the Contras, both of which were banned by US law.⁵⁰

One other event that merits mention is the use of the oil weapon by Gulf states to harm Iran: in July 1986, OPEC members, led by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, flooded the oil market. They thus brought oil prices down from \$28 to below \$10. This caused Iran's annual oil revenues to shrink from \$23 billion in 1983 to \$7.2 billion in 1986. Though Iraq suffered as well, it was compensated for its losses with assistance from the Gulf sheikhdoms, Western countries and the Soviet Union.⁵¹

Truce and After

The fighting on the ground was lethal: it involved massive movements of troops, with tanks and heavy artillery, across the border, the temporary holding of some slivers of territory on the other side, followed by robust counter-attacks to retake lost land. While this fighting hardly showed any real gains on the ground, most battles cost the lives of thousands of soldiers on both sides.

From early 1988, the Iraqis began counter-attacks to regain lost territory and then move across the border. Their ground assaults were supported by intensive bombings of Iranian cities. With the Halabja episode in mind, the Iranians believed that Saddam could go to even greater extremes to wreak havoc upon Iran to neutralize any military successes it might achieve. By May, the Iranians had lost all their gains in Iraq, while Iraqi forces appeared poised to take the war into Iran once again.

The domestic situation in Iran had also deteriorated: the collapse of oil prices meant that subsidies on essential items would have to be reduced to fund the war effort. Former prime minister Mehdi Bazargan publicly criticized Khomeini, saying, ‘... thanks to your misguided policies Iraq has fortified itself, its economy has not collapsed, and it is we who are on the verge of bankruptcy. ... When will you stop the commerce with the blood of our martyrs?’⁵²

In this fraught atmosphere, an episode occurred that finally compelled Iran to accept a truce. This was the shooting down on 3 July 1988 of an Iranian civilian airplane by the American warship, *USS Vincennes*, a powerful guided missile cruiser that was part of the US armada patrolling the Gulf waters to ensure the free movement of merchant shipping. Fearing an Iranian air attack, the crew of *USS Vincennes* erroneously viewed a civilian Iran Air Airbus A300 as an Iranian F-14 aircraft. They shot it down, killing 290 passengers.

The Reagan administration refused to accept any blame and, instead, blamed Iran for not accepting Iraq’s ceasefire offer of the previous year. Public opinion in the US was so hostile to Iran that an overwhelming majority blamed Iran more than the US, and over 60 per cent opposed compensation for the families of the victims. (In 1990, President George

Bush Sr conferred on the captain of *USS Vincennes* the Legion of Merit.)⁵³ As Ansari has pointed out, ‘... what remains shocking about this incident is not so much the criminal negligence that led to it but the whitewash that followed ... This event convinced even the skeptics [in Iran and Iranian communities abroad] that the United States was the Great Satan.’⁵⁴

The Iranian leadership was convinced that the attack on the aircraft had been deliberate, and reflected the US’s visceral animosity for Iran, its revolution; and, further, that ‘the United States would go to any lengths to prevent Iran winning the war’.⁵⁵

What finally tilted the balance in favour of a truce were the assessments given to Khomeini by his military commanders. The IRGC set out in detail what was needed for victory and then the generals concluded that ‘the country was not capable of providing for such needs’; they also said that ‘no victories are in sight for the next five years’. This, combined with the view that Saddam would recklessly devastate Iran, using his chemical weapons with impunity, and the fraught domestic economic situation, encouraged the consideration of a truce.⁵⁶ This was approved by Khomeini on 16 July 1988. The next day, Iran informed the UN secretary general of its acceptance of the UNSC Resolution 598 without conditions.

In a radio broadcast on 20 July, Khomeini told his people, ‘The acceptance of this issue [truce] is more bitter than poison for me, but I drink this chalice of poison for the Almighty and for his satisfaction.’⁵⁷

Domestic Developments during the War

Even as the war was being fought, Iran saw no respite from the vagaries of domestic politics as parties, factions and prominent personalities competed for position and power in the fragile and contentious political order.

The first competition was between the president, Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, and the Islamic Revolutionary Party that had spearheaded the revolution. Besides being president, Bani-Sadr was appointed by Khomeini as commander-in-chief of the armed forces in February 1980 and then, in

October, as chairman of the Supreme Defence Council, which gave the impression that he enjoyed Khomeini's full support.

Thus empowered, he publicly criticized the Islamic Revolutionary Party for its authoritarian ways and its frequent resort to torture against political enemies, while his liberal supporters protested against the regime's autocratic conduct. The Islamic Revolutionary Party, in turn, raised the possibility of Bani-Sadr using the army to overturn the revolution. Their ties deteriorated as Bani-Sadr criticized the prolonged incarceration of the US embassy hostages and then the meagre amount of Iran's frozen assets that the US government actually released after the hostages were released (\$4 billion out of \$12 billion). He also peremptorily arrested Islamic Revolutionary Party members who heckled him during a public address.

Khomeini attempted to mediate between the two sides – Bani-Sadr claimed he had full political authority in the state, while the Islamic Revolutionary Party accused him of having 'delusions of grandeur'.⁵⁸ As Bani-Sadr's opponents increased Khomeini's distrust of his protégé, his powers to appoint cabinet ministers were transferred to the prime minister, Mohammed Ali Rajai, and then in June 1981, he was removed as commander-in-chief. A month later, he was ousted as president through clerical opposition in the majlis that enjoyed Khomeini's support.

Soon after Bani-Sadr's ouster, Iran experienced a series of bomb attacks that killed a large number of prominent revolutionary leaders; these included important clerics, such as Beheshti and political figures such as Rajai and Mohammed Javad Bahonar, who had taken over as president and prime minister, respectively, after Bani-Sadr's departure. Though the MEK did not take responsibility, these bombings had its fingerprints and appeared to be part of its commitment to armed resistance. In any case, the Islamic Revolutionary Party turned against the MEK cadres in Iran and, between June 1981 and September 1983, several thousand of the latter were killed in street battles or executed in prisons.

After Rajai's death, Hojjatoleslam Ali Khamenei (b. 1939) became president and appointed Mir Hossain Mousavi as his prime minister.

Having dealt mortal blows to the liberals (with the ouster of Bani-Sadr) and then decimating the MEK, the Islamic Revolutionary Party now turned on the communists – the Tudeh party. Using information that the Tudeh had close ties with the Soviet Union and that there were hundreds of Soviet agents in the country, from February 1983, hundreds of Tudeh members were arrested and forced to confess their misdeeds on television. In April 1983, the party was banned. Thus, a major Opposition party in Iran ceased to exist altogether.

The next stage in domestic dissension relates to internal differences within the Islamic Revolutionary Party itself. These pertained to economic policy: one group, led by Prime Minister Mousavi, was from the left and favoured a larger state role in the economy and greater commitment to the disadvantaged; the conservative side, including Khomeini and several other clerics, favoured a laissez-faire approach. These two groups reflected the two distinct strands in Khomeini's thinking and in the Islamic Revolution itself: while Khomeini was outspoken in supporting the interests of the lower social classes, described as the *mostazafin* (the oppressed), he was also sensitive about the sanctity of private property, and the traditional ties between the clergy and the private traders.

The factionalism that these differences engendered led Khomeini to dissolve the Islamic Revolutionary Party in June 1987. In January 1988, the debate between the Left and the conservatives on economic policy led Khomeini to assert firmly the principle of *vilayet-e-mutlaq* (absolute vice-regency) in the following terms:

The government that is part of the absolute vice-regency [*vilayet-e-mutlaq*] of the Prophet of God is one of the primary injunctions of Islam and has priority over all other secondary injunctions, even prayer, fasting and hajj ... The government is empowered unilaterally to revoke any sharia agreement that it has conducted with the people when those agreements are contrary to the interests of the country or of Islam.⁵⁹

The concept of vilayet-e-mutlaq took the idea of vilayet-e-faqih to a new level in Shia jurisprudence by giving the ‘supreme leader’ full authority, in the name of ‘expediency’, even over the injunctions of Sharia if the interests of the state or faith so demanded.

This new doctrine found expression in a deadly episode at home as the war with Iraq now caught up with ongoing domestic conflicts. Though Iran had informed the UN of its acceptance of the ceasefire on 17 July 1988, Saddam continued Iraq’s offensive from 22 July at several points of the international border. At one of the fronts, towards Kermanshah, the offensive was carried out by fighters of the MEK, who had been allowed by Saddam to set up their headquarters in Iraq from 1986. The MEK fighters, backed initially by Iraqi aircraft, penetrated 160 km into Iranian territory, after which they were destroyed by a fierce Iranian counter-offensive in which thousands of them were killed.

This act of blatant treachery against their motherland led to a second round of massacres of MEK cadres in Iran’s prisons. These killings followed an order issued by Khomeini personally: describing them as monafeqeen (hypocrites), Khomeini said that ‘since they wage war on God ... it is decreed that those who are in prisons throughout the country [and] who remain steadfast in their support for the monafeqeen are considered to be moharreb (‘waging war on God’) and are condemned to execution’.⁶⁰ Around 4,000–5,000 persons are believed to have been killed as a result of this order.

Official explanations are diverse: one senior role-player said the executions were a response to public pressure; the prime minister, Mir Hossain Mousavi, said they were a pre-emptive measure to prevent the killings and subversions that the MEK had planned. In February 1989, Khomeini linked the executions to the occupation of the US embassy and conduct of the war as matters that could not be questioned.⁶¹ Axworthy sees these killings as ‘the early fruit of the new doctrine of velayet-e-mutlaq [and] the blackest episode in the record of the Islamic Republic’.⁶²

Implications of the War

The ceasefire between Iraq and Iran finally came into effect on 20 August 1988. The Paris-based author of a monumental work on the war, Pierre Razoux has pointed out that this war reflected major aspects of all principal conflicts of the twentieth century: trench warfare, human waves and chemical attacks of the First World War; the use of armoured vehicles and bombings of cities of the Second World War; the aerial dog-fights and use of missiles of the Arab–Israeli conflicts; and the wars of insurrection, the ambushes and infiltrations across marshlands of the Algerian and Vietnam wars.⁶³

The scale of military mobilization had been stupendous. During the eight years of the war, a total of 2 million soldiers were mobilized, along with 10,000 armoured vehicles, 4,000 artillery pieces, and nearly 1,000 aircraft deployed at one time.⁶⁴ About 680,000 persons were killed, nearly half a million on the Iranian side, while about a million and a half were wounded or maimed. Contrary to popular impression about heavy civilian casualties, 85 per cent of those killed were soldiers. All told, about 9,000 armoured vehicles, including 4,600 tanks, were destroyed, along with 950 aircraft and thirty warships. The total cost of the war was \$1,100 billion, with Iran bearing 60 per cent of the total.⁶⁵

On the face of it, this horrendous conflict changed very little on the ground: at the end, hardly any territory was lost by either side, nor was there any change of regime in either country. And yet, the war had profound implications for Iran; as the US-based scholar of Iranian politics, Behnam Ben Taleblu has said, ‘... no single event has defined Iran’s revolutionary ideology, politics, perspectives on society and security more than the Iraq–Iran war’.⁶⁶

The war engendered among the Iranians a deep sense of national unity and national pride. In their view, in very difficult circumstances, the country had repelled the aggressor and retained its territorial integrity; as Ansari has said, ‘... this was the first Iranian state not to lose territory in nearly two hundred years’.⁶⁷ The war corrected the sense of powerlessness and

humiliation that the country had experienced over the previous two centuries as a result of foreign interventions, occupations and capitulations, undertaken in connivance with local governments and politicians. Now, Iran had resolutely repelled external interference, threats and invasion, and had emerged, with great sacrifices, as ‘a *real* country, with *real* independence’.⁶⁸ This sense of national accomplishment went along with two firm commitments that emerged from the war – the central importance of self-sufficiency and an abiding distrust of the West.

The war also marked the consolidation of the Islamic Revolution: Iraq’s effort to overturn the revolution, backed by major Western powers, had woefully failed. The people had come together around their supreme leader and realized the efficacy of the idea of *vilayet-e-faqih* in the challenging circumstances of the war. Under Khomeini’s leadership, the diverse foes of the nation and the revolution had been effectively confronted.

This had two distinct implications: one, it provided the revolution with what Ansari has called its ‘grand narrative’ that would set up Iran and its revolution as a unique contribution to Islamist discourse. As Khomeini explained to his people:

You must show how the people struggled against tyranny, and the oppression of stagnation and backwardness, and put the ideals of Muhammad’s Islam in place of the ideals of Royal Islam, Capitalist Islam, and false Islam, or in one word, American Islam. You must show ... how a few members of the *ulema* joined the poor and suffering people of the streets and bazaar hand in hand, and plunged themselves into danger and hardship until they came out victorious.⁶⁹

But there is another aspect pertaining to what the war did for the Islamic Revolution in Iran: it facilitated the ‘Islamization’ of the national order by taking advantage of the sense of formidable threat – not just from Iraq, but also from its mighty mentor, the US. Every episode from the early days of the revolution to the final truce was utilized to highlight the threat Iran

faced from the imperialist powers – the taking of the US diplomats as hostages from the ‘nest of spies’ that was the US embassy; the weapons provided to Iraq; the use of chemical arms without international opprobrium; and the shooting down of Iran’s civilian aircraft.

In this background of siege and existential threat, Khomeini could push through Islamization measures which, Ansari says ‘may have met stiff social resistance in peacetime’.⁷⁰ Thus, the war enabled the liquidation of all opposition groups: secular nationalists (Bazargan, Bani-Sadr), moderate clerics like his heir apparent, Ayatollah Hosein-Ali Montazeri, the radical adversary (MEK and the Tudeh) and domestic insurrections for independence in the provinces, i.e., the Kurds, Balochis and Azeris.

Ayatollah Montazeri’s downfall was due to his outspokenness on the tenth anniversary of the revolution – on 11 February 1989, he called on the senior officials of the Islamic Republic to reflect on their achievements and failures, particularly in the prosecution of the war and in meeting the needs of the people. His remarks contained veiled criticisms of Khomeini’s handling of the war and the mass killing of prisoners, and, in fact, of his entire governance over the previous decade. These remarks angered Khomeini, who, in March, removed Montazeri as his successor and viewed his actions as ‘my friend’s treachery’.⁷¹

Thus, the war enabled Khomeini to accumulate greater authority for himself, that, as Ansari says ‘reached totalitarian proportions by the end of his life’.⁷² The dramatic and far-reaching assertion of the doctrine of vilayet-e-mutlaq in the context of a minor public discussion about the role and regulation of the private sector in the provision of services for the population included a public reprimand being issued to the incumbent president, Ali Khamenei, who had attempted to moderate Khomeini’s claim to absolute authority.⁷³ This doctrine soon thereafter was used to justify the executions of MEK prisoners and, over the longer term, has left Iran saddled with an authoritarian order that enjoys absolute power that sits uneasily with the institutions of democratic accountability.

The last months of Khomeini’s life saw an aggressive and combative leader. On 14 February 1989, he issued a fatwa sanctioning the execution of

the British writer Salman Rushdie for blasphemy. Not only did a death sentence on a foreign national contravene all norms of international conduct, it also painted the Islamic Republic as intolerant and barbaric, and provided justification for the West's sustained hostility to the country and its leadership.⁷⁴

After removing Montazeri, Khomeini designated President Ali Khamenei as his successor as rahbar (supreme leader) and appointed an Assembly of Experts to revise the Constitution. He passed away on 3 June 1989. With Khamenei's elevation, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani became president.

The revised Constitution was finalized on 8 July and approved in a referendum on 28 July. It did away with the post of prime minister and removed the provision that the rahbar be a marja-e-taqlid (to enable Khamenei, who was not an ayatollah, to take the position). It also set up a Supreme National Security Council, headed by the president, that would be responsible for matters relating to national security and foreign policy, though its decisions needed to be ratified by the rahbar.

The Islamic Revolution: Implications for West Asia

This chapter has discussed two significant events in the late twentieth-century West Asia – the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Iran–Iraq war – and the implications they had for the Iranian political order. But these two events had significant implications for other countries in West Asia as well.

Saudi Arabia saw in the Islamic Revolution a challenge to its own leadership of the Muslim world, its political influence over the Arab states of the region, and, above all, as a threat to its own security. Its domestic scenario was further complicated by the takeover in November 1979 of the Haram Sharif in Mecca by zealots from within the Wahhabi fold who challenged the royal family's right to rule the sacred Muslim land. Saudi Arabia dealt with these domestic and regional challenges with the cudgel it could wield most effectively – Islam – but one that was, in sectarian terms,

from the mainstream Sunni tradition. The challenges faced by the kingdom and how it responded to them are examined in the next chapter.

Saddam Hussein believed that, with great sacrifice of life and treasure, Iraq had won the war with Iran, and had ensured that the revolution would remain confined to Iranian territory and not threaten its neighbours. He came to believe in his own acumen as a military leader and in the invincibility of his forces: they not only were way ahead in capacity compared to Iran, they were also three-times stronger than all the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) armies put together.⁷⁵ Suffused with hubris, Saddam sought a 'reward' for Iraq's sacrifices and found it in the occupation of Kuwait in August 1990. This unleashed a series of military interventions and conflicts, whose consequences reverberate across the region to this day. These developments are discussed later in the book.

We end this chapter with a quote of what Saddam Hussein told his Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) interlocutors about the war after his capture:

Khomeini was a religious fanatic who was persuaded that every leader was like the Shah of Iran – easy to overthrow. Khomeini thought he could do the same thing in Iraq. ... Iraq had no choice but to start the war, in order to put an end to Iran's interference.

All this was done for the good of the people and humanity. ... The people love men for their actions. ... What is important is not what people say or think of me today, but what they will think in 500 or 1000 years.⁷⁶

5

Islam at the Heart of West Asian Politics (1979–2001)



THE DRAMATIC PACE OF EVENTS THAT MADE THE REVOLUTION IN IRAN IN 1979 an *Islamic* revolution reverberated across West Asia. Now, for the first time, after two centuries of colonial domination, a Muslim state had overthrown the vestiges of Western influence and shaped a political order that was modern *and* Islamic, and was not subservient to Western powers.

This posed a particularly dangerous threat for Saudi Arabia – a threat that was at once doctrinal, political, and strategic. The Islamic Revolution challenged Saudi Arabia’s leadership of the Muslim world, which was based on the fact that its geographical space encompassed the source of the faith and its rulers’ guardianship of Islam’s holiest shrines. The kingdom, as the distinguished British authority on West Asian politics, Tim Niblock has noted, was depicted by Iran’s new leaders as ‘outdated, corrupt, compromised by its relationship with the United States’ and, therefore deemed unfit to lead Islam.¹ Revolutionary Iran, with its allure for the region’s youth, also encroached on the kingdom’s political space – the Arab world – over which it had exercised a natural dominance. Above all, Iran, hostile both to the West and the regional monarchies allied with Western

powers, and anxious to export its revolution, posed an existential threat to the Saudi royal family.²

The kingdom's response was swift and peremptory. Its first focus was on the sectarian divide: it reminded Arab youth that the Iranian revolution was Shia, and therefore 'not Islamic', and the product of Iran's unique traditions that had little doctrinal connection with mainstream Sunni Islam.³ It also warned the Arabs and their rulers that revolutionary Iran posed a military threat to them by seeking to impose Persian hegemony upon the region, as Iranian rulers had been trying to do over several centuries.

As noted in the previous chapter, this perception was shared by Iraq's ruler, Saddam Hussein, who saw in Iran's disruption and confusion the opportunity to overthrow the revolution through force, and enhance his own and Iraq's standing in the region. The war with Iran, generously funded by Gulf monarchies, scarcely fulfilled Saddam's pursuit of greatness, as noted earlier, but it did ensure that the military threat from Iran had been blunted. (That the Iraqi leader sought a 'reward' for his military achievement in the annexation of Kuwait, and let loose a series of destructive events that culminated in his fall and execution in 2003 is the thread we will pick up in the next chapter.)

However, the regional challenge posed by the Islamic Revolution for Saudi Arabia came to be exacerbated by a more immediate domestic challenge. In November 1979, a group of zealots from within the kingdom's religious establishment took control of Islam's holiest mosque in Mecca. By condemning the Saudi rulers for their corruption, licentiousness and subservience to Western powers, the occupiers questioned the right of the Al Saud family to be the guardians of Islam's holy shrines.

Though the occupiers of the shrine were soon flushed out and the survivors were publicly executed in different parts of the country, the twin challenges posed by the Islamic Revolution across the Gulf waters and the questioning of its Islamic credentials at home compelled the Saudi royal family to burnish its right to protect the holy shrines and lead the Muslim world. It found the opportunity to do so in the third dramatic event in that historic year of 1979 when Soviet forces occupied Afghanistan in

December. Saudi Arabia, in association with the US and its Cold War ally and defence partner, Pakistan, converted the Afghan national struggle against foreign occupation into an Islamic cause, a jihad, which later became a 'global jihad'.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Saudi Arabia, as noted in Chapter 3, had confronted the challenge posed by the Arab republican revolutions espousing nationalism, socialism and secularism, with the banner of Islam as the inherited tradition and source of identity across the region. With the defeat of Egypt in 1967, the kingdom had hastened to consolidate its regional influence on the basis of Islamic solidarity: it convened the Islamic summit in Rabat in 1969 and then, in 1972, institutionalized the Islamic conclave by setting up the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC, later renamed Organization of Islamic Cooperation) that is headquartered in Jeddah, is largely funded by the kingdom, and functions under Saudi influence.

Hence, the three events of 1979 – the Iranian revolution, the takeover of the Mecca mosque, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan – drove the kingdom, a state defined by its affiliation with the doctrines and practices of Wahhabiyya, to respond to the regional and domestic challenges through Islam.

Saudi Arabia, driven by urgent political compulsions, drew on its Wahhabi traditions to justify and give expression to jihad – one of Islam's fundamental tenets, but whose application is severely restricted by complex doctrinal injunctions and norms.⁴ However, anxious to strengthen its Islamic standing, the kingdom gave jihad a global appeal, and encouraged youth from across the Muslim world to come to the Pakistan–Afghanistan border for indoctrination in the tenets of jihad and training in war and subversion.⁵

But the recourse to Islam in the service of its political interests had unintended consequences for the kingdom – Islam, now at the centre of regional politics, also provided the activist domestic critics of the kingdom with the norms on the basis of which the conduct and actions of the country's own rulers would be measured and found wanting. And, again,

the jihadi warriors the kingdom had nurtured in Afghanistan later turned their weapons on the kingdom itself and its partners, affirming how dangerous faith-based mobilization can be for its progenitors.

Before discussing Saudi Arabia's use of Islam to serve its political interests, we will first look at the meaning and diverse expressions of political Islam in the following paragraphs.

Political Islam

Political Islam, or 'Islamism', which is the use of the doctrines and tenets of Islam to shape political order, is a major influence and motivational force in global Islamic politics today – it is the principal instrument used by its protagonists against foreign domination; it is their main weapon against domestic tyranny, and is a powerful tool to seek to reorganize the domestic political order on Islamic principles. This faith-based ideology emerged as a significant influence only in the last few decades of the last century, and is thus a relatively new phenomenon in Muslim politics.

Not surprisingly, given its recent origins, there is considerable dispute among commentators about its meaning and application. Early scholars, familiar with the 'global jihad' in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the earlier writings of radical Islamist intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s, used to conflate it with extremist Islam or jihad. One scholar saw Islamism as being impelled only by the desire to overthrow the existing political order, while another asserted that, while there were several Islamist groups, there was 'not a hair of ideological difference' between them, and that all of them 'aim to subjugate other religious and worldviews and create an Islamic Caliphate'.⁶

Modern-day scholarship has gone well beyond these limited perceptions. As Leonid Grinin and Andrey Korotayev have noted, Islamism is 'multifaceted, multileveled, continually changing, and often self-contradictory'.⁷ It also goes beyond the purely political dimension, and embraces social, cultural life and diverse modes of action to realize the Islamist project. The definition of Islamism that the two scholars provide is:

‘Islamism is based on the idea of placing a high value ... on the rules and traditions of Islam ... [and it is oriented towards] organising politically around people who put some Islamic ideas and principles at the centre of political life.’

This definition embraces the diversity of Islamism from its moderate expressions that accommodate pluralism, civil liberty and Sharia, alongside secular laws, to its more extreme expressions that seek radical transformations of the social and political order to make it a theocracy and even accept the use of violence to realize this political project.

Shaping Political Islam

The principles borrowed from Islam that shape the belief system of the Islamists have been described as attempts to respond to modern-day societal challenges ‘by imagining a future [that rests on] re-appropriated, reinvented concepts from the Islamic tradition’.⁸ In this effort to ‘invent’ tradition to shape contemporary projects, Islamists dehistoricize and decontextualize Islam, delinking the principles, beliefs and practices of the faith from the political, social and economic environments in which they were originally manifested in earlier times, and asserting them as eternally ‘Islamic’. This assertion is usually achieved by trying to cleanse the faith of the aberrations and modifications in belief and practice that have accumulated in different geographical and cultural spaces over the last several centuries, which have given the expression of Islam, the faith, a unique character and identity in different geographical locales.

In this effort to draw out Islam’s essential principles, Islamists go back to a ‘golden age’ – the age of early Islam of the Prophet and his companions, referred to as al-salaf al-salih (the age of the ‘pious ancestors’). This generally refers to the first three generations of Muslims who had personal knowledge of pristine Islam, and the beliefs and actions of the Prophet himself, particularly when he headed the first Muslim community in Madinah. This golden age is viewed as the ideal period in Islamic history on account of its virtue and simplicity. Modern-day

Islamists believe that this period can be recreated today through the assiduous application of the norms that defined early Muslim society. Hence, political Islam, or Islamism, is also referred to as ‘Salafism’.

This idea of going back to pristine Islam to obtain norms and principles to shape modern-day political order is a departure from the view that was accepted through much of Islamic history, and even upheld by the ulema and eminent scholars. As the US-based scholar of West Asian politics Mohammed Ayoob points out, Muslims through much of their history accepted the ‘inoperability of the golden age model’ and reconciled themselves ‘to the reality of imperfect political arrangements, including unjust orders and tyrannical rulers’.⁹ The pervasive view was that the model of Madinah, while an ideal Islamic polity, was just that of a city–state and, hence, was hardly applicable to the vast empires and long-running dynasties that have dominated the Muslim political order up to modern times. Following from this, political quietism – the acceptance of the supreme authority of the ruler by his subjects – was the defining feature of Muslim political order.

This was justified by clerics and scholars on two bases: one, that tyranny was preferable to anarchy; and two, the Muslim ruler, however unjust, still provided the space for Muslims to practise their faith.¹⁰ Ibn Taymiyya, the eminent scholar of the fourteenth century, argued thus:

The essence of government ... was the power of coercion, which was necessary if men were to live in society and their solidarity was not to be destroyed by natural human egoism. ... The ruler could as such demand obedience from his subjects, for even an unjust ruler was better than strife and the dissolution of society.¹¹

Expressions of Political Islam

Before discussing differences among Salafi groups, we could first look at the precepts that bind them. Salafis share the concept of tawhid. In doctrinal terms, this has three meanings: one, there is only one God, the sole creator

and supreme being in the universe; two, God is unique – He has no human characteristics – and is the supreme law-giver; and, three, only God may be worshipped: there is no scope for intercession (i.e., appealing to others to reach Him) or veneration of objects other than Him.¹²

The other idea the Salafis share is that there is only one way to reach and understand God – through a close and careful study of Islam’s primary texts, the Koran and the Hadith. This study, they believe, will reveal God’s message, without the need to apply human reason or personal subjectivity, or the application of personal interpretations that would lead to diverse understandings. Any belief or action not enjoined in Islam’s basic texts is *bida’a* and is contrary to *tawhid*. Thus, Salafis reject the four schools of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam that emerged after the Prophet’s death, as also the commentaries of early scholars that collectively constitute *taqlid*.

Salafis also reject Shia and Sufi traditions, since they were developed after the Prophet’s death and, hence, have no sanction in the holy texts. On the same lines, Salafis reject the influence of local cultures that have provided considerable diversity to the practice of Islam due to the adoption of local traditions and customs from pre-Islamic times, or derived from non-Islamic cultures flourishing alongside Muslim communities in pluralist societies. Instead, they postulate a monolithic faith.

While purist Salafis propound the idea of an undifferentiated doctrine, they have not been able to realize this in practice. Their scholarly pursuits have, ironically, led to considerable diversity in their understanding of Islam’s principles, which have led to diverse expressions of political Islam. There are several reasons for this.

Modern-day Salafi scholars, such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, the present head of Al Qaeda, or Abu Musab al Suri, former ideologue of radical Islam, apply rigid rules while interpreting Islam’s primary texts, with each of them then asserting that his own understanding is the most accurate and authentic; Salafis, Quintan Wiktorowicz, the US-based authority on political Islam, says, ‘exhibit the arrogance of scientific certitude’.¹³ But this self-confident certitude cracks against the rock of certain ground realities. For instance, the Salafis’ study of Hadith literature is complicated

by the fact that there are several Hadith collections, and on several occasions their compilers strongly disagree amongst themselves on the authenticity or otherwise of a specific Hadith. The proliferation of numerous forged Hadith has made the task of identifying authentic ones even more difficult.

Again, the challenge before the Hadith scholar is to draw the meaning and application of a particular Hadith for modern times based on qiyas. This gives scope for diverse interpretations. Finally, contemporary scholars also turn to the commentaries of earlier respected scholars; this itself provides for variegated interpretations of these old texts.

These diverse understandings of principles to be drawn from the outreach to Islam's golden age have given contemporary Islamism three broad political expressions, referred to by Bernard Haykel, the distinguished West Asia scholar at Princeton University, as: Scholastic or Quietist Salafism (al-Salafiyya al-ilmiyya), Organized or Activist Salafism (al-Salafiyya al-tanzimyya), and Salafi Jihadism.¹⁴

Quietist Islamism

The Scholastic or Quietist tradition reflects the 'purist' strand in modern-day Salafism, which gives primacy to matters of creed and rejection of deviation. Its adherents view their present situation as analogous to that of the Prophet's early period in Madinah, when Muslims were a small minority and were vulnerable to attacks from the Quraysh in Mecca. Hence, they urge obedience to rulers, despite repression, and, when the populace differs with the ruler, they recommend opting for quiet advice to the ruler rather than open rebellion.

They believe that to meet contemporary challenges, it is important to first understand the faith through a deep study of the primary sources. Only through mastering the true teachings of the faith will Muslims be equipped to defend their religion from external threats.¹⁵ Going in for political activism without the required scholastic preparation violates the prophetic model and is an innovation.¹⁶

Purists accept the divide between Muslims and non-Muslims: the ‘eternal enemies’ of Muslims are Christians, Jews and the West in general, collectively viewed as seeking to divert Muslims from their faith not just through military force or material blandishments, but through their thinking and even mode of analysis. Thus, a purist scholar has rejected the use of the term ‘Islamic awakening’ on the ground that its origins lie not in pristine Islam but in modern-day Western discourse. Similarly, another scholar rejects the use of terms such as ‘extremism’ and ‘fundamentalism’ since these are not religious terms, but modern Western concepts.¹⁷

The Wahhabi doctrine – that informs the Saudi state – reflects the adherence to purist or quietist Islam, in that the ruler is accepted as the repository of all political authority, and is responsible for ensuring the security and welfare of his people. In turn, his subjects owe him total loyalty and obedience. Islamic scholars, usually members of state-sponsored institutions, guide the ruler on doctrinal matters and ensure that his decisions are in accord with Sharia. In practice, establishment ulema are appointed to their offices by the ruler himself and their principal responsibility is to provide doctrinal support for his decisions – in general, the ulema are not an independent centre of power, but subordinate to the ruler.

Activist Islamism: Muslim Brotherhood

Activist Salafis are at the opposite pole from the quietists: they advocate political activity by the population at large in promoting and realizing the state founded on Islamic principles. Theirs is thus an active and organized grassroots effort. They view the purists (usually part of state religious establishments) as being obsessed with matters of ritual, and generally uninformed about political and foreign affairs; they refer to them as ‘scholars of trivialities’ and their thinking as ‘mummified’.¹⁸

The activists’ intellectual foundations have been shaped by the Muslim Brotherhood or groups linked to the Brotherhood, which is headquartered in

Egypt and has autonomous or even independent branches in some West Asian capitals.

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al Banna, who hoped to counter the influence of the West, when European powers were dominating his country and much of the Muslim world, through da'awa (an organized effort to preach Islam's doctrines), while remaining aloof from politics. Al Banna drew his philosophical influences from the pioneers of Muslim modernism – al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida: al-Afghani was the movement's 'spiritual father' for his advocacy of activism; Abduh was venerated for seeking to modernize Islam by going back to the roots of the faith, while al Banna took his puritanism from Rashid Rida.

Al Banna, like his nineteenth-century mentors, viewed early Islam as the faith's ideal period; it was later contaminated by the emergence of empires and different schools, which caused disputes and descent into stagnation, mindless ritualism, fanaticism, and neglect of the 'practical sciences'. With colonialism and the enforcement of Western laws, the national ethos was 'corrupted and perverted', leading to 'slow annihilation and profound and complete corruption' in Egypt.¹⁹ A 'return to Islam' was the only solution; Islam, in his view, '... is a faith and a ritual, a nation (watan) and a nationality, a religion and a state, spirit and deed, holy text and sword'.²⁰

Islam, al Banna argued, encompassed the best features of Western culture; he asserted:

If the French Revolution decreed the rights of man and declared for freedom, equality and brotherhood, and if the Russian revolution brought closer the classes and social justice for the people, the great Islamic Revolution [had] decreed all that 1300 years before. It did not confine itself to philosophical theories but rather spread these principles through daily life, and added to them [the notions of] divinity of mankind, and the perfectibility of his virtues and [the fulfilment of] his spiritual tendencies.²¹

The Brotherhood noted that, while Islam did not provide an elaborate political theory or thought, it did set out certain ‘principles’ to shape the Islamic state. These were:

- The Koran is the basic Constitution.
- Government should function on the basis of shura, i.e., consultation.
- The ruler must rule on the basis of the tenets of Islam and the will of the people.²²

The ruler, variously referred to as caliph, imam, sultan or amir, would derive his authority from the ‘will of the people’ on the basis of a ‘social contract’. The ruler would uphold Islam and enforce Sharia, while the people would enjoy equality and freedom of thought, worship and expression, as also the rights to education and ‘possession’, i.e., owning property in reasonable quantity.

Al Banna firmly believed that ‘jihad is an obligation of every Muslim’, and indeed, a pillar of Islam. Jihad for him meant qital (fighting) and martyrdom. These views permeated the training of Brotherhood cadre, and extolled militancy and martyrdom. Al Banna told his members that they were ‘the army of liberation, carrying on your shoulders the message of liberation; you are the battalions of salvation for this nation, afflicted by calamity.’²³

The bitter confrontation between the Brotherhood and the Nasser regime, and the imprisonment of its leaders and members in the 1960s, fostered a more radical orientation within the Brotherhood. It was led by the academic, philosopher and activist, Sayyid Qutb (1906–66). Even as Qutb projected ‘Islam’ as an ideological force, his polity was totalitarian, and supported the concept of ‘total war’ with the West and with the home-based enemies of Islam. He recognized that contemporary society was in a state of jahilliyya (ignorance), and the irreligious and corrupt system needed to be reformed by a specially trained talia (vanguard): ‘How is it possible to start the task of reviving Islam? ... there should be a vanguard which sets out

with this determination and then keeps walking on the path, marching through the vast ocean of Jahilliyyah which has encompassed the entire world.’²⁴

Jihad for Qutb would be the principal weapon in the hands of Muslims against their un-Islamic governments and Western imperialism.

However, the moderate leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood rejected both of Qutb’s concepts – jahilliyya and jihad – and, instead, continued to pursue its agenda of realizing an ideal Muslim society based on compassion and the rejection of violence.

Nasser’s successor, Anwar Sadat, at the outset, attempted to change many aspects of Nasser’s political order. He released the Brotherhood members from prison and encouraged them to cooperate with his government. However, the Brotherhood got estranged from Sadat due to his peace agreement with Israel and what it saw as his acceptance of American influence over Egypt at the expense of the country’s ties with the Arab countries.

After Sadat’s assassination in October 1981, Hosni Mubarak’s central strategy was to use force against the Islamic movements, the extremist Gamaa Islamiya as well as the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood. The latter was condemned for presenting itself as the ‘acceptable face of violence’, even though, in his view, it was the fountainhead of Islamic terror.²⁵

From the 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood began to reshape its political theory and practice because it now had members from a new generation, many of whom were from the professional middle classes. Thus, it became a de facto political party, and its members contested national elections in 1984, 1987 and 2005 as independents. It, however, boycotted the elections of 1990, 2000 and 2009.

Its members also fought elections to the various professional syndicates in Egypt and won the medical syndicate elections in 1984, the engineers’ syndicate in 1986, and the pharmacists’ syndicate in 1988, and successfully contested the bar elections of 1992. It expanded its presence on university campuses and its members were elected to the students’ unions at Cairo, Alexandria and at Al Azhar University. Through the 1990s, the

Brotherhood, by virtue of its control over professional associations and its own network of charitable associations, was effective in delivering social services, usually far more efficiently than the government.²⁶

During this period, a divide emerged between two generations of Brotherhood members – the top leadership that belonged to the Nasser and pre-Nasser periods and younger members who advocated a more active role in national politics. However, the supreme guide, Mustafa Mashur, firmly rejected a political role and, instead, asserted that the Brotherhood would maintain its ‘presence’ outside mainstream politics, in charitable, professional, and banking and financial associations, which would provide it with a platform for da’awa, and would in time enable it to offer the ‘Islamic solution’ to the country.²⁷ Despite its low-key role in national affairs, the Mubarak regime outlawed the Brotherhood and arrested those who promoted active political participation.

The second half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a new generation of Islamic intellectuals, who sought to harmonize the precepts of Islam with the challenge of modern governance. These were: Yusuf al-Qaradawi (b. 1926), Tariq al-Bishri (b. 1933), Kamal Abdul Majd (b. 1930) and Mohammed Salem al Awwa (b. 1942). The US-based scholar of West Asian politics, Bruce Rutherford terms their collective work as ‘Islamic constitutionalism’, the main point of their discourse being that ‘renewal of Sharia is essential for reviving the dignity and strength of the Islamic world.’²⁸

These intellectuals agreed that, while man-made laws could not be framed where there were clear Koranic and Hadith pronouncements, particularly in matters of faith, laws pertaining to secular issues could be promulgated by the state on the basis of well-established Islamic principles – the most important of which was *masalaha*. They noted that the accountability of the ruler to his subjects was contained in the principles of *shura*, *adl* (justice) and *karama* (dignity). Again, when the community gave *bayat* (allegiance) to the ruler, this allegiance was premised on the ruler upholding the norms of Sharia.

On this basis, the ruler, they asserted, was bound by a contract with the ruled, and was required to exercise his authority in accordance with the Sharia and the will of the community. The constitutionalists also advocated the setting up of an independent judiciary and the creation of civil society organizations. With regard to the political system, they called for elections, political parties, Parliament, and full protection of the rights of the citizens, including those of women and non-Muslims.²⁹

Mohammed Salem al Awwa, for instance, though educated in the tradition of Abduh and al Banna, asserted ‘the absolute necessity of both pluralism and democracy’.³⁰ His pluralist state emerged from the Islamic principles of shura, religious freedom, equality, and accountability of the ruler. According to him, multipartyism was also permitted in Islam as it is in the public interest. Pluralism, according to him, was compatible both with tawhid and the unity of the Muslim community since unity offers scope for diversity.³¹

Inspired by the writings of these constitutionalists, the Brotherhood in Egypt took the first tentative steps towards redefining its political agenda. This culminated in the ‘Reform Initiative’ of March 2004 and its campaign platform of October 2005. In these documents, the Brotherhood called for a republican form of government that would be democratic, constitutional, and parliamentary, and would function in accordance with Islamic principles. It also stressed on the centrality of law, the protection of the people’s rights, the autonomy of the judiciary, an elected Parliament, strong political parties, and the protection of the rights of women and non-Muslims.³²

In the 2005 national elections, the Brotherhood fielded 161 candidates and won 88 seats. Besides its attractive religious rhetoric, and the familial and tribal links of some of its leaders in rural areas, the Brotherhood’s appeal was enhanced by its ability to offer goods and services to people at affordable prices at a time when the economy was shrinking.³³ This led the Mubarak regime to quickly institute constitutional amendments in 2007 that would prevent the Brotherhood from forming a political party or indulging

in any form of political activity.³⁴ This kept the Brotherhood outside Egyptian politics until the Arab Spring uprisings of early 2011.

Radical Islam: Salafi-Jihadism

It is ironical to recall that, while activist Islamism, which attempted to marry the principles of Islam with those of Western parliamentary democracy, was generally proscribed and its votaries suppressed by state authorities in West Asia, radical Islamism, for a time, enjoyed state patronage, though later it became a scourge across West Asia and even beyond – in Europe and the US.

The intellectual wellsprings of radical Islam, or Salafi-Jihadism, go back to the mid-twentieth century when, in the face of Western influence and, specifically, the secularism of the revolutionary republics in West Asia from the early 1950s, scholars drew from Islamic principles and its history a political ideology that would help them guide the bewildered Muslim communities.

A pioneer in this effort was the Indian intellectual and political activist, Maulana Abul Ala Maududi (1903–79). He described the contemporary world as the ‘new jahilliyya’, or era of ignorance, in which Muslims were alienated from the values of Islam. This ignorance could only be corrected by a return to Islam since, he said, it was ‘a revolutionary ideology which seeks to alter the social order of the entire world and rebuild it in conformity with its own tenets and ideals’.³⁵ Maududi argued that Islam would play a central role in the revolutionary struggle to establish God’s just order on earth.

The instrument in this effort would be jihad. He pointed out that this was necessary since ‘under an evil government, an evil system takes root and flourishes and no pious order can ever be established’; hence, the Islamic party ‘has no option but to wrest the authority of government from wicked hands and transfer it into the hands of true Muslims’. He clarified:

... [T]he objective of the Islamic ‘Jihad’ is to eliminate the rule of an un-Islamic system and establish in its stead an Islamic system of state rule. Islam does not intend to confine this revolution to a single state or a few countries; the aim of Islam is to bring about a universal revolution. Although in the initial stages it is incumbent upon members of the party of Islam to carry out a revolution in the State system of the countries to which they belong, but their ultimate objective is no other than to affect a world revolution.³⁶

The Egyptian intellectual, Sayyid Qutb, briefly discussed earlier in the context of the Muslim Brotherhood, picked up Maududi’s idea of the ‘new jahilliyya’ and called for a God-centred society in which faith would be ‘an all-embracing and total revolution against the sovereignty of man’.³⁷ Having had personal experience of repression, incarceration and torture in Nasser’s prisons, Qutb saw armed struggle as the only way to free humanity so that it can accept the message of Islam. In his view, there could be no compromise with the enemies of Islam: ‘Islam is a universal truth, acceptance of which is binding on the entire humanity. ... If anyone adopts the attitude of resistance, it would be obligatory on Islam to fight against him until he is killed or he declares his loyalty and submission.’³⁸

Maududi later became active in Pakistani politics as the head of his Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami, which played a central role in indoctrinating warriors in the ‘global jihad’ in Afghanistan (see below). Qutb was executed in Nasser’s prison in 1966, but has left behind a legacy that, according to Holland-based scholar of Islamic thought, Johannes Jansen, would transform Muslims from pious civilians into self-conscious conscript soldiers committed to war against the enemies of Islam.³⁹

The scholar-warrior who helped translate the academic reflections of Maududi and Qutb into an active paean for jihad was the Palestinian intellectual Abdullah Azzam (1941–89). Azzam’s first tutoring in radical Islam was in the conclaves of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. After completing his doctorate in Islamic jurisprudence, he taught at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, where he was an influential teacher. He

was expelled from the kingdom after the takeover of the Mecca Mosque (details below) and moved to Pakistan in 1981.

He saw in the Afghan jihad against Soviet occupation (details below) an opportunity for Islamic rejuvenation by extolling the martyrdom of young Arabs. In his book, *The Defence of Muslim Territories is the First Individual Duty*, published in 1979, he proclaimed that the jihad in Afghanistan was a defensive jihad and an individual duty for all Muslims. In terms of obligations, he elevated jihad to just after iman (faith), the first principle, making it the second pillar of Islam. Jihad, he said, ‘is the most excellent form of worship’ and, through jihad, ‘the Muslim can reach the highest of ranks’.⁴⁰

Before we examine the jihad in Afghanistan that gave concrete shape to the thinking of these intellectuals, we will take a quick look at one episode – the takeover of the Mecca Mosque by Islamic zealots. As mentioned previously, this episode, taking place so soon after the Iranian revolution, provided the Saudi regime with the motivation to confront both challenges with a powerful rejoinder. This event placed political Islam, in its diverse expressions, at the heart of West Asian affairs for decades to come.

Takeover of the Mecca Mosque

The boom in oil prices in the context of the 1973 war with Israel, when prices went up five times in the space of a few years, created cataclysmic changes within Saudi Arabia in economic, social, and cultural areas. The proliferation of revenues led the government to initiate major projects to upgrade the country’s infrastructure, the energy sector, and health and educational facilities. This forcibly opened the kingdom to the outside world, as major Western corporations and hundreds of thousands of foreign workers came into the country to execute these projects, while thousands of Saudi students went abroad for higher studies.

This dramatic exposure to the outside world created a deep cultural divide within the country – between those exposed to the West, who became part of the kingdom’s ‘liberal’ ethos that impacted their lifestyle,

values, and even literary style,⁴¹ and those who reflected the country's older, more pious tradition, for whom their 'pure world was under threat'.⁴² For the latter, most of the bewildering changes around them were *bida'a* (innovations) in the established Islamic order. Juhayman al Otaibi emerged from this confusion and anger.

Juhayman (1936–1980) was the grandson of one of the Ikhwan fighters who had backed King Abdulaziz in his quest to set up the Saudi kingdom. As we have noted earlier, once the state had come into being in 1925, the king did not countenance any interference in national affairs from these fanatical warriors, or accept their traditional raids within the country or on neighbouring states. As the Ikhwan remained recalcitrant, the king carried out a military assault on them in March 1929, in which hundreds of them were killed, though Juhayman's grandfather survived.

Juhayman, which literally means 'angry face', was, from his early life, nurtured in Wahhabi Islam, and the lore and traditions of the Ikhwan. Perhaps because he was dyslexic, he ended his formal education after primary school, but remained a prodigious reader and collector of religious texts. He served in the Saudi National Guard for a few years, but then left it in 1973 to pursue his religious interests in a Salafi group he joined in Madinah. He soon took over its leadership and called it *al Jamaa al Salafiyya al Muhtasiba* (Salafi Group for Righteousness).

The headquarters of the group in Madinah was called *Bait al Ikhwan* (Home of the Brothers) where daily classes were conducted on doctrinal matters. By 1976, the movement had branches in all major Saudi cities, including Mecca, Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam. While the group mainly focused on matters of faith, the political side of the movement soon became apparent; as Lacroix has pointed out, Juhayman's 'identification with the first Ikhwan had shaped his political consciousness and made him a determined opponent of the power of the Al Saud'.⁴³

Juhayman's group's criticisms of specific government policies led to an attempt to arrest him and its members in December 1977. Though Juhayman himself avoided arrest, many other members were detained, though they were released due to the intervention of Sheikh Abdulaziz bin

Baz, the chief mufti (qualified legal scholar) of the country, who had known Juhayman in Madinah. While on the run, Juhayman became a cult figure among his followers.

Hostility to Al Saud

Between mid-1978 and early 1979, Juhayman published twelve letters that, taken together, constitute his political manifesto. In his letter titled 'The State, Allegiance, and Obedience', he said the Al Saud had used faith 'to guarantee their worldly interests, putting an end to jihad, and paying allegiance to the Christians [America], bringing evil and corruption upon the Muslims'.⁴⁴ The letter added that the non-Quraysh origins of the Al Saud and their actions made the oath of allegiance between the ruler and his people null and void; hence, obedience was not owed to them, and accepting state appointments and joining the state education system was forbidden.⁴⁵

Sometime in 1978, Juhayman focused on the messianic concept of the Mahdi (the saviour), whose return would mark the end of the world. He saw in recent events in the history of the Arabian Peninsula (the overthrow of Sharif Hussain, the rise of King Abdulaziz, the defeat of the Ikhwan) signs that the coming of the messiah was imminent. Later, in a dream, he identified his companion, Mohammed Abdullah al Qahtani, as the expected Mahdi.

The shift of the group towards messianism also led to heightened military activity. This included the collection of weapons, weapons' training, and the decision to occupy the holy mosque in Mecca during the annual Hajj pilgrimage, which was to occur a few weeks before the commencement of the new Islamic century on 20 November 1979. Juhayman decided to take over the holy mosque and proclaim the rule of the Mahdi. He also married al Qahtani's sister, making the expected messiah his brother-in-law.

Robert Lacey, who has authored two important books on Saudi history and politics, believes that Juhayman and his co-conspirators did not have a

clear plan to overthrow the royal family; they were perhaps hoping that the cataclysmic events surrounding the end-days would wreak the destruction they were looking for.⁴⁶ Hence, besides weapons, they stocked the basement of the Grand Mosque with simple food for about a week – dates, dried yogurt and drinking water.

In the early hours of 20 November 1979, as a large congregation gathered in the mosque for the morning prayers, Juhayman proclaimed that the Mahdi had arrived, that he was his (Juhayman's) brother, and that he would bring justice on earth and cleanse it of all corruption. Hundreds of his armed followers emerged from the congregation, and shot an imam and the policemen in the mosque.

Juhayman and his followers then took refuge in the many-pillared basement of the mosque and withstood a two-week siege. During this period, the Saudi security forces made several attempts to flush them out. In one such effort, the 'Mahdi' himself was killed, though Juhayman kept this news secret from his followers as it would cast doubt on al Qahtani's messianic status.

Finally, on 4 December, security forces burst upon the last surviving group in the cellars of the mosque and arrested Juhayman. The clearing of the mosque cost the lives of 127 security personnel and injured over 450 of them; about 120 of Juhayman's supporters were killed. Sixty-three of the rebels, including Juhayman himself, were publicly executed in eight different Saudi cities over the next month.

The combined challenge from the Islamic Revolution and the takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca compelled Saudi Arabia to take a fresh look at the place of its doctrinal affiliation with Wahhabiyya in the state, particularly in its public space. The Saudi regime, as Hiro says, now sought to 'close the gap that had developed over decades between the administration and the original Wahhabi doctrine'.⁴⁷ This was achieved by expanding the role of clerics in public life, increasing their influence in matters of education and public conduct, and actively monitoring public behaviour with the enhanced and intrusive authority provided to the mutawwa (a police force to monitor public conduct).

The injunctions included strict rules relating to gender segregation, modest attire for women, and severe restrictions on the movement and employment of women. In schools and colleges, religious education was increased significantly. In October 1986, in response to Iranian criticism of the Saudi royal family and to affirm the kingdom's leadership of the Muslim realm, King Fahd bin Abdulaziz assumed, in place of 'His Majesty', the title of 'Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques', a title that had been used by the Ottoman sultans since 1517.

But, besides these changes in the domestic milieu, Saudi Arabia needed a dramatic initiative that would affirm the legitimacy and credibility of its political primacy in the Islamic realm. It found this opportunity in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December of that fateful year – 1979.

Jihad in Afghanistan

As the world has reeled from the violence of extremist Islam over the last three decades, it is interesting to recall that the modern world's first jihad was state-sponsored – the product of a cooperative effort of three unlikely partners: the US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

For the US, the jihad in Afghanistan was one more front to fight against the Soviet Union, one that President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, saw as an opportunity that would go beyond Afghanistan and export 'the composite ideology of nationalism and Islam to the Muslim-majority Central Asian states and Soviet republics with a view to destroying the Soviet order'.⁴⁸ In a later interview in January 1998, Brzezinski clarified that, contrary to the popular view that US support for the Afghan jihad began in 1980, i.e., after the Soviet invasion, the factual position was that, at his urging, President Carter signed the first directive for secret assistance to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul on 3 July 1979. Brzezinski added that he had told the president that 'this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention'.⁴⁹

Pakistan's president, General Zia-ul-Haq, backed the jihad to reap some political advantages at home. He had come to power through a military

coup and had promptly executed the country's popularly elected leader, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Supporting a jihad in neighbouring Afghanistan would impart to his dictatorship an Islamic veneer. At the same time, he was concerned that communists ruling Kabul would encourage separatism among Pakistan's own restive Pashtun population.

Beyond these immediate considerations, he also hoped that Afghanistan under Pakistani influence would give his country 'strategic depth' vis-à-vis India – i.e., provide a broader hinterland that would yield logistical advantage in the event of an Indian military attack, and, over time, build 'a new [Pakistani] sphere of influence from Kabul to Tashkent'.⁵⁰

Saudi motivations were immediate and obvious: the jihad would affirm the kingdom's credentials as leader of the Muslim world. These credentials had been challenged by the Iranian revolution across the Gulf and at home, from within the kingdom's religious establishment through Juhayman's virulent questioning of the royal family's fitness to be the guardian of Islam's holy shrines and lead the global Muslim community.

The Afghan struggle against Soviet occupation had all the characteristics of a jihad from the very outset, as the diverse Afghan opponents of the Soviet Union and the communist regime it backed in the country saw their fight as a religious struggle, with the participants being described as mujahideen (holy warriors). This enjoyed the full support of both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Lacey has pointed out that the Afghan situation could readily be framed in terms of outrage and injustice within the kingdom, and adds cryptically the view of the Saudi rulers: 'Better that anger [of the people] be directed into jihad abroad than into [an] Iran-style revolution at home.'⁵¹

Thus, Saudi Arabia committed itself fully to the Afghan cause: local newspapers highlighted communist atrocities against Muslims, charities were set up and collection boxes proliferated to raise funds for the cause. By June 1980, the kingdom announced that \$22 million had been collected for Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

More importantly, at the state level, funds were provided to back the Afghan war effort: in February 1980, it was agreed between the US and

Saudi Arabia that they would match each other, dollar for dollar, to fund a guerrilla campaign that would lead to a 'Soviet Vietnam'. By the end of the war in 1989, the two countries had contributed \$3 billion each.⁵²

While the US and Saudi Arabia provided the money and weaponry for the jihad, the actual control over all aspects of the struggle on the ground was exercised by Pakistan, through its intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence. Thus, the Inter-Services Intelligence was responsible for the indoctrination of the fighters and for their military training. Pakistani armed forces personnel were also involved with providing guidance during specific battles, as also, on occasion, even deploying soldiers to fight alongside the mujahideen.

The bulk of the funding went not to traditional, tribe-based parties that espoused moderate Sufic Islam, but to the radical groups, such as the Ittehad-e-Islami, headed by Abdul Rasool Sayyaf, that was a Wahhabi group sponsored and funded by Saudi Arabia, and the Hizb-e-Islami, headed by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

In the period, the fight against the Soviet forces and their Afghan allies was carried out mainly by various Afghan groups, though, from 1982, Pakistan had instructed its embassies to issue visas freely to anyone wishing to go to Afghanistan to fight alongside the mujahideen.⁵³ In 1986, the triumvirate backing the jihad took the crucial decision to convert the Afghan struggle into a 'global jihad', so that Muslims from all over the world could join the Afghan war.

During, about 35,000 Muslim fighters from forty-three Islamic countries actually joined the Afghan fighting. Several thousand others came to study in the madrassas (schools for Islamic studies) set up by the Pakistani government at the Pakistan–Afghanistan border, so that eventually about 100,000 Muslim radicals 'were to have direct contact with Pakistan and Afghanistan and be influenced by the jihad'.⁵⁴

A large number of these fighters came from Arab countries, and hence came to be known as 'Arab-Afghans'. These Arab fighters were hosted on arrival at Peshawar by Abdullah Azzam who, in 1984, set up his own office, Maktab al-Khidmaat (Services Office). It was funded by the Saudi national

Osama bin Laden (1957–2011), who had been a student of Azzam’s when the latter had taught in Jeddah.⁵⁵ Bin Laden belonged to one of the kingdom’s wealthiest families that had been the principal contractor for most royal family-funded projects since the days of King Abdulaziz.

Bin Laden had been attracted to the Afghan struggle from the very outset and had set up a guest house in Peshawar, Bayt al-Ansar, to accommodate Arabs coming to the country to join the struggle. At this early stage, his main role was to provide logistical support to the mujahideen. Later, in 1986, bin Laden set up his own military camp to train Arab fighters, possibly to reduce co-mingling between the Arabs and the Afghans, who were viewed as lax in matters of religious doctrine and practice.⁵⁶

In 1988, bin Laden set up in Peshawar an organization named Al Qaeda, ‘The Base’, in order ‘to lift the word of God and to make His religion victorious’.⁵⁷ Al Qaeda now became the central organization of the Arab jihadi network, with the Arabs creating a separate jihadi identity from the Afghans. They viewed themselves as the ‘vanguard’, which had been described by Azzam as ‘... the small spark which ignites a large keg of explosives, for the Islamic movement brings about an eruption of the hidden capabilities of the Ummah [the global Muslim community], and a gushing forth of the springs of Good stored up in its depth’.⁵⁸

In 1987, bin Laden was joined by a prominent Egyptian intellectual and activist, Ayman al-Zawahiri (b. 1951). Having been imprisoned briefly in 1984 after the assassination of President Anwar Sadat, al-Zawahiri came to Peshawar in 1985 as a medical doctor to help the mujahideen and the refugees. He viewed the Afghan jihad as an ‘incubator’ for the jihad that would later be pursued in Egypt. He was drawn to bin Laden’s vision of a ‘global jihad’ that would go beyond the Soviet Union to include the secular and corrupt rulers in West Asia, the US and Israel.

In 1988, the Soviet Union began to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, completing the disengagement on 15 February 1989 – a major defeat for a global superpower. And things were made worse by the fall of the Berlin Wall later that year and the break-up of the Soviet Union itself.

The modern world's first 'global jihad' had several immediate consequences, not all of which had been anticipated by its original sponsors: one, from the perspective of the jihadis, the struggle had ended in a great Islamic victory, the first Muslim victory over Western powers after several centuries. It clearly signalled that Allah was now again with His community since it had rediscovered the path of righteousness He had ordained.

Two, as the Paris-based authority on political Islam Gilles Kepel has noted, the Afghan jihad now unleashed 'the international brigade of jihad veterans', who were now available to serve Islamic causes; young Islamists from all over the world 'came to join these men and learn the terrorist trade from them'.⁵⁹

Three, the jihad spawned extremist organizations in different parts of the Muslim world, which were led by radicals with deep grievances against their own rulers who were viewed as corrupt and betrayers of the true message of Islam. These militants caused considerable ferment and violence: the civil conflict in Algeria cost the lives of nearly 100,000 people; other theatres of violent conflict were Egypt, Chechnya and Bosnia.

The death of Abdullah Azzam in mysterious circumstances in 1989 made bin Laden the effective head of the 'global jihadi' movement and, in the process, settled an important point of difference between Azzam and bin Laden in the last period of the Afghan struggle. After victory in Afghanistan, the former had wanted to consolidate the success of Islam by bringing together the different factions that had fought in the country. Bin Laden, on the other hand, saw the Afghan success as preparing the ground for 'a wider war against impious rulers';⁶⁰ a journalist who was close to bin Laden said, 'He [bin Laden] went to Afghanistan, not for the Afghans alone, but to liberate the ummah.'⁶¹

The aftermath of the jihad had reverberations in Saudi Arabia, where it had been spawned, and in Afghanistan itself, where it had fulfilled its mission.

Impact of Jihad in Saudi Arabia

The new focus on religiosity in Saudi Arabia after the bitter experience with Juhayman's uprising institutionalized in the country a narrowness and rigidity in matters of faith. This made the country an outlier in the Muslim world in doctrinal matters and an object of derision internationally, particularly for its religious intolerance and ill-treatment of women. It also alienated large sections of its own people – those nurtured in a liberal way of life due to foreign education and international business and travel, as also those from within the religious fold who had been tutored in activist Islamism.

The jihad in Afghanistan, which the kingdom had actively supported and in which several thousand Saudis had participated, set the stage, in the 1990s, for three distinct but simultaneous competitions within the kingdom: one, between the Islamic activists and the liberals (referred to as 'secularists'); two, between the Islamic activists and the traditional state-supported Wahhabi ulema; and, three, between the Islamic activists at home and the radicals returning from the struggle in Afghanistan.

All three competitions have at their centre the Saudi activist Islamists from the country's Sahwa (Awakening) movement. They were the products of the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose members had come to Saudi Arabia from Egypt after 1954 when Nasser first cracked down on them. Then, after 1970, there was a steady stream of Brothers from Egypt and other Arab countries – initially on account of employment opportunities available due to oil revenues and, from 1982, due to the harsh action taken against them in Syria by Hafez al Assad.

In Saudi Arabia, the Muslim Brothers' role in the political domain in the 1950s and 1960s was encouraged by King Saud and Crown Prince Faisal, when the country was in ideological and political competition with Nasser. The kingdom then used Islam as a 'counter-ideology' to Nasser's Arab nationalism and socialism, and utilized the services of the Brotherhood in this regard. As Stephane Lacroix, the Paris-based scholar of Islamic politics in Saudi Arabia, has pointed out, the members of the Muslim Brotherhood

in Saudi Arabia ‘... were increasingly brought into the anti-Nasser propaganda apparatus and became its core by 1962. No one but these experienced Islamists, sometimes themselves Nasser’s victims, was in a better position to denounce the “ungodliness” of his secular government and to use Islam as a weapon against it.’⁶²

Separately, the Brothers were given an active role in setting up and strengthening the kingdom’s nascent Islamic institutions of higher education, such as the Islamic University of Madinah established in 1961, and later the King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah and the Umm Al Qura University in Mecca. Stalwarts from the Muslim Brotherhood, such as Mohammad Qutb, Sayyid Qutb’s brother, came to occupy senior positions in these institutions. Some of the Brothers also taught in religious secondary schools known as ‘Scientific Institutes’.⁶³

Thus, an entire generation of Saudi students came under the Brothers’ influence, which penetrated different arenas of the country through the education system. This new social movement became known as Al-Sahwa Al-Islamia (Islamic Awakening) or just Sahwa. The Sahwis were organized in Saudi Arabia in jamaats (groups) formed around prominent tutors. In due course, four such jamaats came to be located in Riyadh and Jeddah.

In the 1980s, Saudi students, as they came into the workplace fresh from domestic universities, encountered a generation of their countrymen who were highly Westernized and whom (because of the Brotherhood’s influence) they came to see as ‘the generation of defeat, secularism and Westernisation’. These Sahwis believed that their country was the victim of a ‘secular-masonic plot’ to eradicate Islam from the country.⁶⁴

This sense of alienation led the Sahwis to question the establishment ulema and, in due course, challenge their monopoly over Islamic interpretation. They argued that, in order to understand current situations and ideas that undermine faith ‘the ulema needed not just mastery over the religious sciences but also vast knowledge of social sciences such as history, contemporary political science and the media’.⁶⁵ The clear implication was that, since most of the establishment ulema in the kingdom

only had knowledge of religion and little else, they could not be effective in the fight against Westernization and secularism.

One of the leaders of the Sahwa, Safar al-Hawali justified the active political role of his group by asserting that ‘we have lived the events, and they [the purists] have not lived them because they lived in another time’. His colleague Salman al-Awda criticized the primary concerns of the purists with the ‘hereafter, grace and death’, i.e., with matters of doctrine that had hardly any connection with contemporary political and economic challenges. He insisted that preachers in mosques should have greater knowledge of current issues and provide ‘lessons and instructive admonitions from these [i.e., current] events and the people can be reassured with regard to that matter’.⁶⁶

The purists fought back against these attacks, saying that these were ‘emotional responses’, that the activists had assumed leadership of youth when they were ‘themselves from the youth’ and had ‘not equipped themselves with this knowledge [i.e., fundamentals of tawhid]’.⁶⁷

Sahwi Critique of the Saudi Order

Amidst these serious challenges, the Sahwa votaries also witnessed a certain aggressiveness on the part of liberal intellectuals and activists whose writings dominated the Saudi and royal family-owned pan-Arab media. These provocations culminated in the attempt by forty-nine Saudi women to drive in fifteen cars in Riyadh, posing a direct challenge to religious restrictions in this regard.⁶⁸

The Gulf War of (discussed in the next chapter) acted as a catalyst for a sharp critique of the royal family by the Sahwa. In order to obtain religious sanction for allowing US troops into the kingdom, the Saudi ruler, King Fahd, obtained a fatwa from the Council of Senior Ulema, in which it ‘support [ed] the actions decided on by the leader ... to call upon qualified forces possessing equipment provoking fear and terror in those who would like to commit aggression against this country.’⁶⁹ Later, the president of the Supreme Council of Justice, followed by the judges of the Final Court of

Appeal, gave a similar opinion. Thus, establishment ulema and their institutions extended full support to the royal family in the hour of a grave national, spiritual and political crisis.

The first organized Sahwa action in Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of the Gulf War was the presentation of a 'Letter of Demands' to the king in May 1991, which was signed by fifty-two religious scholars.⁷⁰ The petition called for the establishment of a Consultative Council independent of any governmental influence; the repeal of all laws and regulations not conforming to Sharia, as decided by competent committees; and all government officials be moral and not corrupt. Justice, said the petitioners, must be applied fairly to all sections of the population without favouritism.

They wanted public wealth to be distributed equally, with fees for governmental services reduced and monopolies eliminated. Banks must be cleansed of usury. For national defence, a strong army was necessary, tasked with protecting the country and the holy sites, and supplied with arms from different sources; the development of a local arms industry should be given priority.

The new media, the petition stated, must serve Islam, and strengthen the moral fabric of society by adhering to Sharia, and spread knowledge by constructive criticism and truthful reporting. Foreign policy must be based on the national interest, without relying on alliances not sanctioned by Sharia, and it must support Islamic causes. Saudi embassies must be revamped to reflect the Islamic character of the country. Islamic religious institutions, particularly those furthering the religion, must be strengthened. Judicial institutions must be allowed to operate independently. The rights of individuals must be guaranteed, in accordance with accepted religious safeguards.

Instead of addressing the issues raised in the letter, the Saudi authorities separately interrogated all the signatories, some of whom were imprisoned but released shortly thereafter.

After this, the Islamic dissidents issued the 'Memorandum of Advice'.⁷¹ This document echoed the ijma (consensus) of the Saudi Sahwa, and critiqued several aspects of the Saudi system. These included the role of the

ulema, the law and judicial system, human rights, public administration, the economy, the armed forces, the information system and foreign policy. The memorandum was signed by 109 persons, many of whom were from the Saudi heartland of Najd.

In September 1992, the Council of Senior Ulema, headed by Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Baz, condemned the memorandum. It accused the petitioners of fomenting dissent, exaggerating the kingdom's shortcomings, and ignoring the good work done by the state. The council stated that the signatories had 'deviationist ideological links' and were encouraging discord.

The royal family reacted to the Sahwa petitions by arresting the leaders and releasing them only after they had signed an undertaking not to participate in political activity. The government also made major changes in the education and religious spheres to restrict the participation of Sahwa scholars.⁷²

Sahwa and the Jihadis

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan led to the Sahwa expressing full support for the Afghan people and providing financial support for the struggle. However, Azzam's attempt to expand the appeal of jihad across Muslim lands led to opposition within the Sahwa; they did not accept his view that jihad constituted 'the first individual duty for every Muslim'.⁷³ Despite the opposition of Sahwa leaders, a large number of Sahwa youth were allured to Afghanistan by the appeals made by Azzam and bin Laden.

After the Afghan jihad, bin Laden, on returning home, found himself out of tune both with the royal family and the Sahwa opposition that, as noted above, was calling for wide-ranging reforms in the country. At that time, bin Laden was still preoccupied with jihadi causes: he refused to sign the Sahwa's 'Letter of Demands' since he was busy organizing Yemeni veterans of the Afghan jihad against the Marxist government in South Yemen and did not wish to attract the attention of the government.⁷⁴ In late 1991, bin Laden settled in Sudan and rejected calls from the Saudi royal

family to return home. In March 1994, King Fahd stripped him of his Saudi citizenship. In April that year, bin Laden set up his Advice and Reform Committee that linked itself to the demands for reform presented by the Sahwa.

In September 1994, the Saudi government launched an attack on Islamic activists, and arrested leaders and many followers. With the arrest of the Sahwa leaders, control over the Islamist movement moved into the hands of the radicals. In November 1995, three veterans of the Afghan jihad and a local Islamist activist came together to launch a bomb attack in Riyadh – signalling that the jihad fomented abroad by the kingdom's rulers had now come home.

On 23 August 1996, bin Laden issued his 'Declaration of Jihad against the Americans who are Occupying the Land of the Two Places', in which he committed himself to 'global jihad' by asserting that he would undertake jihad against US troops deployed in Saudi Arabia itself. He declared himself an heir of the Sahwa movement and his conflict with the Saudi state as a continuation of the protest movement that began in 1991.

In 1996, bin Laden moved from Sudan to Peshawar, and then travelled to Kandahar, commencing a new phase in his jihadi journey.

After the withdrawal of Russian forces from Afghanistan, there was prolonged infighting among the Afghan mujahideen groups, with no settlement on power-sharing being possible among them, despite the best efforts of the Pakistani leaders and the Inter-Services Intelligence. Being unable to effect any reconciliation among the warring groups, Pakistan created a new jihadi force from among the Afghan students in the madrassas set up at the Pakistan–Afghanistan border. This new force was known as the Taliban (Students) and was headed by a veteran of the mujahideen struggle, Mullah Omar. The Taliban was organized, armed and trained by the Pakistani armed forces and, on occasion, even provided combat support as well.

In 1996, the Inter-Services Intelligence introduced bin Laden to Mullah Omar, thus putting in place an extraordinary symbiotic relationship: Mullah Omar gave bin Laden and the Al Qaeda sanctuary in Afghanistan; while bin

Laden brought with him about 3,000 Al Qaeda fighters, and imbued Mullah Omar and the Taliban with the message of 'global jihad', and deep animosity for the US and the West.

Towards 9/11

In his seminal work on the 9/11 attacks, *The Looming Tower*, the well-known American journalist Lawrence Wright points out that, while several factors were in play to promote a conflict between the West and Arab Muslim world, it was Osama bin Laden's 'vision to create an international jihad corps' and his personal leadership that had rejuvenated Al Qaeda, and these are largely responsible for the events of 11 September 2001.⁷⁵ But beyond bin Laden's personal role lies the significance of his ties with al-Zawahiri. As Wright explains eloquently:

The dynamic of the two men's relationship made Zawahiri and bin Laden into people they would never have been individually; moreover, the organisation they would create, Al Qaeda, would be a vector of these two forces, one Egyptian, one Saudi. Each would have to compromise in order to accommodate the goals of the other; as a result, Al Qaeda would take a unique path, that of global jihad.⁷⁶

While bin Laden was not a religious scholar, he articulated his views on matters of faith with clarity and emphasis. Natana Delong-Bas, the US-based authority on Sharia and Wahhabi Islam, sees the influence of Sayyid Qutb in bin Laden's attacks on 'Christian Crusaders and Zionist Jews', his division of the world into Muslims and kuffar (non-believers), the cosmic battle between good and evil, and his justification of violence in pursuing what is right and battling what is wrong. Finally, like Qutb, he also glorified martyrdom; he said, 'Being killed for Allah's cause is a great honour achieved by only those who are the elite of the nation.'⁷⁷

The Egyptian lawyer and former associate of al-Zawahiri in prison in Cairo, Montassir al-Zayyat, has described the ways in which bin Laden and al-Zawahiri influenced each other:

Zawahiri convinced bin Laden of his jihadi approach, turning him from a fundamentalist preacher whose main concern was relief, into a jihadi fighter, clashing with despots and American troops in the Arab world. ... Zawahiri's alliance with Osama bin Laden changed his philosophy from one prioritising combat with the near enemy to one confronting the far enemy: the United States and Israel.⁷⁸

Scholars have devoted considerable attention to discussing the shift in jihadi discourse from prioritizing reform of home countries on Islamic lines, i.e., religious nationalism, to the new commitment to transnational jihad, whose principal target was the US. The distinguished London-based authority on West Asian politics, Fawaz Gerges has explained that harsh state action by ruling regimes, particularly in Egypt and Algeria, had destroyed the domestic jihadi movements; their votaries had either been executed or incarcerated in cruel circumstances. Hence, the only option before Al Qaeda was either to recant and rejoin the social mainstream or select a new enemy. It is in this context, Gerges argues, that Al Qaeda decided to turn 'their guns against the West in an effort to stop the revolutionary ship from sinking'.⁷⁹

Ayman al-Zawahiri affirmed this in his memoirs (which he had started writing from 2000 and completed just after the 9/11 attacks), when he wrote, 'The jihadi movement finally assumed leadership of the ummah after it adopted the slogan of liberating the ummah of its foreign enemies and portrayed it as a battle between Islam and *kufr* [impiety] and Islam and *kuffar* [non-believers].'⁸⁰

This idea was given concrete shape when, on 23 February 1998, bin Laden issued the 'World Islamic Front's Declaration of Jihad against Jews and Crusaders', which sharply criticized the US for its occupation of

Muslim lands, the sufferings inflicted on the Iraqi people, and its total support for Israel's interests.

The declaration asserted that jihad was 'an individual duty whenever the enemy enters the lands of Muslims'. It then decreed that 'to kill the Americans and their allies, civilian and military, is an individual obligation' upon every Muslim, until the Muslim shrines of Mecca and Al-Aqsa are liberated, and foreign armies withdraw from Islamic territories.⁸¹ Bin Laden described this front 'as the first step to pool together the energies and concentrate efforts against the infidels represented in the Jewish-Crusader alliance, thus replacing splinter and subsidiary fronts'.⁸²

This declaration, issued in the form of a fatwa, gave worldwide publicity to bin Laden and his call for jihad, and attracted thousands of fighters to Afghanistan from diverse sources such as Pakistan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Sweden, Morocco, Canada and Chechnya. Bin Laden also publicized his cause through a series of interviews to members of the international media.⁸³

On 7 August 1998, Al Qaeda launched its first international strike – this was on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. These bombings were the result of planning going all the way back to 1993. This was a global operation in that it involved planning by the leadership in Afghanistan, local coordination through a cell in Kenya, cells in the US, UK and Yemen facilitating documentation and travel, and handling post-event publicity as well as operatives from Egypt. In the bombings, twelve Americans and 212 Africans were killed. The bombings were followed by US cruise missile attacks on targets in Sudan and Afghanistan, but they did no significant damage.

These bombings in east Africa – consisting of spectacular simultaneous attacks by suicide bombers – established a template for Al Qaeda's future actions.

After the bombings, bin Laden made a dramatic outreach to Mullah Omar by acknowledging him as 'amirul momineen' (the commander of the faithful), and called on 'all Muslims to render assistance and cooperation to

you, in every possible way they can'. This sealed a deep friendship between the two jihadi leaders.

Thus, when, in August 1998, the Saudi intelligence chief, Prince Turki Al Faisal, came to Kandahar to obtain the surrender of bin Laden (on the basis of what the prince thought had been a firm promise to him by Mullah Omar in June and affirmed subsequently by his ministers), Mullah Omar rejected the request peremptorily. He spoke of bin Laden as 'a man of honour' who wanted to rid Arabia from US presence; describing Saudi Arabia as an 'occupied country', he urged the prince to cooperate with bin Laden and the Taliban, and 'fight against the infidels'.⁸⁴

In October 2000, the Al Qaeda used a boat laden with explosives to carry out a suicide bombing against the US warship, *USS Cole*, off the port of Aden, killing seventeen Americans.

The 9/11 Attacks

The three simultaneous attacks on 11 September 2001, collectively referred to as the 9/11 attacks, are the most dramatic assault by Islamic extremists on the country that had spawned the jihad in Afghanistan. By taking the lives of about 3,000 people, they mark the apogee of the radical impulse that had been mobilized thoughtlessly by three state powers twenty years earlier in the battlefields of Afghanistan.

The report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, generally referred to as the '9/11 Commission Report', has provided a detailed account of the operational aspects of the attacks and the role of the various principal characters in the assaults. The British journalist, Jason Burke, has also given details of the recruitment of the participants, and the planning and execution processes.⁸⁵ An equally useful account is provided in Lawrence Wright's *The Looming Tower*, referred to earlier.⁸⁶

Briefly, four civilian aircraft, taking off from different US airports and going to different destinations, were hijacked shortly after take-off by Al Qaeda members – some of whom were trained pilots. Two of these aircraft

were deliberately crashed into the North and South Towers of the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York, while the third hit the Pentagon in Washington DC. On the fourth plane, which was perhaps targeting the US Capitol in Washington DC, there was some resistance from passengers, which led the pilot to deliberately crash the aircraft in a muddy field in Pennsylvania. These hijackings not only killed all the passengers on the planes (and their hijackers), they also caused the deaths of numerous people in the Pentagon and the WTC buildings, where a third building also collapsed due to the heat generated by fires burning after the attacks.

All told, nineteen persons were directly involved in these attacks. Broadly, they could be placed in three groups:

- The ‘hardcore’, i.e., those who were long-standing associates of bin Laden in Afghanistan.
- From the ‘Hamburg’ cell, i.e., those who had come to Hamburg during, functioned autonomously for jihadi causes, and independently came in contact with bin Laden; they included three of the four pilots, and one other hijacker.
- Those who were deployed as ‘musclemen’ to control the passengers; they were thirteen in number.⁸⁷

The four pilots were from Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, while the balance were Saudis since it was easy for Saudis to get US visas.⁸⁸

Most of the planning was done between end-1998 and end-1999, in different towns of Afghanistan. The total cost of the operation was about half-a-million dollars, which had been obtained from a clandestine network of charities, private businesses and government organizations that transferred money to different accounts, as required.

Though the operation was monitored by a core group that included bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, most of the detailed planning was the handiwork of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, a Pakistani national of Baluchi origin, who had lived in Kuwait and obtained an engineering degree from an American

university. He is believed to have suggested the original idea of hijacked planes crashing into high-profile targets. Bin Laden possibly selected the final four targets as also the first four recruits, and later, approved the final participants. Most of the recruits received advanced training in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which included: commando tactics, night operations, use of codes, hijacking of aircraft (by using flight simulators), and familiarization with some aspects of Western culture.

After the 9/11 attacks, one of bin Laden's close associates, Abul Walid al-Masri, wrote a very negative account of bin Laden's leadership. Among other things, he pointed out that bin Laden saw the US as a weak nation that would not be able to withstand Al Qaeda's hammer-blows. This was based on him recalling the US's hasty departure from Lebanon in 1983 after the bomb attack on its Beirut headquarters, and its departure 'in shameful disarray and indecorous haste' from Somalia in March 1994.⁸⁹

Contrary to bin Laden's assessment, the US quickly mobilized itself for war, with bombings of Taliban and Al Qaeda targets starting from early October 2001. It also organized the Northern Alliance in northeast Afghanistan, which was hostile to the Taliban, to begin ground operations; these forces took Kabul in November, followed by Kandahar in December. However, bin Laden, al-Zawahiri and Mullah Omar managed to escape to Pakistan with their close associates, though Al Qaeda in Afghanistan was decimated, with 80 per cent of its members being killed or captured.⁹⁰

The destruction of the Taliban emirate deprived the Al Qaeda of a secure base for its regional and global operations, its ability to bring recruits from different countries to a safe haven for indoctrination, training, and its selection of operatives for specific missions. The US spread a global dragnet to identify, apprehend and eliminate as many jihadis as possible as part of its 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT). Many detainees were incarcerated at the infamous Guantanamo Bay detention camp in southern Cuba. Starting with arrested Al Qaeda members, eventually hundreds of prisoners from several countries were held at the camp without charge and without the legal means to challenge their detentions.

The George W. Bush administration maintained that it was neither obliged to grant basic [constitutional](#) protections to the prisoners, since the base was outside US territory, nor required to observe the Geneva Conventions regarding the treatment of prisoners of war and civilians during wartime, as the conventions did not apply to ‘unlawful enemy combatants.’⁹¹

Implications of the 9/11 Attacks

The huge quantum of commentary spawned by the 9/11 attacks offers a wide variety of theories to explain this catastrophic assault on the US mainland, and identify failures on the part of prominent individuals and institutions. Conspiracy theories blame President Bush and his vice president, Dick Cheney, of deliberately allowing the attacks to happen in order to justify the later invasion of Iraq. Others identify Israel as the villain – carrying out the attacks to encourage the US’s war on the Muslim world.

And while many accounts speak of serious intelligence failures, both by the CIA and the FBI, the conclusion is unavoidable that, given the circumstances prevailing at that time, the threat perceptions of the US security establishment and the resources available, the attacks could not have been prevented.⁹²

However, despite the spectacular nature of the strike and the jubilation among Al Qaeda cadre, the attacks divided opinion among Islamist circles, highlighting how disparate positions were – not just between the three broad expressions of political Islam, but within jihadi groups themselves, indeed, as it later emerged, within Al Qaeda itself. The criticisms found fault with Al Qaeda’s actions on doctrinal, political, strategic and tactical bases.

The principal groups representing activist Islamism – the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas and Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan – condemned the attacks as being ‘against all human and Islamic norms’. The

spiritual guide of Hezbollah, Mohammed Hussain Fadlallah, said he was 'horrified' by these 'barbaric crimes', which were 'forbidden by Islam'.⁹³

Fadlallah said Al Qaeda should have distinguished between ordinary Americans and their leaders, that the struggle was against US hegemony, and that 'civilized Islam' did not approve of pre-emptive attacks on innocent civilians. Bin Laden, in his view, had displayed poor understanding of political matters and had not made an objective cost-benefit analysis before the attacks, thus exposing Muslims the world over to considerable harm. Finally, he asserted that there was no parallel between the 9/11 attacks and the Palestinian 'martyrdom' operations against Israel; the latter was an occupation force in Muslim lands and oppressed Muslims, which justified the attacks on them.⁹⁴

The Sudanese Islamist ideologue, Hassan al Turabi, who had had a long association with bin Laden when the latter was in Sudan during, described the killing of American civilians as morally wrong and politically harmful; intelligent mujahideen, he said, should 'exercise restraint and refrain from initiating war and must limit operations to military, not civilian, targets'.⁹⁵

From within the jihadi fold, sharp criticisms came from the ideologue of the Islamic Group in Egypt, Mohammed Essam Derbala, who said that the attacks violated Islamic law and recalled several occasions when US actions had helped Muslim interests. He denied that there was an inevitable clash of cultures or religions since Islam was a universal faith and was well-integrated with other civilizations. Finally, he regretted that the 9/11 operations had been undertaken without an objective appraisal of benefits and difficulties.⁹⁶

The final set of condemnations came from within Al Qaeda itself. Abul Walid al-Masri, a veteran Arab-Afghan, who was close to Mullah Omar, published in the London-based Arabic daily, *Al Sharq al-Awsat*, a detailed account of the experience of the Arab-Afghans from their entry into Afghanistan to their final departure after 9/11. He criticized bin Laden for his authoritarian approach, the curbing of internal debate, and his fondness for media attention – in short, his 'catastrophic leadership'.⁹⁷

The response from Al Qaeda leaders to justify the 9/11 attacks address both Western audiences and their critics from within the Islamist fold. In an article published in the *Atlantic Monthly* of September 2004, the author, Alan Cullison, provided bin Laden's explanation addressed to Americans on why the US had been specifically targeted:

What takes place in America today was caused by the flagrant interference on the part of successive American governments into other's business. These governments [had] imposed regimes that contradict the faith, values and lifestyles of the people.

Our current battle is against the Jews. ... However, Muslims find that the Americans stand as a protective shield and strong supporter, both finally and morally. ... The American position obliged Muslims to force the Americans out of the arena first to enable them to focus on the Jewish enemy. Why are the Americans fighting a battle on behalf of the Jews?⁹⁸

Other responses reflect the differences in the application of general Islamic tenets in modern-day circumstances that divide the various expressions of political Islam and are addressed to Islamist critics. Thus, Al Qaeda issued a formal statement on 24 April 2002, in which it provided a justification for the attacks on the basis of Islamic doctrine. This document discusses the justification for the use of violence provided in Islam – an issue that continues to divide Islamists.⁹⁹ The main points made in the statement may be summarized thus:

- The statement questions the scholarly independence and integrity of the critics of the 9/11 attacks 'that changed the face of history on such a grand scale', describing them as 'the rulers' sheikhs', i.e., spokespersons of Arab regimes who are puppets of the US.
- In fact, support for the US against the 9/11 martyrs gives 'Crusaders the green light to exact revenge on Muslims' and amounts to apostasy.

- The critics are guilty of hypocrisy when they support Palestinian ‘martyrdom’ operations against the Israelis, while criticizing the attacks on the US; in fact, Israel is the ‘branch’ while the US is its ‘supporting trunk’.
- The 9/11 attacks were defensive measures to protect the interests of the Muslim community against the ‘Zionist-Crusader’ plot to annihilate the Muslims.

The document then provides a point-wise justification for the attack on the US and the targeting of civilians on the basis of Al Qaeda’s understanding of these norms. The document included a stark warning for the US: ‘We are coming, by the will of God almighty, no matter what America does. It will never be safe from the fury of Muslims. America is the one who began the war, and it will lose the battle by the permission of God almighty.’

In separate documents, al-Zawahiri took on his Egyptian critics from Islamic Jihad and then issued a strongly worded message to all Muslims on the need for loyalty to the faith. In his memoir, *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, that was under preparation from 2000, and published in December 2001, al-Zawahiri said of his former associates that the ‘hot-blooded revolutionary strugglers’ had become ‘cold as ice’ after a life of comfort in civilized Europe and the enjoyment of the materialism of Western civilization.¹⁰⁰

In his later tract of 2003, *Al Walaa al Baraa* (‘Inclusion and Exclusion’, an Islamic concept referring to the distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims), he warned Muslims against ‘enemies’ who were carrying out a ‘misleading intellectual and moral campaign’ in support of the military campaign to keep in place the existing unjust order.¹⁰¹

The destruction inflicted upon the US on that fateful day of 11 September marks an ironical milestone in the Islamist narrative, with the protagonists of the ‘global jihad’ assaulting the edifices of US power that had nurtured and sustained them two decades earlier. In this period, Islam in its political incarnations was truly at the centre of West Asian affairs – and pitted states and non-state actors in a wide variety of lethal conflicts clothed

in the veneer of Islam, the faith, but camouflaging interests linked to domestic challenges to rulers' legitimacy and their regional competitions to uphold their strategic interests.

But 9/11 is just that – a milestone on the path of political Islam that has still some way to go. The events themselves unleashed a new set of contentions shaped by the rage and desire for vengeance of the wounded US hegemon. Hence, we need to pause this narrative of political Islam and go back ten years, to 1990. Here, we will pick up the thread of another drama unfolding simultaneously in the region – the end of the Iran–Iraq war, the end of the 'global jihad' in Afghanistan, and the end of the global Cold War that in West Asia was marked by the occupation of Kuwait by Iraq in August 1990.

This provided the US, fresh from victory in the Cold War and now the sole global superpower, the stage to exercise its military prowess through regional interventions and display its capacity for extraordinary destruction. This backward look will bring us back to the 9/11 events. From there, we will take the narrative forward to the second US attack on Iraq.

Political Islam, in different expressions, remains central to the regional narrative for another two decades.

6

Post-Cold War in West Asia : The First Gulf War to 9/11 (1990–2001)



FOLLOWING THE SECOND WORLD WAR, THE INFLUENCE OF THE US IN West Asian affairs steadily increased, so that by 1980 its fingerprints were to be seen in every significant development in the region. It played this role through behind-the-scenes persuasion, robust public coercion or direct military assault, while creating a strong cabal of local rulers who crucially came to depend on the US for the very survival of their regime and the security, and even the territorial integrity of their state.

After the Cold War, the US was the world's sole superpower; in West Asia, it was the hegemon, usually determining unilaterally its approach to regional challenges, and taking recourse to coercion and military force to bend leaders and states to its will.

Not surprisingly, US policies in West Asia were often influenced by the vagaries of its own domestic politics – the swing of the political pendulum between Democrats and Republicans, and the linked electoral considerations that all-too-frequently decided power and influence at home. These political swings and the consequent decisions that flowed from the White House, of course, had behind them the role of lobbies and special

interest groups – particularly those driven by ideological and even faith-based beliefs dearly held, that made themselves felt most obviously through the media. But more often through machinations and pressures well outside the public domain.

The one movement that has been most influential in steering US policies in West Asia in specific directions has been the Israel lobby, whose efforts on behalf of Israel's interests have been abetted by its close affiliation with the Christian right in the US.

This chapter will attempt to capture and explain the vagaries of the US's role in West Asia, and the implications of its policies, diplomatic initiatives and military interventions for the region and its principal protagonists.

Early Forays

It takes some effort to recall that till about four decades ago, the US was a reluctant role-player in West Asia. Yes, as noted earlier, its petroleum companies did enter the Gulf sheikhdoms to prospect for oil after the First World War, but these were commercial efforts, with little political content.

Saudi Arabia was the major location where a consortium of American oil companies had been remarkably successful. Oil in commercial quantities had been discovered in March 1938, but this made little difference to the political scenario: Britain was accepted as the arbiter of the region's political destiny and the US saw no reason to change this in any way. In April 1941, for instance, the chairman of BAPCO, a partner in oil exploration in the kingdom, recommended to the US government that financial assistance be provided to Saudi Arabia, then suffering from drought and increasing food prices. Despite support from the State Department, this was turned down by President Roosevelt; he asked his officials to tell the British, 'I hope they can take care of the King of Saudi Arabia. This is a little far afield for us.'¹

The situation changed after the US entered the Second World War. It now recognized the strategic value of the kingdom both on account of its oil resources and its location as the staging post for supplies to the Soviet

Union. In 1943, Saudi Arabia was declared eligible for lend-lease assistance² and a US chargé d'affaires was appointed in Jeddah. Thus, while the UK continued its premier presence in the rest of the Gulf for the next twenty-five years, the US's economic and military presence continued to expand in Saudi Arabia – this included loans for national development, an airfield in Dhahran, and an oil pipeline (Tapline) to Sidon in Lebanon.

In January 1968, British Prime Minister Harold Wilson shook the political status quo by announcing that, by the end of 1971, the UK would end its presence east of Suez. The US had not been consulted in advance and was deeply concerned that the British withdrawal would open the doors for Soviet entry into the oil-rich region. US Secretary of State Dean Rusk is said to have admonished Foreign Secretary George Brown by saying, 'Be British, George, be British, how can you betray us?'³

The story of how the US gradually expanded its presence in West Asia is best narrated by the 'doctrines' that are named after different US presidents and were framed in response to prevailing political circumstances – with the challenge from the Soviet Union being central to all of them. The US had been concerned about Soviet interest in West Asia even before the Second World War ended: in 1944, American officials had noted that 'Soviet policy in the Arab world appears to be aimed at the reduction of British influence in the area and the acquisition of the balance of power'. In early 1945, the State Department concluded that Britain might not be able to resist Soviet incursions and that the US might have to take charge of 'fostering the economic advancement of the Middle East people'.⁴

In this background, the first doctrine enunciated was the Truman Doctrine. Announced in March 1947, and later elaborated in July 1948 in a speech by President Truman before Congress, it affirmed US support for the economies and the armed forces of Greece and Turkey. This is said to mark the beginning of the Cold War by leading to the setting up of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Europe. Its later impact on West Asia was the Baghdad Pact Organization of February 1955, formally the Middle East Treaty Organization (METO) – made up of Britain, Turkey, Iraq, Iran and

Pakistan – which was aimed at keeping the Soviet Union out of West Asia. (With the withdrawal of Iraq from METO after its revolution of 1958, it was renamed Central Treaty Organization, or CENTO.)

This was followed by the Eisenhower Doctrine of January 1957: it provided that a West Asian country could request American economic assistance or aid from the US's military forces if it was being threatened by armed aggression. Eisenhower authorized the commitment of US forces 'to secure and protect the territorial integrity and political independence of such nations, requesting such aid against overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by [international](#) communism'. While communism was identified as the principal target of this doctrine, most observers then understood that it was largely directed at curbing Arab nationalist aspirations – particularly those represented by Nasser, who was seen as building close ties with the Soviet bloc.

The Nixon Doctrine of July 1969, also referred to as the 'Twin Pillars' strategy, envisaged that the US's allies and friends 'would supply their own manpower to defend themselves against communist aggression'.⁵ The US would prepare its regional partners for this role by providing military equipment, but would avoid a direct military role for itself. In the Gulf, this role was to be played jointly by Iran and Saudi Arabia, though the lead player would be Iran. This doctrine was aimed at undermining the emergence of nationalist movements with a radical agenda, countering Soviet influence in different countries, and ensuring that oil was not used again (after 1973) as a weapon against US interests. The supply of the latest US weaponry fit well with the regional ambitions of the shah: during, Iran received a third of the US's global sales, at an average annual cost of \$2 billion.⁶

The Nixon Doctrine achieved very little in terms of US interests: it encouraged Iran's aggressiveness in the Gulf, with the shah claiming Bahrain as part of Iran (which was aborted through a UN mission determining that its people wished to remain independent) and then taking over three islands in the Gulf that were claimed by Sharjah and Ra'as al-Khaimah (which then joined other neighbouring sheikhdoms to form the

United Arab Emirates in December 1971). The doctrine became meaningless once the shah was himself overthrown in 1979 and Iran became an Islamic Republic that was viscerally hostile to US presence in the region.

The Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 led the US to hurriedly announce the Carter Doctrine in January 1980. This declared that Gulf oil was a 'vital interest' of the US, and that America would deter or respond to 'outside' threats to Gulf security; it included this ringing assertion:

An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.⁷

Over thirty-three years, from Truman to Carter, US policies in West Asia had been generally influenced by concerns relating to Soviet encroachments into the region. But they had also conveyed a strong resistance on the part of the US to get too deeply involved in regional affairs – its religious and cultural ethos was too arcane for the Americans, and its politics far too contentious and convoluted for the US's straightforward approach. And yet, the region was far too valuable for a hands-off policy either.

The US's strategic interests in West Asia consisted of: one, ensuring the free flow of oil supplies, including through the choke points;⁸ two, the security of Israel and of the Arab regimes that were US allies; and, three, ensuring that the Soviet Union and its allies were prevented from expanding their presence and influence in the region.

Despite its extensive military deployments and its stern anti-Soviet agenda, it is important to recall that, at this stage, the US was not interested in any military engagement in the region. What the Americans desperately hoped for was that the Soviets would understand US warnings and back off from further incursions after their entry into Afghanistan or, failing that, the US would once again seek another surrogate partner (to replace Iran) to

champion its regional interests. The surprise US choice for this role was Iraq on the basis that the country was feeling threatened by its neighbouring revolutionary republic. As Mohammed Ayoob puts it, ‘The Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980 provided the opportunity for the United States to develop this new relationship with its former adversary in order to contain its new foe.’⁹

The US’s alignment with Iraq was manifested throughout the Iran–Iraq war in the form of financial support and military intelligence. America also condoned the Iraqi use of chemical weapons against Iran and the attack on an American naval vessel, *USS Stark*, in May 1987, in which thirty-seven personnel were killed. However, what the war also achieved was the significant expansion and consolidation of the US’s military presence in the region.

President Carter announced the setting up of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force in March 1980, which was a multi-service mobile strike force. Besides this, the US also set up a vast web of bases across the region – upgrading the Diego Garcia base in the Western Indian Ocean, building military facilities in Saudi Arabia and upgrading the naval base in Bahrain. In 1983, President Reagan reorganized the joint task force into the US Central Command, or CENTCOM.

CENTCOM’s area of responsibility includes West Asia, Central Asia, North Africa (Egypt) and South Asia (Pakistan and Afghanistan). It covers an area of 7.5 million square miles across the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Gulf of Oman and parts of the Western Indian Ocean, including the choke points of Hormuz, Bab al-Mandab and the Suez Canal. In the Gulf, it has a naval base in Bahrain, an air base in Qatar, along with its special operations command centre, and an armed forces base in Kuwait.

The value of these deployments was immediately seen in the face of the steady increase in attacks on merchant shipping through the Iran–Iraq war: these attacks went from seventy-one in 1984 to 111 in 1986, and then surged to 181 in 1987. Major global powers sent their warships to the Gulf waters to escort regional vessels, particularly during the ‘Tanker War’ phase of the war in. By the end of the war, there were eighty-two Western naval

vessels in the Gulf, including thirty-three combat vessels, as well as twenty-three Soviet ships.¹⁰

Developments during the period took place in the backdrop of three significant events – two regional and one of global import – that determined the US's approach to West Asia over the next decade: Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the end of the Iran–Iraq war in 1988-89, and, globally, the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, which initiated the collapse of the Soviet Union, with independent states emerging in eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

As mentioned previously, the end of the Cold War left the US as the world's sole superpower and as the regional hegemon in West Asia. However, its visceral hostility towards Iran and its revolution, and the robust support it extended to Iraq during the latter's war with its neighbour, led the nascent global hegemon, after the war, to back the exaggerated claims of its former favourite – Iraq – ultimately leading to the widespread destruction of Iraq's edifices and institutions, and untold misery for its people.

The First Gulf War

The supreme irony associated with the US's backing for Iraq during its war with Iran is that it convinced Saddam Hussein that the US would not seriously oppose him when he sought a 'reward' for successfully warding off the threat to Gulf and US interests from the Iranian revolution. His 'reward' took the shape of the occupation of Kuwait and obliterating it from the comity of sovereign nations. As Ayoob has pointed out, the US's pandering to Iraq had created a 'Frankenstein's monster'.¹¹

As Iraq's war with Iran came to an end, its destructive effects on the economic well-being of the Iraqi people became immediately apparent. Within a few days of the beginning of the war on 22 September 1980, Iraq had had to suspend oil production from its southern fields, so by the end of 1980 its oil exports had reduced by 72 per cent.¹² The burden on the population was eased to some extent through state subsidies, but this was a

temporary palliative. Through the war, the economy had been utilized to support the war effort, so that developmental and welfare activity had to be suspended.

Adding to the economic pressures were the problems of the demobilization of 200,000 soldiers and the high debt burden, as also continued expenditure on defence. In 1990, Iraq's officially admitted debt was \$42.1 billion. Debt service over five years meant an outflow of \$15 billion per year – more than the annual oil revenues. Kuwait was a major source of pressure: it (with the UAE) continued to produce oil well above its OPEC quota by 40 per cent, which depressed oil prices; it also insisted that Iraq repay the \$12–14 billion that it had borrowed during the war. Oil prices fell to \$11/barrel, which only provided Iraq with revenues to meet its current expenses, with no surplus for debt servicing or development.¹³

In July 1990, Iraq submitted a memorandum to the Arab League in which it accused Kuwait of encroaching 'on our territory, oilfields and stealing our wealth', which, Iraq contended, was tantamount to 'military aggression'. The memorandum added that Kuwait was also causing 'a collapse of the Iraqi economy' when Iraq was confronting the 'Zionist enemy', which too was an act of military aggression.¹⁴ The London-based commentator on Iraq's sectarian politics, Fanar Haddad concludes that 'economic consequences of the 1980s were amongst the most important causal factors' in Iraq's decision to invade Kuwait in August 1990.¹⁵

The final green signal to Iraq's plans to invade Kuwait seems to have been given by the US ambassador in Baghdad, April Glaspie, who met Saddam Hussein on 25 July, a week before the invasion. In response to Saddam's query relating to the US position on Iraq's territorial claims on Kuwait, Glaspie responded thus:

We have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait. I was in the American embassy in Kuwait in the late 1960s. The instruction we had during this period was that we should express no opinion on this issue [of borders], and the issue is not associated with America. [US Secretary of State]

James Baker has directed our official spokesmen to emphasise this instruction.¹⁶

This is truly an astonishing statement. Glaspie refers to the US position of having ‘no opinion on the Arab-Arab differences’ of the late 1960s when national borders in the Gulf were still being shaped under British supervision. But, by recalling Baker’s latest instructions, she appears to suggest that, twenty years later, this was still the US view. This makes no sense given that, in the late 1980s, the US was the principal source of regional security in terms of the Carter Doctrine, and the Gulf sheikhdoms were its important regional allies, whose interests it was committed to defending, with military force if necessary.

We can only conclude that either the ambassador was seriously ill-informed, or she had been directed to obfuscate on the border issue in order to lure Saddam into a trap that would give the US the opening for his ultimate destruction. But, even if the latter is true, it does not excuse Saddam’s folly in accepting the US position at face value. Perhaps he heard what he wanted to hear and did what he had planned to do, in any case. By this time, Saddam had been in power for over twenty years, had eliminated all rivals, and was surrounded by those who cheerfully echoed his views. Voices of caution, restraint and good sense no longer existed near the Iraqi tyrant.

Saddam Hussein and his officials read the US statement as an official green signal to assert their territorial claims on Kuwait. Thus, Iraq plunged into a thirty-year nightmare from which it has not fully emerged even now. It also unleashed a series of developments that have caused upheavals – domestic and regional – across West Asia, whose reverberations are still being felt.

On 2 August 1990, at 6 a.m., Iraqi armed forces began their invasion of Kuwait; four hours later the occupation was complete. After a few days, Saddam Hussein announced that Kuwait had been merged with Iraq as its nineteenth province. Kuwait’s ruling family fled to Saudi Arabia, while the state ceased to exist as an independent entity. On 6 August, King Fahd of

Saudi Arabia, fearing the invasion of his own country, called for US military assistance. President George H.W. Bush immediately sent 40,000 troops to defend the kingdom.

Backed by UNSC Resolution 678 of 29 November, which called for the vacation of occupation by 'all necessary means', the US put together a coalition that included almost the entire international community. Iraq's half-a-million troops faced an alliance of 700,000 soldiers, including 550,000 Americans, with 4,000 tanks, 2,900 aircraft, and 107 warships.¹⁷

The military campaign, named 'Operation Desert Storm', began on 16 January 1991 with massive attacks on Iraq's war machine, national infrastructure and institutions. The war ended on 27 February – after 167 days of pre-war crisis and forty-two days of fighting. Over 60,000 Iraqi soldiers were killed, as against 375 coalition deaths. Iraqi targets had sustained over 100,000 tons of explosives – more than five times the number showered upon Hiroshima in the Second World War.¹⁸

The US had warned Iraq before the war that its firepower would take Iraq 'back to the pre-industrial age'. In this effort, the US succeeded: a French commentator, Eric Rouleau, wrote in early 1995 that 'Iraq has been irrevocably damned' and that Operation Desert Storm had begun the Iraqis' 'descent into hell'.¹⁹

Rouleau noted that US-led bombardment systematically destroyed or crippled Iraqi infrastructure and industry; this included electric power stations (92 per cent of installed capacity destroyed), refineries (80 per cent of production capacity damaged), petrochemical complexes, telecommunications centres (including 135 telephone networks), bridges (more than 100 destroyed), roads, highways, railroads, hundreds of locomotives, radio and television broadcasting stations, cement plants, and factories producing aluminium, textiles, electric cables, and medical supplies. The losses were estimated by the Arab Monetary Fund to be at \$190 billion.

Though the Allied armies could have marched into Baghdad within a couple of days, the considered decision of the George H.W. Bush administration was to retain Saddam Hussein in power. Brent Scowcroft,

Bush's national security adviser, explained that occupation of Iraq would have meant a mid-course change of objectives, which would have had 'incalculable human and political costs', and placed the occupation forces 'in a bitterly hostile land'.²⁰

General Sir Peter de La Billière, the commander of the British forces in the coalition, pointed out that Arab and Muslim members of the coalition were reluctant to invade another Arab country. He also noted that Western forces in Iraq would have been seen as 'foreign invaders' and the whole operation would have become one more effort by Western powers to promote their interests in West Asia.²¹

But despite there being no invasion, Iraq's ordeal did not end. The US's intention was to obtain regime change, but without the use of invading military forces. It believed that subjecting the Iraqi people to the severest possible sanctions would encourage an uprising from within. Thus, with the help of a series of UNSC resolutions, Iraq was subjected to wide-ranging sanctions that denied it the ability to sell its oil and restricted imports. These sanctions were backed by the policy of 'dual containment' and two 'no-fly-zones' – one above the 36th parallel and the other below the 32nd parallel – in which Iraqi military aircraft could not fly; this was to protect the Kurds and Shia, respectively, from Saddam's attacks.

'Dual containment' emerged from the US view that, instead of attempting to balance Iraq and Iran against each other, both should be viewed as 'significant threats' to American interests in West Asia. This idea was developed by US diplomat and foreign policy analyst, Martin Indyk, in 1993, when he was in the National Security Council. He argued that Iraq was a 'criminal regime', while Iran too posed challenges to US interests due to its 'assassination and terrorism' across the globe, its hostility to the Israel–Palestine peace process, and its backing for Hamas and Hezbollah.

In terms of the 'dual containment' policy, both countries were subjected to stringent sanctions: Iran was isolated economically and denied technology transfers, while Iraq was subjected to continuous and intrusive inspections to detect weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Even at that time it was obvious that this policy was being promoted to suit Israel's

concerns and there were several criticisms that it did not serve US interests.²² One important point made by critics was that the US was now compelled to contain these two countries on its own, using huge military resources, and suffer the animosity of both of them.

The distinguished American commentator on West Asian politics, F. Gregory Gause III complained at that time that the policy contained 'logical flaws and practical inconsistencies and is based on faulty geopolitical premises'.²³ Stalwarts of the Bush Sr administration, Brzezinski, Scowcroft and Richard Murphy, wrote jointly that the policy was 'more a slogan than a strategy ... [it] lacks viability and carries a high financial and diplomatic cost'.²⁴ These criticisms made no difference: the US under President Bill Clinton pursued this policy vigorously in respect of both countries.

In Iraq, the harshest manifestation of the policy was the inspections regime: UNSC Resolution 687, passed on 3 April 1991, provided for the destruction of all of Iraq's chemical and biological weapons. The UN secretary general then set up a commission to carry out on-site inspections, the incentive for Iraq being that, once it was certified as being without WMD, the sanctions would be removed. Thus began an inspections' ordeal for Iraq that ended only with the US's second war on the country in 2003 and the removal of the Saddam regime.

The functioning of the inspections commission was closely controlled by US intelligence and other departments, which infiltrated their own officials into the inspections teams, obtained regular briefings from them and secured detailed information relating to Iraq's military capabilities and deployments. Periodically, when the US found that Iraq was not being fully cooperative in accommodating its intrusive demands, military attacks would be launched to obtain compliance.

On 29 April 1994, US Secretary of State Warren Christopher announced that reports of full compliance by Iraq would still not be sufficient for easing of sanctions.²⁵ After this, the inspections came to be used to affect a coup d'état or encourage a Kurdish insurgency.²⁶ As repeated inspections failed to reveal any evidence of WMD, the inspections ceased to have any link with discovering these weapons. They became increasingly provocative

and intrusive to encourage the Iraqi government to react negatively, so that there would be an excuse for a military attack.

In response to reports of the dire economic circumstances of the Iraqi people, the UN approved in April 1995 the 'oil-for-food' programme which would allow Iraq to sell oil valued at \$2 billion every six months; after deductions for the compensation fund, relief for the Kurds and administrative expenses, just about half this amount was available for food and medicines. Still, food consumption of the Iraqis increased – the daily calorie intake going from 1,350 to 2,000.

However, the economic situation still remained difficult: in 1991, the GDP had declined by two-thirds due to an 85 per cent fall in oil production; by 1994, prices had increased by 5,000 per cent since 1990, while the Iraqi dinar declined against the dollar by 3,000 per cent so that \$1 was equal to ID3,000 in 1999.²⁷

Another factor influencing US decision-making relating to Iraq was that, in his second term, the Monica Lewinski scandal had broken and Clinton was facing impeachment. Thus, senior US officials worked closely with Richard Butler, the head of the UN inspections commission, in December 1998, to use his doctored report about Iraq's non-cooperation as an excuse to bomb the country just when impeachment proceedings were to commence, so that the proceedings would be postponed. Iraq was bombed during 'Operation Desert Fox' for four days (17–20 December 1998), but the House vote still went against Clinton on the impeachment issue.²⁸

In December 1999, the UNSC passed Resolution 1284 that created a new inspections regime, removed the ceiling on Iraq's oil exports and eased procedures to import foodstuffs, medical supplies, agricultural equipment and educational items.

None of this really helped Iraq: in January 2001, George Bush Jr became the US president and, within a few weeks, authorized military attacks on Iraq on the grounds that the country was planning to upgrade its air defences; popular opinion held that Saddam Hussein was being punished for supporting the Palestinian Intifada in the Occupied Territories.

Much worse was to follow for Iraq after the 9/11 attacks (see next chapter).

Israel–Palestine

Any understanding of US foreign policy relating to West Asia, particularly pertaining to the Israel–Palestine issue, requires some knowledge of the ‘Israel lobby’ in the US.

The role of this lobby in influencing American foreign policy, particularly towards West Asia, came to be discussed publicly in the country following the publication of a paper by two distinguished American foreign affairs scholars, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt titled, ‘The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy’. It was submitted for publication to the *Atlantic Monthly* in January 2005. After being denied publication in the US, a shorter version appeared in the *London Review of Books* in March 2006. The piece caused a storm of protest in the US, confirming the main point made by the authors – that the Israel lobby had deliberately restricted discussion relating to US policies in West Asia.

In 2007, the authors published their 484-page book with the same title. They described the Israel lobby as a loose coalition of individuals and groups that seeks to influence US foreign policy in favour of Israel. The policies so pursued, the authors said, were often to the disadvantage of the US or even led to the long-term disadvantage of Israel. But the lobby had convinced many Americans that their and Israeli interests were essentially identical, which they were not. In the 1990s, the lobby was led by hardliners in the US who cooperated closely with their extremist counterparts in Israel, usually the right-wing Likud party and its allies. Finally, the authors said, it had become impossible to discuss the lobby’s role and influence in the US without being accused of anti-Semitism.²⁹

The influence of the Israel lobby in the US can be traced back to the middle of the previous century. Following the Second World War and the wave of sympathy for Jews after the Holocaust, anti-Semitism in the US now began not only to distinguish between Jews and Arabs, but also to see

the Jews as a part of the shared ‘Judeo-Christian civilisation’, thus obliterating two millennia of animosity between Christians and Jews. In 1957, President Harry Truman told the Zionist Organization of America that Israel reflected ‘a rebirth of a nation dedicated, as of old, to the moral law [and was] an embodiment of the great ideals of our civilisation’.³⁰

A significant source of support for Israel in the US were the Christian evangelists, also known as Christian Zionists, who believed that, once the Jewish state is established in the ‘Promised Land’ and the Third Temple is rebuilt, the Antichrist will emerge to destroy the temple. He will then usher in a seven-year period of tribulation and prepare the stage for the ‘second coming’ of Jesus Christ. The Jews will now either become Christians or perish violently. Christ will then preside over a 1,000-year reign of justice and happiness. Thus, evangelist theology, though founded on the ultimate destruction of the Jewish people, has set up an opportunistic alliance with Zionism, which has made the two communities partners in their shared animosity for Palestinians and Arabs, and Muslims in general.³¹

Israeli leaders from Menachem Begin onwards, with the help of the Jewish community in the US, have assiduously cultivated close ties with prominent American evangelists and, through them, influenced successive US presidents and other political leaders. They have thus secured support for the maximalist Israeli agenda at home – most importantly, for the expansion of Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank.

As Mearsheimer and Walt have noted, Christian Zionist financial support for the settler movement has ‘reinforced hard-line attitudes in Israel and the United States and have made it more difficult for American leaders to put pressure on Israel’.³² The other issue on which evangelists have offered full support to Israel has been with regard to Jewish sovereignty over united Jerusalem, i.e., including the occupied East Jerusalem.

In the 1990s, the Israel lobby was buttressed in the US by a new movement of Jewish intellectuals – the neo-conservative movement, or neocons. Unlike mainstream American Jews, who are liberal and back the Democratic Party, neocons tend to be conservative in their social values and

often support the Republican Party. They have a deep interest in Israel and West Asian affairs, and have influenced both Israeli and American political leaders.

In 1996, influential neocons Richard Perle and Douglas Feith (who would later become influential policymakers in the Bush Jr presidency) wrote a paper for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, titled 'A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm'. They advised Netanyahu to abandon the Oslo peace process (see below) and return to the military repression of the Palestinians. The writers saw a threat to Israel from Iraq and Syria, and thus advocated the removal of Saddam Hussein and his replacement by a weaker monarchy. They saw in Saddam's removal 'an important Israeli strategic objective'.³³

Following this advice, in 1998, eighteen neocon associates in their think tank, Preparing for the New American Century (PNAC), advised President Clinton to undertake military action and remove Saddam Hussein from power, and secure 'the significant portion of world's oil supply' in that country. In September 2000, the PNAC writers again advised Clinton to remove Saddam and occupy Iraq. The neocons finally came into their own after the events of 9/11, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

In this background, it is not surprising that the distinguished writer on Palestinian history and politics, Rashid Khalidi, in his seminal work on the US's role in addressing issues relating to Israel and Palestine, should speak of 'how closely entwined have been the respective policies of the United States and Israel toward the Palestinian people over recent decades'.³⁴ He then quotes the doyen of West Asian studies in the US, William Quandt, as saying, 'One must frankly admit, the American political system makes it difficult for a president to tackle a problem like that of the Palestinians.'³⁵

Despite the severe limitations on their actions placed by the Israel lobby, successive US presidents have made attempts to initiate policies that would give some justice to the Palestinian cause and promote peace in the region – only to be thwarted by obdurate Israeli politicians backed by their powerful supporters in the US.

For instance, in the context of horrendous Israeli violence in Lebanon in 1982, President Ronald Reagan proposed his 'Reagan Plan' in September 1982 in which he spoke of the Palestinians' 'legitimate rights' and Israel's 'legitimate security concerns'. In this plan, he rejected Israeli sovereignty or permanent control over the West Bank and Gaza, called for an immediate halt to expansion of settlements in the occupied territories, and, while opposing an independent Palestinian state, he called for 'self-government by the Palestinians ... in association with Jordan'. Even this modest agenda was unacceptable to Israel: it was summarily rejected by the Begin Cabinet, which was fully backed by its supporters in the US.

The next major US peace initiative took place in. Fresh from victory in the Cold War and the successful war over Iraq, and buoyed by the backing of a large international coalition, President Bush Sr now sought to concretize the US's pre-eminent position in West Asia by promoting a settlement of the Israel–Palestine dispute. With the Soviet Union in its last days as a co-host, the US president brought Israel and all the major Arab countries to an international conference in Madrid in October 1991. This was followed by several meetings with Israeli and Palestinian teams in Washington.

At the Washington discussions, Israel affirmed two positions on which there could be no compromise: one, there would be no acceptance of a Palestinian state or even any effective Palestinian control over any part of the occupied territories; and, two, there would be no limit placed on the expansion of settlements in the West Bank.

Unknown to the discussants in Washington, including American officials, Israeli and Palestinian officials, the latter from the PLO offices in Tunis, had been in secret dialogue in Oslo in 1993. These discussions resulted in an agreed 'Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements', which was formally signed on the lawns of the White House on 13 September 1993.

The Oslo Accords

As the Cold War ended, the PLO found itself in a much-weakened situation: in the demise of the Soviet Union, it lost its superpower supporter. Again, having backed Iraq's occupation of Kuwait, it suffered the hostility of most other Arab states and the loss of financial assistance from Saudi Arabia. Finally, having been evicted from Lebanon in 1982, and being resident in Tunis since then, the PLO had been physically cut off from its people. The latter had expressed their frustration with their situation through the Intifada from December 1987 and had succeeded in obtaining considerable popular support for the Palestinian cause. These factors taken together instilled in the PLO leadership a sense of pragmatism, which facilitated the secret discussions at Oslo.

On the Israeli side, too, there had been positive developments: in the June 1992 elections, the Likud government of Yitzhak Shamir was replaced by a Labour government headed by Yitzhak Rabin. During the campaign, the two leaders had indicated similar positions on the Palestine issue; as noted by Israeli commentators Daniel Elazar and Shmuel Sandler a little after the elections, the two 'contesting leaders agreed that autonomy was to be negotiated with the Palestinians to be followed after three years by negotiations on the final status of Judea, Samaria [i.e., the West Bank] and Gaza'.³⁶ However, the writers also noted that Labour had within its ranks several influential doves, who, in fact, accepted a Palestinian state. The 1992 elections in Israel were central to the Israel–Palestine negotiations going forward and the interim agreement being finalized at Oslo.

The Oslo Accord, as the agreement came to be called, had some significant features: Israel for the first time negotiated directly with the PLO, thus conferring legitimacy upon what had been seen as a terrorist organization until then. Israel also accepted the PLO as the 'representative of the Palestinian people', thus recognizing the Palestinians' unique identity that it had till then denied.

On the negative side, the accord did not put an end to the expansion of settlements in the West Bank. More seriously, it did not concede the right of self-determination and statehood to the Palestinian people. What it provided for was an 'interim' (five-year) self-governing set-up in the shape of the

Palestine Authority (PA) in the West Bank and Gaza, where the PA would provide security and have some role in development and welfare activities, but sovereignty would remain with Israel.

The core issues that mattered to the Palestinians – the Palestinian state in the occupied territories, the status of Jerusalem, and the right of return of Palestinian refugees – these were described as ‘final status’ issues, which would be discussed three years into the interim period and finalized within two years, i.e., by May 1999.

However, as the distinguished Israeli historian, Ilan Pappé, has observed, from the Israeli perspective, ‘interim objectives of the Oslo document seemed to become the basis for the final and permanent settlement of the conflict’.³⁷ This view is affirmed by the violation, for instance, of Article 31, Clause 7, that had forbidden either side to take any action ‘to change the status of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip’ till the final status discussions. However, during, the Labour government invested heavily in settlement expansion, so that the settler population increased by 48 per cent in the West Bank and 62 per cent in Gaza.

However, even this modest accord aroused the ire of Israel’s settler community and its extremist political supporters. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had come to power in July 1992 after defeating his right-wing Likud rival, Yitzhak Shamir. Conceding even limited autonomy to the Palestinians condemned him in the eyes of the hardline settler movement and the rabbis who backed it. Fearing that the Oslo Accord would freeze settlement activity, they called for a struggle against this ‘malevolent and treacherous government’. Their anger surged against Rabin, even though his government, in fact, backed continued settlement activity.

In September 1995, Rabin signed the Oslo II Accord at Taba, in Egypt, which provided for the progressive withdrawal of Israeli troops from parts of the West Bank and the simultaneous deployment of 30,000 Palestinian security personnel. The Palestinian self-governing authority, the PA, and a Palestinian Parliament became functional.

The agreement divided the West Bank into three areas, with A (2.8 per cent) coming under the PA; B (22.9 per cent), where authority would be

shared with Israel; and C (74.3 per cent) which would be under effective Israeli control. Despite the very limited authority being transferred to the Palestinians, Oslo II was backed by 72 per cent of the Palestinians – the highest level of support for the peace process.³⁸

In Israel, the situation was the opposite. Likud politicians condemned the accord in the Knesset, while the settlers and their rabbi leaders warned Rabin of serious consequences – one of them described the peace effort as ‘the ugly face, the monstrous face of the false peace that is purchased by national betrayal’.³⁹ In October 1995, at a public demonstration, Rabin was depicted in a Nazi SS (Schutzstaffel) officer’s uniform.

On 4 November 1995, Rabin was assassinated by a young student, Yigal Amir, a disciple of Baruch Goldstein, who had killed twenty-nine Muslim worshippers at the Patriarch’s Mosque in February 1994. Despite this serious setback to the peace process, both Israeli and Palestinian leaders continued with the implementation of the Oslo Accords, along with periodic violence on both sides and the continued expansion of settlements on the West Bank.

Camp David II

Before relinquishing office, Clinton, anxious to leave behind the legacy of a major foreign policy achievement, made an effort to get the Israelis – led by Prime Minister Ehud Barak – and the Palestinians, led by Yasser Arafat, to address the ‘final status’ issues – the Palestinian state, Jerusalem and the return of refugees.

Negotiations took place at the US presidential retreat at [Camp David](#), Maryland, in the period July 2000. Though the two sides had wide differences, what complicated matters further was that the three principal negotiators were then at their most vulnerable politically: Clinton would end his presidential term within a few months; Barak’s coalition at home was already splintering, and he faced a tough election against the right-wing Likud led by Ariel Sharon; while Arafat was also under pressure not just from Palestinians on the final status issues, but also from other Arab

leaders, who insisted that there could be no compromise on the issue of Jerusalem.

Both Clinton and Barak were also pressuring Arafat to accept Israeli proposals – for Barak, success in the negotiations was crucial for his political survival, but, given the polarized state of Israeli politics and the passions whipped up by the settlers, the rabbis and their American supporters, there were severe limits on what he could offer. His role at Camp David was closely monitored by the settlers, who threatened him with dire consequences were he to make territorial concessions. As distinguished Israeli commentators Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar have noted, the failure of Camp David II was ‘a political and psychological victory for the settlers’.⁴⁰ Arafat, on his part, complained that the pressures on him were ‘more like a guillotine hanging over our necks’.⁴¹

Camp David II has been studied closely over the years and is seen as a textbook example of how *not* to manage a summit. The three leaders did want a satisfactory resolution and, in fact, Barak made offers that went far beyond what Israelis had ever offered earlier, but the maximum that he could give did not meet the minimum requirements of the Palestinian side – he just could not offer the territorial concessions that would have led to a sovereign and viable Palestinian state. Barak finally offered about 90 per cent of the West Bank to the Palestinians, but the latter insisted on a return to the 1967 borders that would have given them 22 per cent, but under their sovereign control.

On Jerusalem, the most Barak could offer was Palestinian sovereignty over some parts of East Jerusalem and *custodianship* over the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which would remain under Israeli sovereignty. Given the competing religious passions involved, neither Barak nor Arafat could compromise on this subject.

On the question of refugees, the two sides had very different perspectives: for the Palestinians, the refugee question was fundamental to their national identity and the wrong done to their people through the creation of Israel. They demanded the return of about 4 million refugees or, failing that, payment of compensation to them. Both options were

unacceptable to the Israelis. The Israelis viewed their country as a Jewish state based on divine sanction, with no scope for sharing this territory with any other people. The most they could offer at Camp David was a token return of some selected refugees, without conceding their ‘right of return’ or accepting return in such numbers as would threaten Israel’s Jewish character or its security.

After the failure of Camp David II, the US and Israel jointly blamed Arafat for the failure. Barak said Arafat was ‘single-handedly’ responsible for the summit’s failure, since he was ‘afraid to make the historic decisions needed’ to end the conflict. He contrasted this with Israel’s ‘magnanimity’. The Palestinians spoke of the ‘venomous propaganda’ surrounding the talks, the close coordination between the US and Israeli sides, and how the Israeli offers were inadequate in several respects. A Palestinian leader described the Israelis as reflecting through the negotiations ‘the colonialist, militarist mentality – the occupier’s mentality’.⁴²

The Second Intifada

As Camp David exposed the deep divisions between the Israeli and Palestinian positions, the discord soon got reflected on the ground in the occupied territories. It began with the visit, in September 2000, by Ariel Sharon to the Al-Aqsa Mosque/Temple Mount, ostensibly to visit archaeological sites. This ignited widespread protests among Palestinians that developed into the second Intifada – marked by Palestinian demonstrations, stone throwing, with occasional bombings and killings, and retaliatory violence by Israeli security personnel, including targeted assassinations.

Despite this unpropitious environment, Clinton continued his peace efforts. On 23 December 2000, he announced at the White House the ‘general parameters’ for an Israeli–Palestinian settlement. This provided for per cent of the West Bank for the Palestinians, but the ‘state’ would be non-militarized. Al Quds, i.e., East Jerusalem, would be the capital of the Palestinian ‘state’, while sovereignty over Al-Aqsa/Temple Mount would

be divided. And while some refugees would be allowed to return, though Israel would not be obliged to accept them, Israel would recognize the sufferings of the Palestinians and back international efforts to ameliorate their condition.

But the time for settlement had evaporated – Barak was defeated in the elections by Sharon in February 2001, while in the US, the Democrats had lost the November 2000 elections and George Bush Jr was the president-elect. Neither Sharon nor Bush Jr was interested in pursuing a peace process. Final status issues thus crashed against the rocks of political reality in Washington and Tel Aviv, and have not been revived since then.

Iran

Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait in August 1990 initially gave Iranians the impression that the US would recognize Iraq as the main source of aggression and instability in West Asia, and view Iran, in turn, as a partner in regional security arrangements. But these expectations were misplaced: while the Bush Sr administration did see some advantages in a thaw in relations, it decided to adopt an incremental approach. It initially sought Iran's assistance to get US hostages released from various militant groups in Lebanon; this was successfully accomplished in December 1991.

Bush then sought from the Iranian president, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a public statement condemning terrorism; the president included this in his Friday sermon on 20 December 1991. However, facing re-election, Bush Sr was hesitant to move forward in promoting ties further, particularly as he was tainted in some American eyes with being associated, as vice president under Reagan, in the Iran-Contra affair.

After winning the election in 1993, Clinton showed no urgency in reaching out to Iran; for vast sections of US opinion, Iran was 'synonymous with fanaticism and terrorism',⁴³ a view buttressed by the Iranian expatriate community in the US that had several monarchists in its ranks. Again, Clinton was happy to take forward the Israel–Palestine peace process that

had been initiated during the Bush Sr presidency, but with the important caveat that the Democrats would affirm close ties with Israel.

Thus, the administration accepted Martin Indyk's 'dual containment' proposal. Indyk's proposal asserted that Iran posed a 'five-part challenge' to the US and the international community: it supports terrorism and assassination across the globe; it is opposed to the Israel–Palestine peace process, manifested through its support for Hezbollah and Hamas; it seeks to subvert friendly Arab governments; it is seeking to dominate the Gulf militarily; and it is seeking to acquire WMD.⁴⁴

It is interesting to note that these 'challenges' have now become deeply ingrained in the US's litany of complaints relating to Iran, and remain resonant twenty-five years later; they are also at the heart of the US's 'obsession' with Iran that continues to this day. This has stymied any attempts made periodically by officials on both sides to rebuild ties on a fresh, non-confrontational basis. Thus, when Iran attempted to reach out to the US corporate sector by offering contracts to Boeing and the oil company, Conoco, the latter valued at \$1 billion, the companies were pressurized by the Israel lobby to reject the offers – an initiative in which the Clinton administration acquiesced enthusiastically. The US embargo on contracts with Iran was announced at a meeting of the World Jewish Congress.⁴⁵

But merely blocking contracts wasn't enough; the US corporate sector complained that European companies would benefit from the absence of American competitors. Hence, the Iran–Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), passed in August 1996, imposed secondary sanctions on countries that invested over \$20 million in Iran's oil and gas sector by denying them access to US markets and funding.

With President Rafsanjani having failed to reach out to the US through commercial ties, his successor, President Mohammed Khatami, attempted to allure the Americans through an intellectual appeal: in an interview with CNN's Christiane Amanpour in January 1998, Khatami spoke of the 'bulky wall of mistrust' between the countries. However, he saw an 'intellectual affinity with the essence of American civilisation'; the reason for this

affinity was the fact that in the US ‘liberty and faith never clashed’ since most Americans were religious people.⁴⁶ Khatami added, ‘I believe that if humanity is looking for happiness, it should combine religious spirituality with the virtues of liberty.’⁴⁷

But this message was barely understood or appreciated in the US, with most media and political comment referring to negative matters, such as the taking of US hostages, Iran’s hostility towards Israel, the burning of the US flag, etc.

A positive response to Khatami’s overture came from the Clinton administration in the last year of his presidency. In public remarks, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright regretted the US role in the events of 1953, when Prime Minister Mosaddeq was overthrown, accepted the US error in supporting Saddam Hussein in the Iran–Iraq war, and promised to remove sanctions on the imports of carpets and pistachios. But this overture had come too late.

During this period, despite widespread popular support for his reformist platform, Khatami was under severe attack in the majlis from hardliners who deprived him of many of his close associates. On crucial occasions, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei did not back him as well. This meant that Iran could not respond positively to the US gestures, and an important occasion for a constructive interaction between the two estranged nations was lost.

In January 2001, George Bush Jr entered the White House; and he brought with him traditional Iran-baiters – Eliot Abrams, Douglas Feith and John Bolton – to handle West Asia. The 9/11 attacks ushered a new phase in the US engagement with the region.

Afghanistan

On 15 February 1989, the commander of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan, General Boris Gromov, crossed the Friendship Bridge into Uzbekistan, bringing to an end the ten-year Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The early part of the conflict in the country had seen a ‘mujahideen’ (religious)

struggle against foreign occupation, but it was largely a national struggle. It later metamorphosed into a 'global jihad' that brought in several thousand fighters from a wide variety of Muslim countries and communities the world over.

The war took several lives on all sides, but, despite the departure of foreign fighters after the Soviet withdrawal, there was no peace in the country. The seven Afghan factions and the warlords who backed them now went to war with one another, so that Afghanistan was on its way to becoming a 'failed state'. Though the US and numerous allies, including the Gulf sheikhdoms, had invested so many millions of dollars in the country, none of them now had any time to devote to their former battleground.

For the US and its Western allies, there were more important developments taking place – within three months of the final withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Soviet bloc began to fall apart, starting with Hungary opening its border with Austria in May 1989 and culminating with the breaching of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989. As former American intelligence officer, Milton Bearden wrote in 2001, the US administration 'did not look back to the former war zone, their energies instead consumed by the stunning denouement of the Cold War'.⁴⁸

But even if any of the officials had recovered from these momentous events and tried to look elsewhere, they just could not: from August 1990, the US and the Gulf countries got entirely preoccupied with handling the consequences of Saddam Hussein's attack on Kuwait – first, overturning the occupation militarily, and then, through the 1990s, severely punishing Iraq for its gross misconduct. The shaping of Afghanistan's destiny was thus in the hands of just one neighbour – Pakistan. The country attempted to reconcile the competing claims of the warring politicians and their warlords, and, when that failed, it unleashed in 1994 a new fighting force into the country: the Taliban.

Nurtured and indoctrinated in Islam's most rigid and intolerant creeds in the refugee camps at the Pakistan–Afghanistan border, these fierce fighters had, by 1996, taken Kabul, made Kandahar their capital, and controlled most of the country.

Pakistan attempted to control and stabilize Afghanistan so that it would yield the 'strategic depth' advantage vis-à-vis India that the former thought it needed.⁴⁹ Afghanistan also acquired some regional significance and even attracted the attention of a few American diplomats as the route for gas pipelines from the newly independent Central Asian republics to diverse destinations – Pakistan, India, or even the shores of the Arabian Sea for further global transportation; the Pakistani authority on Afghan and Central Asian affairs, Ahmed Rashid has described the activities associated with pipeline politics as the 'new Great Game'.⁵⁰

This brief energy-related American interest in Afghanistan soon expanded into full-scale focus as the Taliban built their ties with Osama bin Laden, gave sanctuary to him in 1996 and backed the first efforts of the Al Qaeda at attacking its far enemy – the US.

The first outreach to Turkmenistan to develop its substantial oil and gas reserves was undertaken by an Argentine company, Bridas Corporation, from 1994. Bridas thought of transporting the gas to Sui in Baluchistan through a 1,400-km pipeline that could later even be extended to India. Bridas brought most Afghan leaders on board as well, besides the Pakistani government, then headed by Benazir Bhutto. However, Bridas now had an unexpected competitor in the shape of the American company, Unocal Corporation, that appeared even more attractive to Turkmenistan as it would bring US investments in the country's development.

For the American administration, backing Unocal meant that it would be well placed to compete with Russia for influence and energy resources in Central Asia. Hence, as Rashid has pointed out, 'the strategy over pipelines had become the driving force behind Washington's interest in the Taliban'.⁵¹ US diplomacy in Afghanistan was now entirely driven by supporting Unocal in its pipeline project – the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan pipeline, or simply, TAP.

This diplomatic effort was undermined by serious errors on the US side; these included an American announcement, after the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996, that the US would establish diplomatic ties with the Taliban, though this statement was quickly retracted. Another US official backed the

Taliban's imposition of Islamic law, describing the movement as anti-modern, rather than anti-Western.⁵²

Two developments finally brought an end to this sorry phase in US diplomacy. One, feminist groups in the US fiercely lobbied President Clinton and Hillary Clinton to end ties with the Taliban on account of its overtly obscurantist approach to issues pertaining to women. Two, politically, the threat from Al Qaeda became more obvious: in February 1998, Osama bin Laden, in a fatwa, declared that 'to kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military – is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it.' This was followed by attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, in which 224 persons were killed, including twelve Americans, and 5,000 were wounded.

After this, US policy in Afghanistan focused on apprehending bin Laden, in which it was unsuccessful. Al Qaeda organized the attack on the American warship, *USS Cole*, in October 2000 that was anchored off Aden; in this attack, seventeen naval personnel were killed and thirty-nine injured. This was followed, less than a year later, by the 9/11 attacks.

Following this, the US then came to Afghanistan as an avenging military force to exterminate the Al Qaeda and Taliban. These forces remained in Afghanistan for twenty long years until negotiations with the Taliban led to an ignominious US departure, ironically, scheduled to be completed on 11 September 2021 – the twentieth anniversary of the events that had brought the US into the Afghan war theatre.

Afghanistan has lived up to its description as the 'graveyard of empires'.

The First Decade of the Hegemon

This chapter has taken a quick look at US policies in West Asia in the first decade after the end of the Cold War. The decade began with America putting together a global coalition to obtain the evacuation of Iraqi troops from Kuwait and restore the sovereignty of the Gulf sheikhdom. In this

endeavour, it secured widespread support from among Arab and Islamic countries. After this, the support quickly withered away as the world's sole superpower succumbed to the influence of the Israel lobby and decided that Iraq should be severely punished.

In implementing this, the conduct of the hegemon was extraordinarily vicious and cruel. The life of ordinary Iraqis was made exceptionally miserable through comprehensive sanctions in order to provoke a national uprising against Saddam Hussein or, failing that, a coup d'état to obtain regime change. In fact, it had the opposite effect: most Iraqis blamed the West, led by America, for their acute distress. The UNSC, under US influence, denied Iraqis basic foodstuffs and medication, as also materials to ensure clean water and electricity.

Over 1.5 million Iraqis lost their lives as a direct result of these sanctions; this number included half a million children.⁵³ These figures have a rather poignant aftermath: in a CBS TV interview in May 1996, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was asked if the death of half a million Iraqi children as a result of sanctions was a 'price worth paying'; she answered, 'It is a difficult question. But, yes, we think the price is worth it.'⁵⁴

Israel was a fervent believer in regime change in Iraq, and used the WMD argument effectively in Washington to obtain the sanctions regime and the intrusive inspections, which were ostensibly under the UN, but were effectively controlled by the US. Despite the failure of the inspectors to discover any evidence of development of WMD by Iraq, in February 2001, an Israeli newspaper said Prime Minister Ariel Sharon believed that 'Iraq poses more of a threat to regional stability than Iran, due to the errant, irresponsible behaviour of Saddam Hussein's regime'.⁵⁵

Israel itself and its lobby in the US worked hard to ensure that, after the Cold War, US–Iran relations did not improve. The principal instrument deployed for this purpose was the 'dual containment' policy that required the US to deploy substantial troops in the Gulf to 'contain' these two regional adversaries. Commentators have noted that the policy document first prepared by Martin Indyk was 'a copy of an Israeli proposal'.⁵⁶

This policy ensured that a fresh US approach to ties with Iran was sabotaged by Israel and its American affiliates on the basis that Iran posed a threat to both Israel and the US. In this way, Iranian initiatives, such as Rafsanjani's move to expand commercial relations and Khatami's appeal to base new ties on shared civilizational values were both doomed.

The case of Afghanistan is even more curious. Here, the US had invested a few billion dollars in support of the war effort against Soviet occupation, but lost all interest in the country once the Soviet armies had withdrawn. This led not only to prolonged and bloody civil conflict, but it also consolidated Pakistan's influence in the country. Pakistan could now sponsor and sustain the military and political successes of the Taliban, and provide a congenial home for the US's arch-enemy – the Al Qaeda – from where it could attack US targets, culminating with the 9/11 attacks. Later, Pakistan's deep ties with the Taliban would ensure that the massive US military intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11 would be subverted by its purported ally.

Finally, this period also confirmed that the US would remain wedded to Israel and would never be able to be the 'honest broker' between the interests of Israel and the Palestinians. Both in relation to the Oslo Accord discussions and at Camp David II, the US always supported the Israeli positions. A senior US diplomat, involved with both Oslo and Camp David, said that 'the approach of the State Department ... was to adopt the position of the Israeli Prime Minister. ... [During the Netanyahu government] the American government seemed sometimes to be working *for* the Israeli Prime Minister, as it tried to convince (and pressure) the Palestinian side to accept Israeli offers'.⁵⁷

Thus, the first decade of the US's role in West Asia after the Cold War made it clear that the hegemon was not a free agent in the region, and all too frequently, its own interests would be wrecked by its apparent allies. This pattern would be repeated in the coming years, and leave US interests undermined and its policies in tatters.

9/11 and After : A Military Debacle and Failed 'Reform' (2001–21)



THE 9/11 ATTACKS BROUGHT THE US WAR MACHINE INTO AFGHANISTAN barely twelve years after the last Russian soldier had left the country in defeat. Within a few hours of the attacks in the US homeland, the CIA had identified the perpetrators as belonging to the Al Qaeda.¹ It is interesting to recall now that the basic principles that shaped the US response to the 9/11 disaster were finalized by President George W. Bush Jr within twelve hours of the attacks. As the US-based writer on US policies in Afghanistan, Sharifullah Dorani has pointed out, as soon as Bush heard of the second plane hitting the second tower of the WTC, he declared that the US was going to war and assumed wartime powers as commander-in-chief.²

Following this, he invoked the principle of 'preventive self-defence' by deciding to attack terrorists in different parts of the world before they could attack the US. Linked with this was his decision that there would be 'no distinction' made in this fight between those who perpetrate terrorist acts and those who give them protection. These principles were then brought together in the all-embracing GWOT. This would take the US-led war on extremism and related violence not just to the Al Qaeda and the Taliban,

who had harboured this extremist movement in Afghanistan, but would go to all havens and hideouts where these elements were located, and would also target those countries that were developing capacities and weaponry to attack the US.

The three influential players in US decision-making at this crucial period were in remarkable sync with each other. The principles relating to the US response were in accord with the realpolitik worldview of Vice President Dick Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who, in turn, had built a broad base of agreement with the neocon intellectuals, discussed above. For instance, both Cheney and Rumsfeld had signed the neocon document 'Statement of Principles of the Project of the New American Century' in 1997.

From the start, the Bush administration had pulled in a number of neocon ideologues into security-related positions. The most important among them who influenced major policy decisions in the president's first term were: Paul Wolfowitz, deputy secretary of defense; Douglas Feith, undersecretary of defense for policy; Lewis (Scooter) Libby, chief of staff of the vice president; Zalmay Khalilzad, in charge of Afghanistan and Iraq at the National Security Council; and Richard Perle, head of the Defence Policy Board.

Afghanistan

Having identified the destruction of the Al Qaeda and the Taliban-led Emirate of Afghanistan as its first priority in the GWOT, the US straightaway brought Pakistan on board. Pakistan was given a list of demands for immediate compliance:

- No cross-border movement of Al Qaeda members.
- End of Pakistani logistical support for the Al Qaeda.
- US aircraft and navy to have full overflight, landing rights and access to Pakistani naval and air bases.
- Full intelligence cooperation with the US.

- Termination of all ties with the Taliban – diplomatic, military and economic.

Pakistan was thus compelled to commit itself to the destruction of the very organizations it had done so much to nurture over previous years.

The attack on Afghanistan was code-named ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’. The military action plan involved an initial deployment of CIA operatives into Afghanistan to work with the Northern Alliance and other opposition groups to identify the targets for US bombardment of Al Qaeda and Taliban positions, and guide the special forces in ground action. The last part of the plan was to stabilize Afghanistan, and make it a free and democratic society.

The military part of the plan, starting from 7 October 2001, succeeded in full measure. Al Qaeda and Taliban were defeated in just over two months with the use of only 110 CIA officers, 316 special forces fighters, and US air power. It was described by CIA head George Tenet as one of ‘the greatest successes’ in the history of the CIA. During the conflict, the US forces had dropped 18,000 bombs; the number of Taliban fighters killed is estimated at 8,000–12,000, about 20 per cent of the fighting force.³ At a meeting in the White House in February 2002, the consensus was that the Taliban were a ‘spent force’ and posed no further threat.⁴

This was a premature assessment. Thousands of Taliban fighters and most of their leaders had, in fact, survived – many either went back to their villages or found sanctuary across the border in Pakistan.

These scattered fighters took some time to reconnect with each other, reorganize themselves into a fighting force and re-emerge to challenge the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan and the US-supported government in Kabul. The first interactions among Taliban leaders in Pakistan began in 2002, followed by personal meetings in 2003. In this effort, they were supported by local radical groups: thus, the Haqqani fighters who had fled to north Waziristan in Pakistan rebuilt their cadre with local recruits as well as Al Qaeda elements who set up training camps for them.⁵ The most

significant source of support was the backing provided by the Pakistan agencies to the Haqqani network for cross-border operations, as well as funding to improve their weaponry and logistics.⁶

Within Afghanistan itself, local leaders began to bring their forces together, with smaller groups slowly coalescing with others to form larger coalitions under prominent leaders. The main driving force was the abusive treatment meted out to former Taliban members, including those loosely associated with them – this was being done both by US forces and officials of the Hamid Karzai government that had been installed in Kabul after the destruction of the Taliban emirate.⁷

By 2004, the Taliban in Pakistan had organized themselves into shuras (consultative councils) headed by prominent leaders, with the apex ‘Quetta Shura’ bringing the top leaders together for collective decision-making. These leaders set up links with Taliban members in different parts of Afghanistan, besides reaching out to new groups through local clerics.

From 2005, the tempo of insurgency accelerated and spread across the country – particularly in Kandahar and Helmand. It benefited from the support it received from both Pakistan and Iran, the latter happy to use the Taliban to keep the US-led forces under pressure, even as local perceptions increased that the Karzai government was ineffective.

The incentives for Afghan youth to join the Taliban were: one, a thoroughly corrupt government order in Kabul that could neither control the burgeoning violence nor address poverty and provide employment, while the Taliban offered a steady monthly income to its recruits. Two, the country as a whole was in the grip of a criminal ‘syndicate’ that was involved in land grab, drug trafficking and rampant abuse. By 2008, Dorani says, the country had been turned into a ‘valley of wolves’.⁸

In 2009, the Taliban ‘were well-organised, resourced, and able to exert considerable control over sections of the population’.⁹ This was largely a result of the training provided by Pakistani advisers over the previous three years, along with trainers from the Al Qaeda and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, or Pasdaran, in Persian). In early 2010, Taliban

fighters were estimated at 35,000, with total manpower, including reserves, being about 200,000.¹⁰

At the commencement of his presidency in 2009, Barack Obama found his advisers deeply divided: one group, led by Vice President Joe Biden, saw no strategic benefits for the US in Afghanistan, believed that the Al Qaeda had been annihilated, and saw the Taliban as a ‘nationalist’ force that did not pose a threat to the US. The group concluded that America had no clear objectives in the ongoing conflict, and warned that Afghanistan could become ‘another Vietnam’.¹¹ The armed forces, led by General David Petraeus, on the other hand, recommended a surge – the induction of 30,000 additional US troops to reverse the Taliban’s momentum.

Obama approved the surge, but with conditions:

- The additional 20,000 soldiers (10,000 less than what Petraeus had wanted) would begin withdrawal from July 2011, with the bulk returning home by end-2014.
- The goal of the US would be to ‘deny’ the Al Qaeda a safe haven in the country, and ‘deny’ or ‘disrupt’ the Taliban’s capacity to overthrow the Afghan government.
- The US would provide development assistance to the country, but would not support any ‘nation-building’ or ‘democracy-promotion’ projects.
- Obama included in his agenda the initiation of peace talks with the Taliban, and promotion of overall regional stability with the support of Pakistan, India, the Arab states, China, Russia and the NATO states.

In this context, it is interesting to note Dorani’s observation that Obama, throughout his presidency, never talked of ‘winning’ the war in Afghanistan in the military sense; for him, according to Dorani, winning meant handing back the country to the Afghans, whose responsibility it would be to ensure that US security interests were safeguarded.¹²

Despite these well-thought-out plans, nothing seemed to work. At home, the US economy failed to improve: unemployment went from 7.6 to 9 per cent, national debt climbed from \$10.6 trillion to \$14.6 trillion, and Americans living below the poverty line rose to 46.2 million. Most Americans blamed their involvement in the Afghanistan (and Iraq, see below) wars for their parlous situation. By mid-2011, most of them had concluded that the war in Afghanistan was not worth fighting.¹³

In June 2011, Obama announced a phased withdrawal of US troops from end-2011, so that by 2014, only a small number of troops would remain for counterterrorism and training purposes. In May 2014, Obama slightly amended the programme to provide that 9,800 US troops would remain for an extra year after the end of combat operations in December 2014. According to his plan, by the end of 2016, the Afghan security forces ‘would be able to self-secure the country and the imperfect Afghan state [would] provide some form of basic governance to its population in those areas it controlled’.¹⁴ This would achieve the central US goal of ensuring that the country would not once again become a base for another attack like that of 9/11.

Even as the US gradually withdrew from Afghanistan, Taliban military activity increased: by mid-2015, the Taliban controlled per cent of Afghan territory, though only 10 per cent of the population lived under Taliban administration, while another 20 per cent was in contested areas.¹⁵ The Afghan security forces controlled the big cities, but several provinces and districts remained under ‘high’ or ‘extreme’ Taliban threat. Dorani concludes that the Afghan government hardly delivered on any of Obama’s goals, while the economic situation in Afghanistan remained bleak – the GDP deficit was 50 per cent and the country was totally dependent on external assistance.¹⁶

By the time Obama ended his term, the fifteen-year war in Afghanistan had ground to a stalemate.

As the American authority on the Afghanistan war, Steve Coll concluded his monumental second book on the war, in 2018, he observed that ‘America failed to achieve its aims in Afghanistan’.¹⁷ He noted that Al

Qaeda ‘remained active, lethal, and adaptive’,¹⁸ despite the killing of Osama bin Laden and many of his senior colleagues – in 2014 alone, over 32,000 people had been killed in terrorist violence, five times more than in 2001.

Coll explains that, through the length of the conflict, the US had ‘no coherent geopolitical vision’;¹⁹ its leaders, as noted above, had swung from focusing on political stability and democracy-promotion in Afghanistan to the more modest goal of simply enabling the government to avoid its own overthrow. Even the latter could not be achieved to any significant degree: the 2014 presidential election, that had fraudulently given ‘victory’ to Ashraf Ghani, truncated the government at the top between Ghani and his Tajik rival, Abdullah Abdullah, so that the administration was kept in place only through phone calls (and threats) from Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry.

Other reasons proffered for the US failure include the diversion of military and financial resources and high-level attention to the war in Iraq, and the American accommodation of elements belonging to Afghanistan’s corrupt ‘syndicate’ – including local warlords – whose rampant abuses were tolerated only because they also fought the Taliban.

But the most important cause of US failure in Afghanistan was its inability to resolve the contradiction at the heart of the conflict: was Pakistan, particularly its intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence, an ally of the US in the war against the Taliban or the principal benefactor of the organization in their war on the US? Throughout Coll’s book, stretching over 700 pages, there are references to the Inter-Services Intelligence actively backing the Taliban with funding, weaponry, training, tactical and logistical support, sanctuary within Pakistan’s frontier areas, and political and diplomatic support when required.

As noted above, Pakistani support was crucial in facilitating the resurrection of the Taliban as a fighting force after the destruction of their emirate, and their dispersal across Afghanistan and Pakistan. From the outset, the Bush administration was chary of demanding a more active Pakistani role in combatting the Taliban. This meant that ‘the Pakistani

Army used it [US assistance] to strengthen its military capabilities, and assist the very Taliban and the Haqqani network that were fighting US forces; US financial assistance was used for killing US troops in Afghanistan'.²⁰

Dorani points out that, after years of denial, the leaders of the Bush administration accepted on the eve of his departure from office that 'the primary cause of the trouble in Afghanistan did not originate in Afghanistan, it came from Pakistan'.²¹ However, there was no change in tactics even during the Obama administration. White House officials and CIA operatives on the ground agreed that the Taliban insurgency could only be defeated if 'the movement's sanctuary in Pakistan was eliminated or at least badly disrupted',²² but could do nothing to actually achieve this on the ground.

While unable to manage Pakistan, US officials instead sought to undermine President Karzai's personal standing and credibility, referring to him in internal exchanges as 'wayward', 'clever madman' and even 'insane'.²³ Coll concludes that the 'failure to solve the riddle of the ISI and stop its covert interference in Afghanistan became, ultimately, the greatest strategic failure of the American war'.²⁴

The other military debacle and strategic failure, that ran in parallel with the Afghanistan defeat, was the US's war in Iraq.

Iraq

Given the violence and anarchy that the war in Iraq unleashed, and the death and destruction it caused, it is interesting to recall how reluctant US leaders were to get embroiled in a conflict in Iraq before the events of 9/11. Bush Sr's defence secretary, Dick Cheney, had warned earlier about getting 'bogged down' in Iraq, and had doubted that a successor government would be any friendlier to the US. Bush Sr's chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, General Colin Powell, had thought that, after a US assault, Iraq would fragment into Shia, Sunni and Kurd entities. Paul Wolfowitz, who would, under Bush Jr, become an ardent war advocate, said in 1994 that even if

initial victory would be easy, 'it is unclear how or when it [war] would end'.²⁵

For Bush Jr, Iraq was not a priority concern in his campaign: he cautioned against the idea that 'our military is the answer to every difficult foreign policy situation'. Condoleezza Rice, who would later become his national security adviser, wrote in 2000 that Iraq and North Korea were living on 'borrowed time'; hence, there was no need to panic about them. As Bush prepared to enter the White House, neither Cheney, who became vice president, nor Colin Powell, who became his secretary of state, indicated any change in the US approach to Iraq.²⁶

As noted above, through the 1990s, the neocons had robustly backed regime change in Iraq. Neocon ideologues William Kristol and Robert Kagan set out, in 2000, their thinking in the book, *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy*. Its principal ideas were:

- In the 1990s, the US had failed to use the unipolar moment to preserve and reinforce 'US benevolent global hegemony' and shape a unipolar era.
- The US should not wait for threats; it should be seen as capable of projecting force quickly and with such devastating effect that challenges are pre-empted.
- The US should be prepared to effect regime change in respect of tyrannical regimes.²⁷

These ideas would become influential in the Bush administration after 9/11. As noted above, the 9/11 events shaped Bush's approach within a few hours of the attacks. While the president did not accept the recommendations of Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz – that the attack on Iraq precede the one on Afghanistan – by November, as the Afghan campaign was completed, he took up the issue of war on Iraq. Bush asked the Pentagon for war plans, while including in his State of the Union address, in January 2002, the

message that Iraq was a ‘growing, grave danger’.²⁸ Thus, a year before the initiation of conflict, plans for the invasion of Iraq were already being prepared.

The neocon ideologues, many of them inside the administration, came into their own with the knowledge that Bush was planning to attack Iraq. Kristol and Kagan wrote that the threat from Iraq was ‘no longer abstract’ and sharply rejected the suggestion that the war on Iraq would detract from the war in Afghanistan. Richard Perle said that the war on terror would not be complete without an attack on Iraq. David Brooks ridiculed the Bush Sr administration for its failure to bring down Saddam in 1991, and condemned its senior officials to ‘live in ignominy’ and ‘hide in disgrace’.²⁹

By August 2002, the neocons had brought Israeli leaders on board, who then told the American public that Saddam was a threat to Israel and, hence, should be removed from power. The first major achievement of the neocons was the National Security Strategy (NSS) published in September 2002, which also came to be known as the Bush Doctrine. With this, the US moved from its traditional policy of deterrence and containment to an aggressive unilateral approach based on global military supremacy and pre-emptive strikes.

Administration officials, backed by their neocon colleagues, then sold the war to the American public. They used the following approaches:

- By grossly exaggerating the threat from Iraq, particularly through its WMD programmes, which were now expanded to include nuclear weapons as well.
- Highlighting the link between Iraq and the Al Qaeda, thus imbuing in the American mind that Saddam was responsible for the 9/11 attacks.
- Downplaying the risks of war and emphasizing its advantages: Kristol and Kagan wrote about installing a democratic government in Iraq, and asserted that the country was ‘ripe for democracy’; Cheney said that American troops would be welcomed by the Iraqis as liberators.

- There was a deliberate underestimation of the costs of the war: Defence Secretary Rumsfeld thought the war would cost about \$50 billion; the Office of Management and Budget accounted for \$2.5 billion for reconstruction: this figure was, in fact, close to the *weekly* cost of the war over the next ten years.
- The idea was assiduously promoted that regime change in Iraq would fundamentally transform all of West Asia for the better: the success of the democratic order in Iraq would compel changes in both Iran and Saudi Arabia, while accelerating the push for democracy in ‘liberalizing regimes’ such as Qatar, Morocco and Jordan.³⁰

War, Occupation and the Political Process

The war on Iraq began with air bombardment on 19 March 2003 and ended just over a month later, on 1 May. The US-led forces numbered nearly 180,000 – of which American soldiers were about 130,000, with the others coming from the UK, Australia and Poland. About 45,000 Iraqi soldiers were killed, while US casualties were 141. UNSC Resolution 1483 of 22 May 2003 described the Allies as ‘occupying powers’ in Iraq. They took over Iraq’s oil industry, but could not muster the force to prevent looting and maintain order in the capital, or provide for public safety.³¹ The inability of the coalition forces to control escalating violence in the early days was a crucial factor in turning the Iraqis against the US occupation.

After General Jay Garner’s short stint as head of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, a former diplomat, Paul Bremmer, was appointed as the ‘Governor of Iraq’. In a television interview in June 2003, he said, ‘We will dominate the scene and we will continue to impose our will on this country.’³²

Abuse of Iraqis became the leitmotif of the US occupation; it is said that the Pentagon took advice from Israel on how to manage the occupation, and therefore, brutal treatment and collective punishments became the norm: the distinguished London-based Arab journalist, Abdul Bari Atwan points out

that ‘orchards were uprooted, while civilian homes were raided and bulldozed by US troops’.³³ From May 2003, there were shocking pictures available in the public domain of the abuse meted out to Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison – hooded prisoners being given electric shocks, accounts of rape and sexual humiliation, and aggressive dogs being unleashed on chained prisoners to torment them. The American academic David Forsythe has written:

Some prisoners were sexually and religiously taunted. They were restrained in painful positions. They were subjected to extremes of heat and cold. ... They were kept in isolation for long periods. ... They were made to defecate on themselves. ... In addition, some prisoners were physically beaten and otherwise abused by US Military Police.³⁴

Similarly, Human Rights Watch, in its report on 25 September 2005, provided graphic details of abuses meted out by US armed forces personnel on the Iraqi population; the report said: one, the armed forces routinely used physical and mental torture for intelligence gathering and, shockingly, for stress relief; and, two, the abuse was pervasive and systemic, and widely known across the chain of command. The abuse consisted of ‘... severe beatings, blows and kicks to the face, chest, abdomen, and extremities; the application of chemical substances to exposed skin and eyes; forced stress positions; sleep deprivation; stacking of detainees into human pyramids; and withholding food and water’.³⁵

In tandem with the military occupation and the attendant abuses, the US in Iraq also produced a political process that doomed the already-battered nation to long-term sectarian discord and extremist violence by the jihadi elements it had nurtured.

Bremmer’s first two decisions as head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) were disbanding the Iraqi army and denying employment to all members of the Ba’ath party. These decisions had catastrophic consequences. Disbanding the army meant that 400,000 armed Iraqis and

their family members were overnight denied income and service benefits. The de-Ba'athification drive effectively declared thousands of Iraqis as war criminals.

These two actions became the basis for the alienation of the country's Sunni community from the US-led administration. But this hostility would be exacerbated by the sect-based political process that the US occupation now enshrined in the country. As Fanar Haddad has noted, the order that was now promulgated in Iraq 'elevated sectarian identity into the primary characteristic and chief organising principle of politics' in Iraq.³⁶

This approach emerged from American views relating to Iraq since before the war – a three-way ethno-sectarian divide, Shia, Sunni and Kurd, that viewed the Sunni as the oppressor of the other two communities. This understanding gave Iraq the muhasasa (apportionment) system, which provides for distributing state positions and offices on the basis of ethnic and sectarian identity. It began with the CPA's first institution, the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), a twenty-five-member body whose membership was based on the assumed demographic proportion of each community in the country: it had thirteen Shia members, five Sunnis, five Kurds, one Turkmen and an Assyrian; three of its members were women.

Thus, the US occupation's first three decisions that were viewed at privileging the Shia and demeaning the Sunni led to a violent insurgency that the American forces could just not control. It tore apart the country's social fabric, made Iraq an arena of bitter sectarian conflict, and opened up the space for virulent jihad that the country had never seen before. This also doomed the agenda of the US's neocons, who had projected Iraq as 'a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region'.³⁷

The Insurgency

Atwan precisely dates the insurgency in Iraq to 1 May 2003, when a hand grenade injured seven US soldiers at their base at Fallujah.³⁸ None of the projections relating to Iraq that the Bush administration and the neocon

ideologues had prepared had envisaged a prolonged and bloody insurgency resulting from the war and the decisions taken by Bremer during the first days of occupation.

The insurgency pulled together a number of diverse elements – several thousand Ba’athists, former army officers and soldiers, Sunni Islamist groups, and Shia militants as well. In fact, Sunni and Shia militia fought side-by-side against the Americans in the Battle of Fallujah in 2004, the last occasion they would do so as sectarian divisions inherent in the US order would soon divide them and make them enemies.

The principal Sunni militia was Al Tawheed wal Jihad, which was headed by the Jordanian-origin veteran of the Afghan jihad, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In December 2004, al-Zarqawi affiliated his organization with the Al Qaeda and named it ‘Al Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers’, or Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). AQI attacked American and Shia targets with equal venom, hoping that the attacks on Shia targets would expand the organization’s allure among Sunnis in Iraq and neighbouring countries.

He was not wrong – foreign fighters from other Arab countries now flocked to Iraq, just as they had done twenty years earlier in Afghanistan. Atwan has quoted two reports from 2006 – one Saudi and the other Israeli – that have concluded that those who joined the jihad in Iraq had not been jihadis earlier; they had been radicalized by the US occupation. In fact, many of those who became suicide bombers against the US occupation and Shia targets came from Iraq itself.³⁹

Al-Zarqawi’s wanton violence and ruthlessness, particularly against the Shia, which included massacres of pilgrims, assassinations of prominent figures and attacks on Shia shrines, did agitate his Al Qaeda mentors in sanctuary in Pakistan, but al-Zarqawi insisted that his actions were sanctioned by Sharia. Fawaz Gerges has described al-Zarqawi as a ‘sectarian psychopath who harboured a genocidal world-view against the Shias’.⁴⁰ Al-Zarqawi described the Shia as ‘the insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom’.⁴¹

His anti-Shia violence had a strategic aim as well: he hoped that it would lead the Shia to target the Sunnis in turn, thus encouraging the latter to 'wake from their slumber' and join the sectarian battle. In the early days of the US occupation, this seemed to work: as the US forces targeted the AQI in Fallujah in 2004, thousands of Sunnis were displaced and formed armed groups to attack the Shia. In January 2006, after the AQI destroyed the Golden Dome shrine in Samarra, sectarian violence became virulent, with suicide bombers being used by each side against the other.

In April 2006, al-Zarqawi was killed in an American drone attack. The leaders of AQI who replaced him, on 13 October 2006, renamed their organization the 'Islamic State of Iraq', signalling their gradual independence from the Al Qaeda and their goal to set up an Islamic emirate in Iraq through armed action. They began by imposing Islamic law in areas under their control.

The Sahwa (Awakening)

Just as al-Zarqawi and his jihad reflected the Sunni community's rejection of the new order in Iraq, the country's prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, represented the face of Shia empowerment. Nouri al-Maliki, of middle-class origin from the rural south of Iraq, had been, during Saddam's rule, a member of the Opposition Da'awa party, a Shia grouping headed by the prominent cleric, Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr. After a long period in party-related activity in Iran and Syria, Nouri al-Maliki returned to Iraq after the 2003 war, and was viewed as a middle-level functionary in the transitional order.

After the 2005 parliamentary elections, he was pushed to prime ministership by the Americans, who saw the interim prime minister, Ibrahim Jaafari, as being too close to Tehran and the Shia militia sponsored by Iran. Within a few years, Nouri al-Maliki had made himself the most powerful figure in Iraq by attacking the Mahdi Army of the cleric, Muqtada Sadr, both in the south of Iraq and in Baghdad. However, after Nouri al-Maliki came into power, his interests and those of the Americans began to

diverge – while the latter prioritized attacks on jihadi extremists by mobilizing a formidable national armed force, Nouri al-Maliki focused on consolidating his authority by using state resources to buy loyalty and firm up sectarian political alliances.

This divide became most apparent during the Sahwa (Awakening) initiative of the American forces: taking advantage of the additional 20,000 troops that Bush had approved, General Petraeus, from late 2006, organized a Sunni tribal movement, the Sahwa, against the extremists in Anbar province, taking advantage of local resentments against the persisting extremist violence. With each fighter being paid \$300 per month, within a year, this movement had swollen to 80,000 fighters, who, alongside US and Iraqi troops, confronted the Islamic State of Iraq militants.

Despite the forces arrayed against it, the Islamic State of Iraq remained a formidable enemy: its militants carried out massacres of the Yazidi community in August 2007, killing nearly 800 people, and then, in September 2007, killed the Sunni tribal leader who had joined the Americans to set up Sahwa. Despite this violence, the Sunnis at this point, Atwan says, ‘still believed a fair, democratic and representative new regime would emerge’ in Iraq; thus, with depleting Sunni support, the Islamic State of Iraq started losing its fighters.⁴²

This positive trend seems to have continued through to early 2009: former US diplomat and commentator on Iraqi affairs, Joel Rayburn has noted that at this time, Iraqis in general seemed to be ‘rejecting militancy and embracing nationalism’, and notes that violence had reduced from a thousand attacks per week in mid-2007 to less than 200 per week in January 2009.⁴³ Gerges, however, is more cautious: he points out that, while violence was plummeting in the rest of the country, it was rising in the Sunni-dominated Nineveh province, indicating that Islamic State of Iraq forces had retreated to this area and were consolidating their base there.⁴⁴

By late 2008, with the Sahwa having successfully ended the Islamic State of Iraq menace, the US forces called on the Nouri al-Maliki government to employ these Sunni fighters in the national army or in the administration. Nouri al-Maliki, however, based his power on sectarian

support – from the Shia militia and the Shia community in general. Given the record of military interventions in national politics, the last thing he wanted to see was a strong army that would accommodate all of Iraq's communities as officers and soldiers. Hence, he rejected the US proposal and refused to accommodate the Sunnis in his army or administration. This was a serious mistake.

The Sahwa fighters, now deeply disgruntled and frustrated, joined the Islamic State of Iraq insurgency, being welcomed back after repenting for their 'collaboration' with the Americans and the government.⁴⁵ In August 2009, the rejuvenated Islamic State of Iraq militia attacked the foreign and finance ministries with truck bombs, and caused nearly 600 casualties. This was followed by attacks against government offices within the Green Zone in October 2009, this time causing 900 deaths.⁴⁶

By this time, Nouri al-Maliki had obtained the supreme power he had craved from the outset, and was not the person the Americans had hoped they could influence to ensure their own freedom of action. Nouri al-Maliki also understood that the US had no other option but to accept his primacy, even when he used the Iraqi security organizations as his personal militia and increasingly depended on the Iran-supported militants from Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah. In a report in 2007, US diplomat Ryan Crocker warned his government that Nouri al-Maliki's policies had led to 'increasing centralisation of power in the hands of an inner circle of Shia Islamists', but there was little the US could do to control its protégé.⁴⁷

As Bush Jr concluded his presidency at the end of 2008, the US game plan in Iraq was in a shambles: by 2005, 2,000 US service personnel had been killed, while extremists were dominant in the major cities of Ramadi and Fallujah. By the end of 2006, another 1,000 American soldiers had died, while the cost of the war had soared to \$7 billion per month. The summer of 2007 saw the death of 900 US soldiers, while the war had, by then, cost the country \$130 billion. Bush's popularity at home had plummeted to about 31 per cent, while the war itself was intensely disliked both in the US and Iraq.⁴⁸

As senator, Barack Obama had been a rare opponent of the Iraq war; during his election campaign he had pledged to withdraw all US troops within sixteen months of entering the White House. In office, he settled on an eighteen-month withdrawal plan in which most troops would return home, leaving behind 50,000 personnel, who would return by August 2010, after seeing through the parliamentary elections in March 2010. The last US troops finally left Iraq in December 2011.

Ten months after the elections in Iraq that had yielded unclear results, the US once again backed Nouri al-Maliki as prime minister, with a Kurd as president and a Sunni as the speaker of Parliament. Nouri al-Maliki made himself the interior, defence and national security minister, and ensured all power would remain in his hands alone. In 2011, he turned on his Sunni colleagues, Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlaq and Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi, by dismissing them, accusing them of engineering a Ba'athist conspiracy to take power, and arresting their officials.

As Nouri al-Maliki was getting rid of political rivals – both Sunni and Shia – and accumulating power for himself and his cronies, the Islamic State of Iraq was gradually making itself more formidable in the Anbar province: sectarian conflict caused the deaths of 4,600 Iraqis in 2012 and over 8,000 in 2013.⁴⁹ This helped shape a new power in Iraq's deserts that would soon burst upon the West Asian landscape and wreak havoc across the world – the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

In an interview in March 2015, President Obama said that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was 'a direct outgrowth of Al Qaeda in Iraq that grew out of our invasion, which is an example of unintended consequences.'⁵⁰ Much earlier, a 2005 report of the US National Intelligence Council had asserted that Sunni Iraqis would provide the next generation of 'professionalized' jihadis who would replace the previous

generation trained in Afghanistan. The report candidly added, ‘Our policies in the Middle East fuel Islamic resentment.’⁵¹

The establishment, in July 2014, of the Islamic State that straddled Iraq and Syria, was the product of the disruption in the Iraqi political and social order due to the US occupation, the shaping by the US of a new political system in the country on ethno-sectarian basis, and the consequent divide between the country’s Sunni and Shia communities and the increasing inter-sectarian violence between them. This nascent order was in the vice-like grip of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who based his authority on fomenting the sectarian binary, personally controlling the country’s security institutions, and using state resources to build a network of support for himself.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (1971–2019), the future head of the Islamic State (IS), was the product of this divided and dysfunctional Iraqi politics. A student of religion, with a doctorate in Islamic jurisprudence, al-Baghdadi was briefly interned by US forces during the early part of their occupation. This internment appears to have sharpened jihadi thought among the prisoners and propelled them towards armed insurgency; a later Iraqi report said that of the twenty-five top ISIS leaders, seventeen had been in US detention during.⁵²

After his release, al-Baghdadi joined the AQI, and appears to have become close to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, who had taken over the leadership of the organization after al-Zarqawi was killed in 2006. With Abu Omar’s death in a joint US–Iraqi military operation in 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the leader of the now-renamed Islamic State of Iraq. As noted above, under pressure from the Sahwa fighters and US–Iraqi forces, the Islamic State of Iraq, at this point, was in a state of crisis. Gerges notes al-Baghdadi’s signal achievements thus:

He [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi] had the strategic foresight to transform a fragile organisation on the brink of collapse into a mini-professional army, capable of waging urban and guerrilla warfare as well as conventional warfare. In this sense, Baghdadi has surpassed

his two mentors, Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, in strategic cunning, organisational skills, and mobilised outreach.⁵³

While information relating to al-Baghdadi is scant, and even contradictory, there seems to be a consensus among first-hand sources about his brutality, and his recourse to terror to control opposition and instil fear among enemies. Early accounts of this period also highlight the role of Ba'athist officers and personnel in the development of Islamic State of Iraq into a formidable fighting machine. It seems that they constituted about 30 per cent of the organization's senior leadership.⁵⁴

Both impoverished and humiliated by the disbanding of Iraq's army and possibly mistreated in US detention centres, the Ba'athists were welcomed into the Islamic State of Iraq by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, who might himself have been a former Iraqi military officer. Though few of them would have been enamoured of the Islamic State of Iraq's jihadi ideology, they provided the organization with considerable knowledge and skill in regard to weaponry, training, intelligence gathering, logistics, and battle planning and war. A specific source of support for the Islamic State of Iraq in these early days was the backing of General Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, Saddam Hussein's close confidant and number two in his government, who headed a coalition of insurgent groups – referred to as the 'Naqshbandi Army' on account of Izzat Ibrahim's affiliation with the Naqshbandi Sufi tradition in Iraq.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi consolidated control over the Anbar province during, finally taking Tikrit in June 2014. But before we take the narrative in Iraq forward, it would be chronologically tidy to go back a bit and examine the Islamic State of Iraq's activities in Syria, and then entwine the two stories into one shared thread.

In Syria, Hafez al Assad's son, Bashar al Assad, had become president after the death of his father in July 2000. He faced domestic agitations for reform from early 2011 as part of the Arab Spring uprisings. Al-Baghdadi saw in this civil unrest an opportunity to insert a part of his outfit into the conflict. In May 2011, he sent to Syria his lieutenant, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, to set up a jihadi cell and fight the al Assad government. The force

was called Jabhat Nusra (Victory Front), or just Al-Nusra. This front was supported by funds and arms, as well as personnel provided by the Islamic State of Iraq.

In Syria, Al-Nusra did not disclose its jihadi identity; it projected itself as one of several militia fighting in Syria. It used Syrian, instead of Iraqi, fighters, but continued to receive considerable backing from Islamic State of Iraq – including identification of sources of local support and local offices for jihadi indoctrination, besides support for coercive measures such as terror and killings. Between November 2011 and December 2012, Al-Nusra carried out over 600 attacks across Syria.

Al-Nusra's successes caused a rift within the organization: while al-Jolani was anxious to retain his outfit's identity as a Syrian militant organization, al-Baghdadi wanted to assert his leadership and control across Iraq and Syria. In April 2013, in an audio recording, he exposed Al-Nusra as a jihadi entity that was a part of the Islamic State of Iraq. He then announced the merger of Al-Nusra with the new organization being set up by him called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Al-Jolani rejected the merger and insisted that Al-Nusra remain a separate entity devoted to the fight in Syria, while the Islamic State of Iraq confined itself to Iraq. In June 2013, he announced his allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the head of Al Qaeda after the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011. Al-Zawahiri, criticized al-Baghdadi for creating a rift in jihadi ranks and attempted to mediate between the two factions by asking each group to confine its activities to Iraq and Syria. Al-Baghdadi firmly rejected this advice on the ground that 'he did not recognise the artificial borders created by the "infidel" Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916'.⁵⁵

The two jihadi entities went to war with each other. Thousands of fighters were killed, but Al-Nusra was delivered the sharpest blows, while ISIS consolidated its presence in Syria. From 2013, ISIS cadre fought on both sides of the Iraq–Syria border. In May 2013, ISIS took the town of Raqqah in Syria, followed by Azaz at the Turkish border, in September 2013. From December 2013 onwards, ISIS fighters overran towns in Anbar, taking Fallujah in January 2014 and Tikrit in April, as also Deir ez-Zour

province in Syria. The province's rich agricultural land and oil resources enabled ISIS to fund the war and win over new recruits. ISIS also took back Raqqa from other rebels and declared it the ISIS 'capital' in Syria.

On 17 April 2014, the ISIS spokesman, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, formally delinked ISIS from the Al Qaeda with the statement: '... Al Qaeda today is no longer the seat of true jihad; its leadership has become an axe, trying to destroy the project of the Islamic State and the coming caliphate ... its leaders have deviated from the true path'.⁵⁶

From May 2014, ISIS began to intimidate its foes by sending out, through social media and various online platforms, a stream of visuals of suicide bombings, attacks, beheadings and other harsh punishments it meted out to state forces and Shia targets. Its aim was to gain more Sunni recruits, while instilling fear among its opponents.

The territorial successes of the extremist group put considerable pressure on the Nouri al-Maliki government. In an interview in March 2014, he blamed Saudi Arabia and Qatar for 'inciting and encouraging the terrorist movements ... of supporting them politically and in the media, of supporting them with money and by buying weapons for them'.⁵⁷ Elections in Iraq on 30 April 2014 gave Nouri al-Maliki's coalition ninety-two seats, the largest with any coalition, but his own party, Da'awa, opted to appoint Haider al-Abadi as prime minister; Nouri al-Maliki stoutly resisted this change.

In early June 2014, ISIS captured Iraq's second city, Mosul, with nearly 2 million residents, with just 500 jihadi fighters. The fear of the ISIS was so great that 20,000 soldiers in the city shed their weapons and uniforms, and fled, leaving behind half a billion dollars in the local branch of the central bank. ISIS cadre now captured the oilfields around Mosul and later Kirkuk, and the Baiji oil refinery on 21 June. ISIS also now opened a land corridor to Syria, by taking the important border town of Tal Afar. Mosul now became the ISIS 'capital' in Iraq.

These territorial successes were accompanied by sheer terror: Iraqi soldiers captured at Kirkuk were beheaded; 670 Shia prisoners in Mosul were executed, while 1,500 Shia soldiers captured at Camp Speicher

military base were put to death over three days. In Mosul, thirteen imams, who refused to give their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, were also executed.

On 29 June 2014, ISIS spokesman al-Adnani announced that the territory from Diyala in Iraq to Aleppo in Syria would now constitute the 'Islamic State', which would be a 'caliphate' and have Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its caliph. On 1 July, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself addressed his congregation in the Grand Mosque in Mosul, which was also heard across the world through the internet. He said:

The Muslims today have a loud, thundering statement, and possess heavy boots. They have a statement that will cause the world to hear and understand the meaning of terrorism, and boots that will trample the idol of nationalism, destroy the idol of democracy and uncover its deviant nature. ...

Therefore, rush, O Muslims, to your state. Yes, it is your state. Rush, because Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for Iraqis. The earth is Allah's. ... The state is a state for all Muslims, all the Muslims.⁵⁸

These developments impacted Iraqi politics: Iran now supported Haider al-Abadi as prime minister, compelling Nouri al-Maliki to resign on 30 August – a victim of the ideological and territorial successes of the ISIS for which he was held largely responsible.

In the years, the IS controlled a third of Iraq and a fourth of Syria, territory the size of the UK, with a population of about 6 million. It, in fact, functioned as a proto-state: it had the Shura Council, akin to a council of ministers, to advise the caliph; the Sharia Council as the apex religious and judicial authority, that also controlled the mutawwa, a police force to monitor public conduct; the security and intelligence councils, headed by former officers from Saddam Hussein's security services; and, the military council, headed by an officer from Saddam's army.

Other councils included the economic council that handled financial affairs; the education council, and the Islamic services council that looked after municipal services in the ‘state’, the distribution of rations, health services, and the care of orphans and widows. The IS also had an influential arm, the Islamic State Institution for Public Information, that handled media outreach, propaganda, recruitment, and appeals to ‘lone-wolf’ operators.⁵⁹ These central councils were supported by provincial councils to manage local administration.

In 2015, Atwan estimated the IS armed forces at about 200,000, with about a third having had battle experience. The bulk of the personnel were from Iraq or Syria, but there were at least 30,000 fighters who came from other Arab countries, with 7,000 having European nationality. Many were lured to the IS by the promise of a regular income – in Iraq, they were paid about \$500–650 per month, while the salary in Syria was a more modest \$250.⁶⁰

As noted above, IS forces were, in the initial stages, led by Ba’athist officers, who played a crucial role in building up the cadre into a professional force. An American military observer noted that IS campaigns indicated familiarity with the local terrain and ‘demonstrated scope, distribution, deception, and timing as overarching strategic characteristics’.⁶¹

The IS affiliation with Ba’ath officers appears to have ended with the capture of Mosul: several senior military officers and Ba’ath party members were arrested in June 2014. The ideological gulf between the jihadis and the Ba’athists widened and now even embraced the Naqshbandi Army. The IS media called the Ba’athists ‘devious’, and Izzat Ibrahim a ‘scheming infidel’. In turn, Ibrahim called the IS tafkiri (apostate) and a threat to the Arab nation, which they (the IS leaders) did not recognize.⁶² Gerges points out that few Iraqi Sunnis accepted IS’s jihadi ideology; most saw it as a protector against Shia militia.⁶³

Atwan, in 2015, described the IS as ‘the richest terror group in history’.⁶⁴ Its principal source of income was the sale of oil from the fields it controlled in Syria, that, at that time, generated \$3–5 million per day. The

oil was sold to the Syrian government and to other neighbouring countries through smuggling networks. Other income came from the sale of antiquities from both Iraq and Syria, some of which were sold at astronomical prices in the global black market. Another major source of income was ransom from kidnappings, which, in some cases, brought in several million dollars to the organization.

The fight against the IS

Over the three-year period, there was sustained fighting by Iraqi forces, backed by the Kurdish peshmerga (literally, ‘those who face death’, it refers to Kurdish armed forces in Iraq), Shia militia and US air attacks, to roll back the territorial gains of the IS.

In August 2014, IS forces attacked the Yazidi community in the Sinjar area, leading to the displacement of about 200,000 people; about 50,000 Yazidis were besieged by IS militants in the Sinjar mountains. In response to fears about starvation and the mass killing of the community, President Obama, on 7 August, ordered air attacks on IS forces and the air-dropping of food for those trapped in the mountains. Obama justified his intervention on the ground that ISIS ‘could pose a threat eventually to American interests as well’.⁶⁵

On 13 August, US airstrikes and Kurdish ground forces broke the IS siege of Mount Sinjar. Five days later, the Kurdish [peshmerga](#), with the help of the Iraqi Special Forces and the US air campaign, reclaimed the Mosul Dam from IS control. In October, however, ISIS fighters retook territory north of Mount Sinjar. This cut off the route to Iraqi Kurdistan and also besieged several thousand Yazidis in Mount Sinjar.

In September 2014, the US put together a coalition with its NATO and Arab partners, called the ‘Combined Joint Task Force in Iraq’, which, besides air campaigns, also provided extensive training to the Iraqi security forces: nearly 200,000 Iraqi soldiers and police officers received training from this coalition. In October, the operation was code-named ‘Inherent

Resolve'. In December that year, the commander of the joint task force said that nearly 1,400 air strikes had been carried out on IS positions.

Iran was also a major player in the fight against the IS. Its first action was in the summer of 2014, in support of the Kurds to retake the town of Makhmour – it provided ammunition, training and intelligence support to its allies. Iran's role expanded over the next period, with the creation of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), a coalition of Shia militant groups – which included some Sunni and Turkmen fighters as well – numbering about 140,000 in total. In October 2014, 'Operation Ashura' was launched by Iraqi forces and the Iranian-backed PMU militia, which retook the strategic town of [Jurf al-Sakhar](#) near Baghdad, securing the way for millions of Shia pilgrims going to Karbala and Najaf on the [day of Ashura](#).

On 17 December, [peshmerga](#) forces, backed by fifty US-led coalition airstrikes on IS positions, launched an offensive to liberate Sinjar and to break the siege of the Sinjar mountains. In two days, IS forces retreated, leaving behind about a hundred dead comrades. In March 2015, after a month-long battle, Iraqi forces, supported by PMU militants, took Tikrit in the Anbar province, but, in May, lost Ramadi to the IS, which was retaken by Iraqi forces only at the end of 2015.

The IS also retaliated with lethal suicide bombings in different Iraqi towns. On 17 July, a [suicide bomber detonated a car bomb](#) in a crowded marketplace in the Shia-majority city of [Khan Bani Saad](#) in the Diyala province during [Eid al-Fitr](#) celebrations, killing people and injuring another 130. On 13 August, a suicide bomber [detonated a truck bomb](#) in a crowded marketplace in [Sadr City, Baghdad](#), killing at least seventy-five people and injuring 212 more. Later, in August, two senior Iraqi military commanders were killed by a suicide bomber.

On 16 October 2016, Iraqi forces began the campaign to take back Mosul. Given the large civilian population residing in the town and the IS militants embedded within, the town was under siege till July 2017, while US aircraft targeted IS positions in the crowded town. PMU militia were kept about 20 km away from the town's borders to avoid a bloody sectarian

confrontation in that largely Sunni region, though its cadre used the time to take major towns on the route from Mosul to the Syrian border.

Iraq **captured** IS's last two strongholds of **Al-Qa'im** and **Rawah** on 17 November 2017. After the Iraqi army had captured the last IS-held areas in the al-Jazira desert bordering Syria on 9 December, Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi announced the end of the war.

In Syria, in October 2015, the US built up the Kurds of the People's Protection Units (YPG) into a cohesive force called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to lead the fight against the IS. The SDF includes Arab, Turkmen and Armenian elements as well. In December 2016, the SDF had about 45,000 fighters, of whom 13,000 were Arab. The SDF secured victories in major IS strongholds – the town of Manbij in 2016; the city of Raqqa, the self-declared Syrian capital of the IS, in 2017; and, finally, in 2019, the town of Baghouz, the last territory under IS control.

The IS thus underwent a 23 per cent reduction of its territorial space in 2016 (leaving 60,400 sq. km under its control), and then was reduced to just about 20 sq. m by the end of 2018.⁶⁶ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi died by suicide on 27 October 2019, when confronted by US forces in a compound where he was hiding in Barisha, in Syria's Idlib province, very close to the border with Turkey.

Scapegoating Saudi Arabia after 9/11

The events of 9/11 had powerful reverberations in Israel. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon immediately realized that large numbers of Americans would recall his country's violent approach to the Palestinians living under its occupation, most recently during the second Intifada that had erupted largely due to Sharon's own deliberate provocations, and would blame Israel for the assault on their homeland.

Hence, before the Americans could in their traumatized state frame clear thoughts, Sharon took quick preventive action. On 18 September 2001, he gave a wide-ranging interview in which he addressed possible accusations of Israeli culpability frankly and in some detail. He noted that

some voices would be raised in the US that ‘if it were not for its relationship with Israel, none of this terror would have hit New York or Washington’.⁶⁷ He then categorically stated that Israel would not accept the guilt for these attacks. He pointed out, ‘This is a struggle with extreme Islam, a deep struggle of values. ... And even if you would say for a minute that there is a connection with Israel – does that mean we are responsible for what happened?’⁶⁸

These remarks gave the Israeli media and their allies in the US the cue to robustly shift attention from the Palestine issue and, instead, focus on Islam and Islamic societies, particularly Saudi Arabia, and hold them culpable for the attacks. Not surprisingly, within a few weeks of 9/11, US political leaders, academics and journalists commenced scathing attacks on Saudi Arabia.

The influential American commentator, Seymour Hersh, on the basis of extensive intelligence briefings, described in the *New Yorker* the kingdom’s regime as ‘increasingly corrupt, alienated from the country’s religious rank and file’, a regime that was so fearful that it had channelled hundreds of millions of dollars to ‘fundamentalist groups that wish to overthrow it’.⁶⁹ Hersh painted a picture of large-scale corruption and self-indulgence on the part of senior royals, and the full backing extended to the regime by successive American governments over the previous decades.

Another influential article in those traumatic days was by the writer Neil MacFarquhar in the *New York Times*, titled ‘Anti-Western and Extremist Views Pervade Saudi Schools’.⁷⁰ In it, he castigated the Saudi education system’s ‘extremist anti-Western world-view’, which, he said, had created a pool of potential recruits for international terrorist networks, while making them unfit for normal mainstream employment. The writer concluded that Saudi Arabia ‘has revealed itself as the source of the very ideology confronting America in the battle against terrorism’.

The views expressed by Hersh and MacFarquhar were then echoed enthusiastically across the mainstream American and British media, and later influenced European writings as well. *New York Times*, in an editorial titled ‘Reconsidering Saudi Arabia’, noted that the country had ‘helped

create and sustain bin Laden's terrorist organization';⁷¹ a month later, its arch-rival, *Washington Post*, wrote an editorial with the same title and made the same points⁷² – a rare instance of the two rivals publishing nearly the same editorial, with the same title, just a month apart.

The Guardian spoke of Saudi Arabia as 'the real cancer in the Middle East'⁷³ and 'a perverted creation of America and its British ally'; Radio Netherlands said of the kingdom that 'with such lukewarm Islamic friends, America hardly needs enemies'.⁷⁴ At this stage, no Western writer made the point, that was pervasive among Arab commentators, that the violence and injustice meted out to the Palestinians by Israel, backed by the US, was the principal source of anger among Arabs and Muslims, in general.

Saudi writers gave a strong response to the calumny being heaped upon their country. Besides refuting the specific criticisms about their education system by MacFarquhar and others as being based on selective quotes from textbooks, they also pointed out that hundreds of thousands of young Saudis had passed out of the country's education system over the last several years who had not got radicalized or harboured ill-will towards the US. They also noted that in the 'global jihad' in Afghanistan, the US had been an active and enthusiastic partner of the kingdom, and had also engaged closely with the Taliban in connection with the TAP gas pipeline.

In US writings, no writer seemed to recall that the US had been a participant in the 'global jihad', and had provided funding and weaponry to the fighters, headed by Abdullah Azzam, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, particularly the shoulder-held Stinger missile that had wreaked havoc on Soviet helicopter gunships and expedited its retreat from the country. Thus, most Western writers not only refused to examine the Israel–Palestine issue as a causal factor for 9/11, but they also suffered from selective amnesia when it came to the US's role in mobilizing and actively using faith-based extremism for its political advantage, in association with those who had now directed their ideological rage and weaponry against their erstwhile mentors.

The ‘Reform’ Initiatives

Uncomfortable facts from recent events had no takers in the US media. Within a few weeks of receiving the Sharon guidelines, the US had found its scapegoat – Saudi Arabia and the Arab world were held collectively responsible for the catastrophe in the US. Flowing from this conviction, reform – of faith, politics, economics, education, and religious and cultural life – now became the new mission of the US among its allied nations.

This US-led concern for sweeping change ignited discussions and debates relating to reform among the region’s academics, journalists, business persons and political and religious figures, who also began to agitate for wide-ranging change with unabashed fervour and unprecedented freedom. The reform debate was greatly encouraged by the publication of the ‘Arab Human Development Report’ (AHDR), in July 2002, which was prepared under the auspices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, and written by a number of Arab intellectuals, headed by the Egyptian economist, Nader Fergany.

The report exposed the serious shortcomings of the Arab world in terms of three deficits: freedom, the status of women, and the state of the knowledge society. The report called for comprehensive reform thus:

The way forward involves tackling human capabilities and knowledge. It also involves promoting systems of good governance, those that promote, support and sustain human well-being, based on expanding human capabilities, choices, opportunities and freedoms.

... The empowerment of women must be addressed throughout.⁷⁵

The first robust initiatives for reform came from the US: in December 2002, Secretary of State Colin Powell unveiled the US–Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). In his speech at the right-wing Heritage Foundation, he painted a bleak picture of West Asia plagued by terrorist violence, poor economic growth, low status of women, and an expanding youth

population. He called for a new US approach to the region focusing on political, economic and educational reform.⁷⁶

In November 2003, President Bush spoke of the need for freedom:

As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export. ... Therefore, the US has adopted a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East.⁷⁷

Following these two ambitious pronouncements, in June 2004, the US 'leaked' a 'working paper' on Middle Eastern reform, titled 'Greater Middle East Initiative' (GMEI). The paper based its reform programme on the shortcomings in the region set out in AHDR-2002. The paper was criticized by some Western commentators for being a unilateral American initiative that had not involved any discussion with the Arab countries concerned; commentators recommended that the US approach be more sensitive to Arab dignity and also involve initiatives to promote a peace settlement in West Asia. In the Arab world, the official response was cautious, highlighting regional differences in political, economic and cultural situations, which were not conducive to broad-brush changes.

Non-official commentators were more enthusiastic, calling for transparency, rule of law and freedom as the pillars of a free civil society. However, while anxious to see reform in the region, most commentators doubted American credentials in promoting the reform project. The US, they said, had served its interests in the region by supporting authoritarian regimes and, hence, bore a large measure of responsibility for the prevailing regional malaise. They recalled the US's role in backing the jihad in Afghanistan and its uneven-handed approach on the Palestine issue, and doubted that the country was sincere in promoting reform since that could jeopardize its strategic interests.

Nader Fergany, the main author of AHDR-2002, added his voice to the chorus of criticism: he condemned the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 as retarding human development and recalled the baneful US sanctions

regime, which had caused the deaths of a half a million children in Iraq in the 1990s. He said that US interventions deprived the Arabs of their fundamental right of self-determination. After the revelations of the abuses at Abu Ghraib, Fergany said:

The US administration must atone for its sins against the entire Arab nation, must make up for its violations of the legitimate rights of our people in Palestine and Iraq. The crimes of the current US administration are so diverse and inexcusable that it would take perseverance and creativity, over a long span of time, to make things good.⁷⁸

In the face of American pressure, some Arab governments also expressed support for reform. Saudi Arabia's de-facto ruler, Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, took the lead by issuing, on 13 January 2003, the 'Charter to Reform the Arab Stand'. The charter stated that it was time 'to reinvigorate the national soul [and make the Arabs] a living nation' that was capable of handling the threats and challenges it was facing. The crown prince asserted, 'Self-reform and the promotion of political participation in Arab countries represent the two basic tools for building Arab capabilities.'⁷⁹

A government-sponsored event in Sanaa in January 2004 issued a declaration in support of democracy and human rights. President Hosni Mubarak said at the Alexandria Library conference in March 2004 that the reform project was a 'self-initiative' of civil society and the private sector. The conference called for freedom, free elections, freedom of speech, and support for pluralism. At the conference held in Doha, in June 2004, the emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, called for a new culture that would replace the one of dominance and oppression. The Arab League summit in Tunis on 22-23 May 2004 marked the culmination of official support for reform. The Tunis Declaration voiced support for democracy and human rights, the increased participation of women in national life and the upgradation of education.

The US took into account the feedback from various sources to its GMEI and prepared a fresh approach. It convened a meeting of the G-8 at Sea Island, Georgia, US, on June 2004, at which West Asian leaders were also invited. The G-8 declaration now spoke of the Broader Middle East and North Africa Partnership (BMEP).⁸⁰ It indicated far greater sensitivity to the region it was seeking to reform by referring to its ‘rich tradition and culture of accomplishment [and] ... lasting contributions to human civilisation’.

It accepted the idea that reform could not be imposed, but had to emerge from within the political order; to indicate local support for reform, it quoted extensively from the earlier state-sponsored Arab conferences. It also included detailed references to major ongoing regional conflicts – Palestine and Iraq – and said that support for reform ‘will go hand in hand with our support for a just, comprehensive and lasting settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict, based on UN resolutions 242 and 338’.

The declaration included an action plan that provided for an institutional arrangement to implement the partnership and monitor progress – the ‘Forum for the Future’ – that would bring together government, business and civil society to discuss reform goals and programmes.

The response of Arab liberals to the BMEP was generally negative: it was felt that the US had considerably diluted its ambitious reform programme due to pressure from Arab regimes. The distinguished Arab commentator, Abdelwahab el-Affendi described the BMEP as ‘an insult and an affront to Arab democrats and Arab people’.⁸¹

The Lebanese writer Joseph Samaha viewed the declaration as ‘a match between modesty and collusion’ as a result of the disruption of the Iraq adventure: ‘modesty’, because the US was seeking to work closely with Arab regimes at the UN and other fora; ‘collusion’ referred to the role of the Arab rulers in backing US interests, an essential requirement for the US to drop reform from its agenda for the region.⁸² The distinguished Lebanese commentator, Ramzy Baroud saw the reform project cracking against the rock of the US and the regimes’ self-interest, dooming the region to ‘greater political stagnation, injustice and imperial designs’.⁸³

The withering away of the reform initiative was already apparent at the first meeting of the Forum for the Future on 11-12 December 2004, in Rabat. A little before the event, *New York Times* wrote:

The popular view of the United States in the region has grown so dark, even hateful, that American officials are approaching the [Rabat] conference with caution and with a package of financial and social initiatives that have only a scant relationship to the original goal of political change.⁸⁴

After the conference, the Lebanese journalist Satie Nouredine wrote in *Al-Safir* that the ‘real reform’ the Americans were seeking in West Asia was already taking place – this was enhanced security cooperation and pooling intelligence.⁸⁵ Fawaz al-Ajami, another Arab journalist, said that the Americans were hardly interested in genuine democracy in West Asia since that would lead to a rejection of the US’s strategic plans in the region:

[With genuine democracy] the Arab world would say ‘No!’ to US schemes in Iraq; ‘No!’ to the US occupation of Iraq; ‘No!’ to limitless US support to the Zionist enemy, and ‘No!’ to the US characterisation of Palestinian resistance as terrorism; ‘No!’ to US intervention in domestic affairs; ‘No!’ to unlimited US support for Arab dictatorial regimes.⁸⁶

Thus, the reform project died a quick death. Conceived by a bitter and traumatized US administration after the 9/11 attacks, and goaded on by Ariel Sharon and the neocons at home to ‘reform’ the region rather than seek any accommodation and balance from Israel, the initiative came to grief as the US’s Iraq occupation faced the hot winds of Iraqi rage and violence.

With Iraq now unlikely to be the base for the US’s political and military domination of West Asia, the Americans had no choice but to scurry back to the very authoritarian rulers they had identified as the source of the violence wreaked upon them on 9/11 and had planned to ‘reform’ on democratic

lines. With the debacle in Iraq, the US needed to align itself once again with these rulers, since they subserved its interests in return for the regime security that the US provided them.

Reflections on War and Reform

The US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were the product of self-righteous rage at the violence unleashed on 9/11 and were shaped by the desire to inflict the maximum possible hurt, and as quickly as possible, on those identified as the perpetrators. But in neither case was there any reflection on the deeper ramifications of the 9/11 events – what had led to them? What had been the implications in the region of mobilizing faith for short-term political advantage, as had been done by the US and its allies in Afghanistan in the 1980s? What should have been done with the thousands of warriors indoctrinated in extremist Islam, trained in weaponry and subversion, and then gifted the sweet elixir of victory that had affirmed to them that Allah was back with His believers? Above all, after 9/11, what should be the American military mission in the two battle theatres of Afghanistan and Iraq, what should be the accompanying political agenda, and what should be resources mobilized for this agenda and the time frame within which this should be accomplished?

In the case of both wars, the traumatized and angry US president was influenced by home-grown right-wing ideologues – the neocons – who were emotionally and intellectually committed to Israel's interests, but, otherwise, had little or no experience of war or national politics. They pushed him into the Iraq war and the West Asia reform project, but both initiatives were based on wishful thinking and significant detachment from reality. Hence, neither project – war or reform – was defined by a strategic vision that was shaped by clear and realistic goals, an understanding of the time frame within which they would be pursued, and the financial and other resources needed for their successful implementation. Nor was there, on the part of the neocon protagonists, a grasp of the political implications of their plans on West Asia itself and on US interests.

So committed were the neocons to Israel that they failed to brief their president about the history and culture of the countries targeted for war or reform, and about the US's earlier forays into the region – the deep association of the US with the region's potentates, the shared interests that had defined their relations over several decades, and the joint 'holy war' in Afghanistan that they had conducted together.

Of course, these neocons had neither the capacity nor the honesty to tell the president about the deep resentment among Arabs about the US's approach to the Israel–Palestine issue. Instead, they pandered to Ariel Sharon's self-serving and unscrupulous diagnosis of the issues that had led to the 9/11 attacks – a combination of Israel's violence, the US's major role in creating the Muslim holy warriors, and the country's long backing of the region's autocratic rulers, who survived on the security umbrella and weaponry provided by the Americans. Indeed, among the Gulf sheikhdoms, much of the weaponry purchased was intended not for use in war but to appease the US's military–industrial complex and sustain the bilateral strategic partnership.

All these years later, it remains a puzzling fact that, while the US poured billions of dollars into the two wars and put its soldiers' lives at risk, it found itself entirely unable to manage its local 'allies' on the ground. In Afghanistan, throughout the twenty-year conflict, Pakistan continued to back the Taliban *against* the US forces – with weapons, intelligence and training – while simultaneously obtaining US financial and military support to fight the Taliban!

In Iraq, the US, with little understanding of Iraqi history or politics, complicated its occupation by alienating the Sunni community and then pursuing an overtly sectarian framework for the new order in the country. This sectarian divide was taken advantage of by local politicians for their own benefit – mainly by the US's own protégé, Nouri al-Maliki. Later, as sectarian violence tore the country apart and fomented jihadi outrage, the US attempted to correct course and promote a more pluralistic political order in Iraq. But it could do nothing to get Nouri al-Maliki to accommodate in the armed forces and the administration the Sunni activists

from the Sahwa movement, who had rejected the allure of jihad and helped defeat the ISI in. The US, ironically, failed to wean Nouri al-Maliki away from his crucial dependence on Iran and the militia that it had sponsored.

Both wars, fought by the US war machine with no long-term strategy and with grossly inadequate resources, inflicted extraordinary destruction on Afghanistan and Iraq – hundreds of thousands were killed, even more were wounded and displaced, all institutions of civic life were damaged beyond repair, and millions were left destitute, experiencing hunger, ill-health and lost education. This devastation will not be repaired for entire decades.

The two wars have also left a toxic legacy for the region: Afghanistan is looking at the prospect of the Taliban defining its future national politics, while Iraq is making every effort to bleed out the sectarian poison that is the principal legacy of the US occupation. However, the impact of extremist and sectarian ideology, and its fierce votaries, will be felt for years to come.

The US-led reform initiative was as ill-conceived as its wars: here too, the US displayed no knowledge or understanding of local cultures, no interest in regional history, no shaping of effective tactics to take the projects forward, no putting together of allies and partners, and – more seriously – no anticipation of the implications of reform in the regional order and, indeed, on the interests of the US itself.

Looking back, it appears that the ‘reform’ initiative – the wholesale reworking of the political, economic, religious and cultural order in West Asia – was premised on the US military triumph in Iraq, an Iraq that would emerge from war and occupation as the unsinkable platform to support the US’s large-scale resculpting of the regional order to serve its own interests. The insurgency in Iraq, apparent within the first few weeks of the US’s troops arrival, and the defeat of the American project in Iraq, obvious by the end of 2004, caused the hasty demise of the reform project and reaffirmed the US’s long-standing alliance with the region’s autocrats.

US interventions in West Asia yield two observations: one, the country can inflict hurt and damage, but has no capacity to heal, to rehabilitate or to reconstruct. And, two, despite the frequent references of US leaders to

freedom and human rights, none of the rulers in the region believes that America has a serious interest in reform – they will remain the guardians of US's interests in West Asia as it flounders from one crisis to another, and leaves in its wake a long trail of death and destruction.

A final thought: the US had entered the new century as the world's sole superpower and, in West Asia, as the regional hegemon. The 9/11 attacks severely damaged this status, while its failure to conduct war to uphold its standing mortally diminished the hegemon and opened the gates for new rivals to enter the arena.

Iran and Israel: US Policies Over Two Decades (2001–2021)



IN OCTOBER 2003, THEN SENATOR JOE BIDEN SPOKE OF THE BUSH JR administration as the ‘most ideological administration in US history, led by neoconservatives who believe that the only asset that counts is our military might’. A few years later, in 2007, Ron Paul, then the Republican presidential candidate, noted that it was not the American people who had wanted war in Iraq; it was ‘a small number of people called the neoconservative [who] hijacked our foreign policy’.¹ Commentator Michael Hirsh, writing in *Newsweek* in June 2003, said that the neocon vision had ‘become the hard core’ of American foreign policy. Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh said in January 2005, ‘The amazing thing is we have been taken over basically by a cult, eight or nine neo-conservatives have somehow grabbed the government.’²

The neocons, briefly noted earlier, were influential players in the Bush Jr administration and, working closely with the president and his senior officials – Vice President Dick Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld – shaped and steered US policy in West Asia, impacting,

crucially, on its approach to Iraq, Iran and Israel, through the two terms of the Bush presidency.

The Neocon Agenda

The central commitment of the neocons was to Israel's interests; they successfully projected the view that the interests of the US and Israel were identical. They worked closely with Israel's politicians and policymakers to define the US position on West Asian issues. As the British writer Patrick Seale has said:

Rightwing Jewish neocons ... tend to be pro-Israel zealots who believe that American and Israeli interests are inseparable. ... Friends of Ariel Sharon's Likud, they tend to loathe Arabs and Muslims. For them, the cause of liberating Iraq had little to do with the well-being of Iraqis. ... What they wished for was an improvement in Israel's military and strategic environment.³

After the 9/11 attacks, the neocons grew in stature. They propounded the idea of an extremist Islamic attack on the US that would, according to neocon intellectual Michael Ledeen, bring together 'Baathists, radical Wahhabi Sunnis, radical Iranian Shia, and the PLO'. Ledeen claimed that, while these groups might have differences between themselves, 'they can always put aside their differences whenever there is a common enemy'; they were united in their hatred of the US because it was the enemy of tyranny which they all represented.⁴ Ledeen offered no evidence to support these far-fetched assertions, nor did he try to explain how the US, with close ties to authoritarian regimes in Asia, Africa and Latin America, could be viewed as the 'enemy of tyranny'.

Affirming this monolithic neocon view of the region, Robert Kagan and William Kristol, as early as October 2001, predicted that 'Afghanistan will prove but an opening battle. ... [This war on terrorism] is going to spread and engulf a number of countries in conflicts of varying intensity. ... It is

going to resemble the clash of civilisations that everyone has hoped to avoid.’ Influential neocons within the administration, such as Richard Perle and David Frum, took a similar Manichaeian view of history; they saw bin Laden as only the latest attempt of ‘leaders of the Middle East’ to lead a ‘unified East against the enemy West’; the US, therefore, had to ‘end this evil before it kills again. ... It is victory or holocaust.’⁵

Iran soon entered the cross hairs of the neocons baying for battle. Much earlier, in July 1996, then newly elected Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, had described Iran as ‘the most dangerous of these regimes’ threatening Israel. This demonization of Iran had a strong influence on the Clinton administration when, under neocon influence, Iran had been coupled with Iraq in the US’s ‘dual containment’ policy. After 9/11, voices hostile to Iran in both Israel and the US became even more shrill.

In January 2002, Perle and Frum ensured that Iran was included in the ‘axis of evil’ in Bush’s State of the Union address, along with Iraq and North Korea, a reference that was added at the last moment and without much reflection.⁶ It is interesting to note that, just three months after the 9/11 attacks, the neocon-influenced presidential address made few references to bin Laden or Al Qaeda, and focused largely on *Israel’s* concerns and interests. The address also failed to explain how the three countries named by the president, given the traditional Iran–Iraq hostility and the absence of any significant ties between them and North Korea, formed an ‘axis’.

In November 2002, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon called Iran the ‘centre of world terror’ and added that, with its WMD and ballistic missiles, it was a ‘danger to the Middle East, and a danger to Europe’. In February 2003, as the US prepared for its assault on Iraq, Israeli defence minister, Shaul Mofaz, strongly recommended that, after Iraq, the US should initiate ‘political, economic and diplomatic pressure’ on Iran. Michael Ledeen joined the chorus in April with his speech titled ‘Time to Focus on Iran: The Mother of Modern Terrorism’. In May, Israel’s ambassador in the US, Daniel Ayalon, urged regime change in Syria and Iran. Regime change in

Iran now became central to the Iran-related cacophony from Israeli officials and their American neocon partners.⁷

This rhetoric inevitably bled into official policymaking: in May 2003, there were reports that the Pentagon was preparing ‘special plans’ for Iran, and that the researcher concerned was a firm advocate of regime change. In November 2003, the head of Mossad, Meir Dagan, told the Israeli Knesset that Iran’s nuclear programme was ‘the biggest threat to Israel’s existence since its creation’. He added, in December 2003, that Iran was ‘a strategic threat to Israel’, even as reports were leaked that Israel was planning a pre-emptive strike on Iran.⁸

Confronting Iran

Despite Israeli and neocon hostility for Iran, as the US prepared for its attack on Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks, it found common ground with the Islamic Republic. Iran nursed a deep animosity for the Taliban – in August 1998, the group had captured Mazar-e-Sharif and massacred a few thousand Hazara Shia; they had also attacked the Iranian consulate and killed eleven diplomatic personnel. Hence, Iran had no qualms in backing the US war by allowing overflights for US aircraft attacking Taliban targets and using its long-standing ties with the Northern Alliance to support ground action.

Iranian officials also played an active role at the Bonn conference in December 2001 (where the future political order in Afghanistan was being discussed) in persuading Afghan politicians and warlords to accept the democratic order that the US was promoting for their country. Following this, American and Iranian diplomats began secret meetings in Geneva and Paris to discuss matters relating to post-war Afghanistan, including the handover of Al Qaeda fugitives who had taken refuge in Iran. It appears that two fugitives were handed over to US military in Afghanistan and some more were deported later; copies of passports of about 200 others were also given to the Americans.⁹

At this point, Iranian leaders believed that their cooperative role in Afghanistan would help improve ties with the US. Hence, Bush's inclusion of the country in the 'axis of evil' in his State of the Union address came as a rude shock. It undermined Iranian President Mohammed Khatami's moderate approach and strengthened the hands of the hardliners, who proclaimed that the US just could not be trusted. However, as the Americans prepared for the attack on Iraq, the clandestine diplomatic dialogue was resumed. Iran also provided some assistance to the US in Iraq by persuading its Shia supporters to back the American-led political process rather than offer resistance to the occupation.¹⁰

Israel was, of course, the 'elephant in the room' during these diplomatic interactions. The possibility of a US–Iran rapprochement was seen in Tel Aviv as a threat to its interests and led to a major lobbying effort by its officials to counter it, with the full backing of its neocon allies.

Given the neocon ascendancy in Washington, an attempt at a 'grand bargain' in US–Iran relations initiated by the latter at that time was doomed to fail. This was a document prepared jointly, in April 2003, by an Iranian diplomat, Sadegh Kharrazi, the son of Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi, and the Swiss ambassador in Tehran, Tim Guldemann (in the absence of US–Iran diplomatic relations, Switzerland was looking after US interests in Iran). Its final form was approved by Kharrazi, Khatami and Ali Khamenei.¹¹

In the document, Iran agreed to detach itself from Hamas and Islamic Jihad, transform Hezbollah into a political party, address US concerns relating to nuclear weapons, help the US stabilize Iraq, make peace with Israel and accept a two-state solution to the Palestine issue. In return, Iran asked for removal of sanctions, an end to threats of regime change, recognition of its interests in Iraq and the broader region, an exchange of Al Qaeda and Mujahedeen-e-Khalq (MEK) members in each other's custody, and acceptance of Iran's right to access WMD technology, without developing weapons, to which it was firmly opposed.¹²

It appears that the document was viewed positively by the State Department, but Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President

Cheney rejected it on the ground that ‘we do not speak to evil’. Later, Secretary of State Colin Powell’s chief of staff, Lawrence Wilkerson, blamed the neocons for this failure to enter into dialogue with Iran.¹³

The Nuclear Issue

In August 2002, there were reports from the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), the political wing of the MEK, that Iran had built two secret nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak to enrich uranium. It was then widely believed that this information had been provided to NCRI by Israel’s intelligence organization, the Mossad. The information was later found to be accurate and was confirmed publicly by President Khatami some months later. Iran argued that, under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it was obliged to inform the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA) only when the plants were operational. But these revelations fed into the general hostility towards Iran that was ingrained in large sections of the US population, and was kept alive in the media by Israel and the neocons.

Following these revelations, Iran entered into negotiations with Britain, France and Germany (the EU3), and agreed in October 2003 to sign the Additional Protocol, which would enable short-notice inspections by the IAEA. In October 2004, Iran also agreed to temporarily suspend uranium enrichment until a final settlement of the nuclear issue.

With the issue now firmly on the global table, Israel has worked hard to maintain pressure on Iran by regularly bringing forward fresh ‘evidence’ of advances being made by the country in developing nuclear weapons, while simultaneously threatening military action and urging the US to join it in this endeavour. From late 2004 onwards, its hard-line commentators spoke of the need to use pre-emptive measures; it was announced in September 2004 that Israel had purchased 500 bunker-busting bombs from the US, which would be able to destroy Iran’s nuclear facilities.¹⁴

Through 2005, the calls for war became more shrill: in November 2005, the Israel lobby in the US warned of the ‘severe danger’ Iran posed to the US and its allies, while Ariel Sharon warned a month later that Israel would

stop Iran's programme through military means. However, Israel and the neocons did not get the war they so dearly wanted. Ironically, the ongoing war in Iraq – that they had done so much to promote – was, by late 2004, viewed unfavourably by the American public, and this influenced the government to not attack Iran.

Though the war option was not pursued, hostility towards Iran continued in full force. At this time, a new contributor to the negative environment surrounding Iran was its hard-line president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, elected in June 2005. He rejected European proposals to address the issue of enrichment: in February 2006, the plant at Natanz began enrichment; soon thereafter, Ahmadinejad announced that Iran had mastered the uranium fuel cycle and had joined the nuclear club through its own efforts.¹⁵

Crippling Sanctions

In the absence of war, Iran experienced extraordinary pressure through the powerful instrument of economic sanctions. In late 2005, the IAEA found Iran non-compliant with its NPT safeguards agreement and referred the matter to the UNSC. In December 2006, the UNSC imposed on Iran the first of several sanctions that would become standard practice over coming years.

In the US itself, while the neocons continued baying for war, what its proponents actually achieved was the ability to severely harm the Iranian economy through sanctions that gradually limited the country's global economic engagement, isolated it from the international economic community, crippled the national economy and left large sections of its people impoverished. In 2007, the US House of Representatives passed the 'Iran Counter-Proliferation Act' that covered almost all of Iranian imports and included in its ambit the foreign subsidiaries of US companies.

However, the clamour for war received a hammer-blow when the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), the collective assessment of sixteen

US intelligence agencies, was published in November 2007.¹⁶ Its principal findings were:

- The NIE judged ‘with high confidence’ that Iran, in fall 2003, ‘halted its nuclear weapons programme’, though it retained the option of reviving it.
- It assessed with ‘moderate confidence’ that, as of mid-2007, Iran had not restarted its weapons programme.
- It also assessed ‘with moderate to high confidence’ that Iran did not currently have a nuclear weapon; it added that the country would not be technically capable of producing and reprocessing enough plutonium for a weapon before 2015.
- The NIE believed that Iran probably halted its weapons programme ‘in response to international pressure’, which suggested that ‘Iran may be more vulnerable to influence on the issue’ than had been understood earlier.
- The NIE concluded that that a ‘combination of threats of intensified international scrutiny and pressures, along with *opportunities for Iran to achieve its security, prestige, and goals for regional influence in other ways*’ could encourage Iran to continue the halt in weapons development [emphasis added].

These reassuring findings did not assuage the bloodlust of Israel or the neocons. The neocon view was that the anti-war elements in the State Department, the Defence Department, the armed forces and now the intelligence community had come together to ensure that war was rejected as an option. A foreign affairs commentator assessed that the government institutions were now ‘determined to resist the White House’, while another said that the US’s key military, diplomatic and intelligence circles were ‘against our Israel-centric policy in the Middle East’.¹⁷

The neocons fought back furiously. Michael Ledeen called the NIE report a ‘scam’ and doubted it would stand up to serious scrutiny. Norman Podhoretz saw a conspiracy by the intelligence community against the Bush Jr administration. Israel said it had clear evidence that Iran’s nuclear

programme was still being pursued, and that the country was a threat to Israel and Europe. Its officials also hinted that Israel could launch military action on Iran's nuclear facilities on its own.¹⁸

In a recent book on Israel's foreign policy after the Cold War, the London-based scholar Amnon Aran has pointed out that, according to Ehud Barak, then the defence minister in Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet, by mid-2010, Israel had acquired the 'operational capability' to launch an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. This option was seriously debated in Netanyahu's inner cabinet: Barak says that Netanyahu described Iran as an 'evil' with whom negotiations were impossible, a view that was supported by Barak himself and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman. However, it was firmly opposed by armed forces chief of staff, Benny Gantz, who saw Iran as a 'rational player' and its leadership 'full of rational individuals'.

Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor pointed out that an Israeli strike would only temporarily delay the nuclear programme, while providing Iran with the 'political legitimacy, on the grounds of self-defence, to accelerate its nuclear programme', including its military aspects. During discussions between Israeli and American officials in, Aran says that the latter were consistently opposed to the military option and preferred diplomacy.¹⁹

An opportunity to use sanctions to influence Iran's domestic politics emerged after the Iranian presidential elections of 2009. This was in the context of widespread national protests, referred to as the 'Green Movement', when a few million people – mainly students and the intelligentsia, and some sections of the middle and upper classes – came out on to the streets to protest Ahmadinejad's 'victory' in the presidential elections, which gave him a second term. They believed the elections had been rigged by state agencies.

Observers in the US and Europe felt that Western support for the Green Movement would encourage several Iranians to move to the opposition. Thus, increased pressure on the political order would make Iran more flexible on the nuclear question or would even achieve a change of regime – if the opposition became more powerful. To this end, the US introduced

sanctions on Iran under the recently passed ‘Comprehensive Iran Sanctions Accountability and Divestment Act of 2010’.

These sanctions banned Iran’s foreign exchange transactions through American banks and financial institutions; banned the supply of goods and technology for Iran’s refineries; imposed restrictions on the export of Iran’s oil products and on services (insurance, shipping, finance) relating to the country’s oil trade; and restricted transactions with Iranian banks linked with the nuclear weapons programme.

At the same time, in an effort to support the Iranian opposition, international companies were encouraged to export different types of software to Iran to develop internet services in the country, which would avoid governmental control.²⁰ Western governments hoped that these tough sanctions would reduce income for the budget and force increased government spending, thus reducing the funds available for subsidies. This would, it was hoped, move a larger number of people to the opposition to bring about a regime change.²¹

This effort did not work out as planned. Major critics of these sanctions were the leaders of the opposition movement themselves – Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi. They pointed out that the sanctions were hurting the common people, without undermining the government.

More seriously, Western nations had failed to read the sense of nationalism among the Iranians, who deeply resented foreign interference in their domestic matters, while the opposition groups knew that even a whiff of foreign support would thoroughly discredit their movement. Beyond this, there was a strong national consensus on the nuclear issue and on matters of foreign policy, such as support for Hezbollah and the Palestinian cause. The protesters in 2009 also accepted the Islamic foundations of the republic and rejected the idea of regime change.²²

In his public remarks, President Ahmadinejad tended to be dismissive of the sanctions: he described them as a ‘stupid move’, which would have no impact on Iran’s economy or its pursuit of economic development. But the baneful effect of the sanctions is indisputable. Iran was denied access to investments, technology and to international markets for its oil. In 2013, its

oil exports fell from 2.4 million barrels per day (MMB/D) to 1.3 MMB/D, while its oil revenues fell by \$35–50 billion. The World Bank forecast that in 2015 its oil export revenues would be \$23 billion, as against \$120 billion in 2011-12.

Its exchange rate went from 18,000 rials to the dollar in 2012 to 34,500 rials in 2013. In 2012, its GDP growth was 0.4 per cent, while inflation was in the range of per cent. About 6,000 of its manufacturing units, 67 per cent of total units, were nearly bankrupt. By 2013, 60 per cent of its population was living at or below the poverty line, while in 2012, unemployment was 12.2 per cent (it was 19 per cent, according to unofficial sources).²³ The World Bank forecast that continued sanctions, in the absence of a nuclear agreement, would bring the economy to a dead halt.²⁴

Towards Nuclear Agreement

Hassan Rouhani, cleric, academic, lawyer, diplomat and secretary of the Supreme National Security Council in the years, fought the presidential elections in 2013 on issues relating to the economy, sanctions and the nuclear programme. In the course of the campaign, he moved his persona from moderate to reformist by focusing on women's rights, freedom of speech and the release of political prisoners. He won the election with 50.7 per cent of the vote, just crossing the 50 per cent threshold to avoid a run-off. It is likely that, after the protests of 2009, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei saw the need for a shift away from the right to a more broad-based government.²⁵ He was also perhaps concerned that total economic breakdown, predicted by the World Bank, would seriously jeopardize the political order.

Rouhani's one-point agenda was to improve the lives of his people, but for this he needed an agreement on the nuclear issue and the relaxation of sanctions. Soon after his election in August 2013, Rouhani addressed the UNGA in September. He categorically stated that threat and coercion had to be replaced by dialogue and compromise. He followed this up with a telephonic conversation with President Barack Obama. With the support of

Khamenei, Iranian officials, led by Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, began negotiations with diplomats from the P5+1 countries (the permanent members of the UNSC *plus* Germany), with the EU, headed by chief EU negotiator, Catherine Ashton, as a separate party.

Obama's rationale for pursuing negotiations with Iran on the nuclear issue was based on the simple consideration that, while an Iranian weapons programme was dangerous for US interests, war was not an acceptable option. Again, he also assessed that, while sanctions would hurt Iran, they would, by themselves, neither effect regime change nor pressurize Iran to give up its programme. This would only be achieved through diplomatic engagement that addressed the core interests of both sides.²⁶

An interim agreement on the nuclear issue was achieved in November 2013. Iran agreed to suspend uranium enrichment, place already-enriched uranium beyond weapons use, suspend work on the Arak plant, and halt the development of improved centrifuges that would have enabled more efficient enrichment. In return, it obtained a sanctions' relaxation of \$7 billion.

The final agreement, titled 'Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action' (JCPOA), was concluded on 14 July 2015. Its main points were:

- Iran's uranium stockpile would be reduced by 98 per cent to 300 kg for fifteen years; the level of enrichment of this stockpile would be kept at 3.67 per cent, as against weapons-grade uranium of 90 per cent.
- Of its 20,000 centrifuges, Iran would install only 5,060 centrifuges at its Natanz plant, with research and development taking place at Natanz up to 2024; no enrichment would take place at the Fordow plant until 2031.
- Iran agreed to redesign its Arak plant so that it would not produce weapons-grade plutonium; Iran would also not construct any more heavy-water reactors.
- Iran accepted the Additional Protocol to its IAEA Safeguards Agreement, which would require the country to accept an IAEA access request within twenty-four days.

- Under the JCPOA, Iran gained access to \$100 billion in frozen assets abroad, was allowed to sell its oil on the international market, and use the global financial system for trade.

The JCPOA was approved by the UNSC through a resolution. In the US, on 22 May 2015, President Obama signed the ‘Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015’ into law after it had been passed by the Senate in a vote, and the House in a vote. On 19 July, the State Department transmitted to Congress the JCPOA, its annexes, and related materials. The sixty-day review period began the next day and ended on 17 September. A resolution of disapproval was brought to the Senate floor, but failed. A resolution of approval was brought to the House floor, but that also failed. As a result, following the congressional review period, the agreement came into effect without a vote. This reflected the deep polarization in US politics, with neither side able to muster the support to formally accept or reject the plan.

The JCPOA deeply divided US opinion. Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, led the charge: on 3 March 2015, he addressed the joint Houses of Congress at the invitation of Republican Congressional leaders, going over the head of the Obama administration. In an unprecedented breach of protocol, he sought to undermine the president’s policies in his own country, while attempting to boost his own electoral prospects at home, with polls taking place just two weeks later.

Pro-Israel right-wing groups and individuals in the US then mobilized millions of dollars to win popular support against the agreement. After successfully overcoming these domestic political hurdles, President Obama declared 18 October 2015 as ‘Adoption Day’ for the JCPOA. In his public remarks, after spelling out the steps Iran would take to implement its commitments, the president said:

These next steps ... will result in cutting off all four pathways Iran could use to develop enough fissile material for a nuclear programme. I am confident in the extraordinary benefits to our

national security and the peace and security of the world that come from the successful implementation of the JCPOA.²⁷

On 16 January 2016, the IAEA confirmed that Iran had fulfilled its key nuclear-related commitments. This day was commemorated as 'Implementation Day' and led the UN, the US and the EU to suspend or terminate the nuclear-related sanctions that had so severely damaged the Iranian economy. Commentators at that time were surprised at the speed with which Iran had met the JCPOA requirements: dismantling and moving over 12,000 centrifuges and infrastructure to storage; shipping to Russia 10,000 kg of enriched uranium; and making permanently unusable the original Arak reactor that was to have produced plutonium.²⁸

The domestic pressures generated by the sanctions were clearly the incentive for Iran to join the nuclear negotiations and ensure the quick implementation of its commitments. The US was motivated by seeking a curtailment of Iran's nuclear weapons, which threatened regional stability, and to avoid involvement in another West Asian conflict, in case Israel were to carry out air strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities. For the EU, Russia and China, besides the desire to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions, the incentives were economic, i.e., participation in the opportunities opening up in Iran after the relaxation of sanctions; for the EU there was also attendant benefit that energy ties with Iran would reduce its dependence on Russia.

It is important to recall that the JCPOA was focused entirely on the nuclear issue; it did not address other issues of regional concern – Iran's regional proxies (Hezbollah, Hamas and the Shia militia in Iraq), its ballistic missile tests, or its domestic human rights abuses – nor was it envisaged that the agreement would somehow moderate Iran's role in regional affairs. This was noted in September 2016 by Robert Einhorn, influential American nuclear expert, who said:

... the JCPOA was never intended to address all troublesome aspects of Iranian behaviour. ... Instead, it was based on the judgement that eliminating the nuclear threat was the most

important priority. ... It was also based on the judgement that Iran's objectionable non-nuclear policies, especially its destabilizing regional activities, could and should be effectively countered by the United States and its partners even as they cooperate with Iran in implementing the nuclear deal.²⁹

It is interesting to recall in this context that the Obama administration did not, at any stage, view the JCPOA as the precursor to a broader engagement with Iran on other issues that divided the two countries. This comes out clearly in Obama's interview with the *Atlantic Monthly*, published in April 2016, under the title 'The Obama Doctrine'. Extending over sixty printed pages, which are largely devoted to the president's West Asia-related policy approaches, it has just one paragraph on Iran which reads as follows:

It is assumed, at least among his critics, that Obama sought the Iran deal because he has a vision of a historic American-Persian rapprochement. But his desire for the nuclear agreement was born of pessimism as much as it was of optimism. 'The Iran deal was never primarily about trying to open a new era of relations between the U.S. and Iran,' Susan Rice [US national security adviser,] told me. *'It was far more pragmatic and minimalist. The aim was very simply to make a dangerous country substantially less dangerous. No one had any expectation that Iran would be a more benign actor.'* [Emphasis added]³⁰

But as Donald Trump entered the White House in January 2017, a new era in the US engagement with West Asia emerged that largely overturned many of the policies and achievements that had been patiently put in place by the Obama administration.

The Trump Presidency and West Asia (2017–2021)

Donald Trump's single-term presidency has cast a long shadow in the White House, in ways few presidents have done before him. Despite numerous books and articles that have attempted to explain his persona, President Trump remains an enigma: viewed by many as divisive, disruptive, contradictory, inconsistent, unpredictable, and dishonest, but even at the time of writing this book – a year after he left the White House – he continues to have a powerful phalanx of supporters – from senior Republican leaders to unlettered rednecks in Middle America (described by Hillary Clinton as 'deplorables') – who are deeply loyal to him and continue to believe that in November 2020, he was robbed of electoral triumph.

In office, at different times, he displayed so many different personalities that it is difficult to draw a pen-portrait that would do justice to his multifaceted persona and impulses. Broadly, in political terms, he was conservative, authoritarian, populist and ultra-nationalist, impelled by a powerful ego, and strongly held opinions and prejudices. Again, without having much intellectual depth or political experience, he disdained advisers, saw himself as 'superior in every way' to others around him and was supremely confident in his abilities as a 'dealmaker'. He was also impelled by deep hostility for his predecessor, Barack Obama, which led him to try to undo every part of Obama's 'legacy' at home and abroad.

To complicate the picture, Trump surrounded himself with officials from diverse backgrounds – right-wing ideologues, mainstream conservatives, populists, and even pragmatists from corporate and military backgrounds, most of whom had little foreign policy experience. Above all, he relied strongly on close family members – his daughter, Ivanka, and son-in-law, Jared Kushner. But, other than family members, few lasted long in office – most officials were summarily dismissed for differences with the president's views at various times.

West Asia is the one region which experienced the deepest imprint of the former president's affections, animosities and inconsistencies, and it is here that he has left his most controversial legacy. Trump's approach to West Asian affairs was determined by two strongly held positions: one, very

close bonds with Israel and Saudi Arabia, buttressed by personal ties with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman; and, two, a visceral hostility towards Iran. These emotive positions emerged from Trump's integrated view of the region that saw Israel's interests as central to US policies, the Saudis as the US's major defence and economic partners, and Iran as the incarnation of 'evil' and the US's implacable enemy.

Trump's personal views shaped two of the president's most important policy initiatives in the region: promoting Israel–Palestine 'peace' through his 'deal of the century' that was heavily skewed in favour of Israel, and withdrawing from the nuclear deal with Iran. The latter overturned an important Obama legacy, punished Iran severely with sanctions (to the satisfaction of Israel and Saudi Arabia), and provided Trump the opportunity to shine as a dealmaker by seeking a 'better' deal with Iran than Obama could achieve.

The principal external influences that shaped Trump's West Asia policies were his affinity with a few American hard right, pro-Israel Jewish business persons and the broad Christian evangelist community in the US, both of whom were major donors to his political campaigns. Chief among Trump's Jewish supporters were Sheldon and Miriam Adelson, who put millions of dollars into his electoral coffers and strongly advocated for America to shift its embassy to Jerusalem. They later occupied the front row in the White House when Trump unveiled his 'deal of the century', the Israel–Palestine peace plan.

Christian evangelists' interest in West Asian politics is based on their belief that the occupation of all the 'promised land' by Jews would prepare the ground for the 'Second Coming' of Jesus Christ, as foretold in the Bible. Thus, they celebrated Israel's victory in the 1967 war, strongly support the annexation of occupied territories by Israel, and firmly oppose the 'two-state' solution. Though the Biblical 'Second Coming' involves the total annihilation of the Jewish people, sections of American Jews are happy to work with the evangelists in order to serve Israel's interests.

There are electoral implications for Trump in this opportunistic affiliation: in 2016, exit polls showed that just 23 per cent of American Jewish voters picked Trump over Hillary Clinton, but 80 per cent of white evangelical Christians preferred him. These figures are significant, given that Jews make up just 3 per cent of the electorate, while white evangelical Christians make up 26 per cent.³¹ Hence, observers have noted that many of Trump's initiatives in regard to Israel and the Jews 'have little to do with the Jewish people – they reflect the mode and priorities of his largely Christian, right-wing base'.³²

Expressing surprise at the absence of Jewish support for Trump in the US, Miriam Adelson, in June 2019, said, 'Scholars of the Bible will no doubt note the heroes, sages and prophets of antiquity who were similarly spurned by the very people they came to raise up.' Carried away by emotion, she then rhetorically asked, 'Would it be too much to pray for a day when the Bible gets a "Book of Trump"?' While awaiting that great event, Mrs Adelson recommended that we 'sit back and marvel at this time of miracles for Israel, for the United States, and for the whole world'.³³

In the next sections we will look at Trump's specific policies in the region.

Israel: Central to the US's Regional Interests

The road to the announcement of the 'deal of the century' by President Donald Trump in January 2020 was marked by several initiatives in support of Israel's interests:

- In December 2017, Trump said in a speech that he would implement the law passed by the Congress in 1995 stating that Jerusalem 'should be recognized as the capital of the State of Israel'. Since the law had been passed, successive presidents had postponed the move on grounds of 'national security', a position that was abruptly reversed by Trump.

- US-based professor of political science and international relations Marc Lynch has pointed out that the traditional American position had been for the US to make this offer as part of a broader, more comprehensive peace process; now, ‘Trump gave this prize for nothing, while offering Palestinians nothing of consequence in exchange’.³⁴ US diplomat William Burns said, ‘I never saw an American president concede so much, so soon, for so little.’³⁵
- In May 2018, the US inaugurated its embassy in Jerusalem; it took place on 14 May, the seventieth anniversary of the establishment of the state of Israel.
- In August 2018, the US cut all financial support to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), the UN body set up in 1949 that looks after the interests of millions of Palestinian refugees uprooted by successive Israel–Palestine conflicts. The US cited UNRWA’s ‘failure to mobilize adequate and appropriate burden sharing’. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo maintained that ‘most Palestinians under UNRWA’s jurisdiction aren’t refugees’, and UNRWA is a hurdle to peace. The cutting off of funding was aimed at pressurizing the Palestinian leadership to begin negotiations with Israel under US auspices.
- In September 2018, the US closed the PLO mission in Washington as the Palestinians refused to be coerced into negotiations with Israel by the Trump administration.
- In March 2019, Trump signed an executive order recognizing the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel in 1967, as part of Israel. The Syrian government promptly rejected the move, pointing out that Golan was an ‘indivisible’ part of Syrian territory and regaining it ‘via all means guaranteed by international law is still a priority’. The government castigated the US for its ‘stupidity and arrogance’ and asserted that it had no right to decide the fate of the area.³⁶ In November 2019, Mike Pompeo announced that the Trump administration no longer considered settlement-building in the occupied West Bank to be a violation of international law, though he offered no legal support for this position.

The ‘Deal of the Century’

In the run up to the announcement of Trump’s Israel–Palestine peace initiative, Jared Kushner released, in June 2019, the economic package accompanying the political process. The plan – formally titled ‘Peace to Prosperity’ – envisaged development funding of \$50 billion over ten years, and forecast that the package, if implemented, would double the Palestinians’ GDP, create more than 1 million jobs in the territories, reduce Palestinian unemployment to single digits (it was 31 per cent in 2018, according to the World Bank), and cut the Palestinian poverty rate by 50 per cent. The plan was expected to be funded by Arab states and private investors.

The proposal included a number of specific projects, including border crossing facilities, power plant upgrades, infrastructure improvements to boost tourism, career counselling and job placement services, along with rebuilding and modernizing Palestinian hospitals and health clinics. It also called for linking the West Bank and Gaza with a modern transportation network, including a high-speed rail service.

This economic plan was discussed at a workshop in Bahrain on 25-26 June 2019. In addition to the host, a number of other Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Jordan, Qatar, Morocco, and Egypt participated in the summit, while Iraq and Lebanon opposed the meeting. Most Arab observers were sceptical about the initiative. They noted that, although the economic development of Palestine was presented as the main agenda of the workshop, the most important goal was to garner support from Arab leaders for Kushner’s ‘Middle East Peace Plan,’ particularly by pressuring Gulf monarchies like Saudi Arabia and the UAE.³⁷

The Trump peace plan, now officially titled ‘Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People’, was formally unveiled at a White House press conference on 28 January 2020. The 181-page document addressed the major ‘final status’ issues between Israel and the Palestinians, including borders, settlements, Jerusalem and refugees. Its main points were:³⁸

- **Jerusalem:** ‘Undivided’ Jerusalem will remain the united and eternal capital of Israel, the plan declared; some areas on the outskirts of East Jerusalem, i.e., Kafr Aqab, the Shuafat refugee camp and Abu Dis, will be the site of the capital of Palestine.
- **Holy sites:** The plan provides that the status of Al-Aqsa Mosque will remain as decided in the 1967 agreement between Israel and Jordan, in terms of which the latter is the ‘custodian’ of the mosque, but sovereignty is vested in Israel.
- **Borders:** While the plan says it provides for a ‘two-state’ solution, there is no Palestinian state on offer; the proposed ‘state’ will consist of several enclaves linked with one another through roads, highways and tunnels. There will be a tunnel or a highway linking a group of enclaves on the West Bank with Gaza. This Palestinian ‘state’ will not enjoy sovereignty: Israel will control its air space, the Jordan Valley – which will be the new eastern border of Israel – and the network of roads linking the enclaves. Israel will also have the right to enter Palestinian territories for ‘security’ purposes. The existing separation wall that straddles Palestinian communities across the territories will remain in place.
- **Settlements:** About 97 per cent of Israelis in the West Bank, estimated at 600,000 in total, will be incorporated in contiguous Israeli territory; the balance 3 per cent will have the choice of remaining in Palestinian territory, protected by Israeli security.
- **Refugees:** The ‘refugee status’ of the 6 million Palestinian refugees will end, along with the dismantling of refugee camps and the closure of UNRWA. Refugees currently registered with the UNRWA will either be absorbed by the state of Palestine, or will be integrated in the states where they reside at present, or will be accepted in OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) member countries at 5,000 per year, as part of a refugee resettlement programme.
- **Gaza:** The plan calls for the complete disarmament of Gaza and the reassertion of control by the Palestine Authority (PA).

By common consent, the Trump peace plan was ‘dead on arrival’. No Palestinian had been consulted in the process of drafting the plan, and –

given the background of US's recognition of united Jerusalem as Israel's capital – the party promoting the plan just did not have the credibility to push it through successfully. The Palestinian people made their position clear – 94 per cent of them rejected it, indicating a remarkable unity of purpose. Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, called it the 'slap of the century', while Israeli commentator Akiva Eldar referred to it as the 'bluff of the millennium'.

Robert Malley and Aaron David Miller, American observers, succinctly described it as 'a plan that gives Israel everything it wants, concedes to Palestinians everything Israel does not care for, tries to buy off the Palestinians with the promise of \$50 billion in assistance that will never see the light of day, and then calls it peace'.³⁹

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, without referring to Trump, noted that 'Jerusalem remains a "final status" issue; the city's future can only be resolved on the basis of international law and through negotiations between the parties'. The Arab League met on 1 February 2020 and rejected it unanimously, while the OIC called on members 'not to engage with this plan or to cooperate with the US administration in implementing it in any form'.⁴⁰

Commentators have noted the political considerations that influenced the timing of the presentation of the plan. Both Trump and Netanyahu hoped for some immediate benefits for themselves: while Trump sought to appease his Jewish donors and the evangelists, apart from consolidating his electoral base before the November elections, Netanyahu faced another round of polls in six weeks, even as he faced indictment on criminal charges in an Israeli court.

As it happened, even though Trump and Netanyahu and their enthusiastic cohorts worked diligently on one more betrayal of the Palestinian people, things did not pan out for them as planned: Israel's elections in March 2021, for the first time in twelve years, led to a government in June that was not headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, while the US elections of November 2020 ousted Trump from the White House. The

Biblical ‘Book of Trump’, so fervently hoped for by Miriam Adelson, has perhaps been indefinitely postponed.

Iran: Crippled by Sanctions

Referring to Trump’s foreign policy approach in West Asia, Robert Malley and Aaron David Miller, cited above, made the perceptive observation that the administration’s actions suggested it was ‘... enamored with the exercise of its own power, certain that it can change reality by the mere fact of enforcing its will. ... It reflects the Trump team’s conviction that power unexercised is power wasted, that power should be used to break the ways of the past ...’⁴¹

The Trump administration’s approach to Iran is the best manifestation of this astute observation.

Through the election campaign, Trump railed against the nuclear agreement with Iran. He called it a ‘disaster’ and ‘the worst deal ever negotiated’, and said it could lead to a ‘nuclear holocaust’. In a speech to the pro-Israel lobby group, American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), in March 2016, Trump declared that his ‘number one priority’ would be to ‘dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran’.⁴² Thus, from the early days of the Trump presidency, Iran was in its cross hairs. In April 2017, the administration announced that it was commencing a six-month Iran policy review, pointing out that the JCPOA ‘only delays [Iran’s] goal of becoming a nuclear state’ and that it failed to limit Iran’s regional influence.⁴³

Following the review, in October 2017, Trump said he would not certify Iran’s compliance with the JCPOA unless three conditions were fulfilled: a fresh look at its nuclear activities permitted under the JCPOA after fifteen years; Iran’s ballistic missiles programme was curbed; and its regional activities were restricted. In January 2018, Trump announced that, in May that year, he would not waive the JCPOA-related sanctions if these ‘weaknesses’ in the plan were not addressed.

On 8 May 2018, the president announced that the US would withdraw from the JCPOA and reimpose all secondary sanctions by November 2018.

Two weeks later, on 21 May, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced twelve new conditions Iran would have to fulfil in a revised JCPOA to obtain normal ties with the US. Besides seeking unfettered access to all of its nuclear facilities, the demands included an end to Iran's ballistic missiles programme, an end of its support to Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the termination of its activities in Iraq, Yemen, Syria and Afghanistan, and an end to its 'threats' to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

While rejecting Pompeo's twelve conditions, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, in an article, said that the statement 'reflected a desperate reaction by the US administration to the overwhelming opposition of the international community to the persistent efforts by the White House to kill the JCPOA, and the ensuing Washington's isolation'. The minister added that the statement was 'especially preposterous as the US administration itself is increasingly isolated internationally due to its effort to undermine diplomacy and multilateralism [and] the culmination of a delusional US approach to our region'.⁴⁴

In April 2019, the US administration designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organization and also announced that waivers granted to selected countries to purchase Iranian oil were no longer operational.

Throughout the Trump presidency, fresh sanctions were imposed on Iran, practically on a weekly basis, so that almost all parts of the country's economy were targeted by sanctions. Besides the oil sector, large sections of the country's banking and financial sector, several corporate enterprises, important governmental institutions, and numerous prominent individuals were subjected to US sanctions. This was described as the policy of 'maximum pressure' to encourage Iran to return to the negotiating table and finalize a 'better' deal with Trump.

As the US escalated its confrontation with Iran, there were a series of tit-for-tat skirmishes in the Gulf waters, which, while relatively low-key, maintained tensions in the region. In May 2019, there were mine attacks on UAE vessels off Fujairah, followed the next month by an attack on a

Japanese vessel in the Gulf of Oman. A few days later, the Iranians shot down an American drone that had strayed into its air space.

The most serious episode occurred in September 2019, when missiles, apparently fired by the Houthis in Yemen, hit Saudi Arabia's oil facilities in the Eastern Province and crippled a large part of its oil production for several days. It was feared that this attack would trigger a larger conflict in the region. Mike Pompeo immediately declared that Iran was the perpetrator, but he was contradicted by Trump, who declared that no firm evidence had been offered and that Saudi Arabia should be consulted before further action was contemplated.

- *Failure of 'Maximum Pressure'*

In January 2020, the US carried out an aerial strike that killed the IRGC-Al Quds Force commander, General Qassem Soleimani, just outside Baghdad airport. After the killing, Pompeo declared that 'the world is a much safer place today' and that 'Americans in the region are much safer'. To justify the murder, he said that Soleimani's killing had 'saved American lives' as he was planning a 'big action' that would have put hundreds of American lives at risk. Contrary to the claim that Americans in the region were much safer, the State Department then issued a travel advisory asking Americans in Iraq to return home immediately. Again, about 3,000 additional troops were sent to the Gulf to join the 14,000 sent from May 2019.⁴⁵

Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA appears to have been largely pushed by his desire to undo an important part of Obama's legacy, and pander to the extremists in Israel and their supporters in the US. Trump also claimed, at the time, that he would get a 'better' agreement. But withdrawal from a deal with which Iran was in full compliance hardly seemed the way to obtain an improved arrangement – particularly when the issues that agitated Trump were not a part of the JCPOA to begin with. These could perhaps have been taken up by the US and its partners on the basis of the goodwill generated by the JCPOA.

What Trump in fact achieved was just the opposite. He not only lost the nuclear deal, but he also did not have anything else to offer besides more intrusive and crippling sanctions. Not surprisingly, the distinguished American foreign affairs commentator, Fred Kaplan says that ‘Trump knows nothing about the art of the deal’;⁴⁶ this requires an understanding of one’s interests, developing a strategy to pursue those interests, and then framing tactics to make the strategy a success – all of which were well beyond Trump’s capacity or even interest.

Soon, sanctions became an end in themselves: in a single day in 2018, the US imposed 700 new sanctions on Iran. As their net widened in content and frequency, they no longer had any link with getting the Iranians to agree to a new deal. As they wreaked increasing havoc on the well-being of the Iranian people, they came to be viewed as instruments to achieve a change in the country’s ruling regime brought about by a bitter population, enraged enough to blame its clerical rulers for its privations.

Regime change has been a long-standing dream of the right wing in the US and Israel, but one that has little basis in reality. Referring to this as ‘fabulist thinking’, American commentators Richard Sokolsky and Aaron David Miller pointed out in May 2019, that the regime enjoyed enormous support among the Iranian people, and there was no legitimate and organized opposition in the country.⁴⁷ The country’s security apparatus and armed forces were formidable elements, and strongly supportive of the government.

The sanctions have certainly harmed the Iranian economy: it had contracted by about 12 per cent, its per capita real income by 14 per cent, and its oil exports by 80 per cent. During, its absolute poverty rate rose by 11 per cent, while average living standards dropped by 13 per cent nationally. In the period, the population that did not meet the minimum nutritional standard of 2,100 kilocalories went from 27 per cent to 40 per cent. The new sanctions from 2018 increased the number of poor Iranians from 22 million to 32 million; the poverty rate was expected to rise to per cent in 2021.⁴⁸ The frenzy with which fresh sanctions were imposed on Iran in the final period of the Trump presidency gave the impression that they

were no longer linked with any policy purpose, but had become a form of collective punishment on the Iranian people.

Despite the onerous sanctions, Iran is not an isolated entity in the international community; it enjoys close ties with two major international players – Russia and China – and regional nations, such as Turkey and Qatar. And, despite the crippling sanctions, Iran remains an influential player in regional affairs – in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, as also in Afghanistan.

As Iranian commentator Seyed Hossein Mousavian has pointed out, in the face of US hostility, Iran has reviewed Khomeini's injunction, 'neither East nor West'; Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei now believes that the 'top priorities' for Iranian foreign policy include 'preferring East to West'. Iran has developed close political, defence and economic ties with Russia, and, in March 2021, it signed the twenty-five-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement with China. As these countries, both under attack from the US, bring Iran deeper into their embrace, Mousavian notes that Trump's Iran policy is 'strategically self-defeating'.⁴⁹

Following the withdrawal of the US from the JCPOA, the increasing severity of the American sanctions, and the obvious failure of the EU to ease the sanctions burden, Iran has retaliated by systematically and incrementally violating its commitments under the JCPOA.⁵⁰

The other worrying development which took place in the dying days of the Trump administration relates to the prospect of war with Iran. This idea emerged from Trump's conviction that he had been fraudulently deprived of victory in the November 2020 elections. He somehow led himself to believe, Susan Glasser says in the *New Yorker*, that he could 'manufacture a crisis in order to swoop in and rescue the nation from it'.⁵¹ General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has told Glasser that war with Iran was frequently brought up by Trump and other officials from early 2020 onwards, with Vice President Mike Pence even justifying war 'because they [the Iranians] are evil'.

After the elections, the president constantly raised the possibility of a missile strike on Iran 'due to various provocations against US interests'.

The last occasion was 3 January 2021, when Trump referred to reports of Iran's nuclear activities, but was persuaded by Milley and his officials that it was too late in the day for military action. Milley has said that, besides the anti-Iran hawks surrounding the president, Netanyahu also urged action against Iran even after Trump had lost the election.

Netanyahu's role in pushing for a US attack on Iran is also discussed in the Israeli daily, *Haaretz*, where the author, Amos Harel, says that, after Trump's election defeat, Netanyahu was gripped by a 'messianic sentiment' and spoke of how the region – and even the world – would be shaken up by an attack on Iran.⁵² Harel adds that more information is emerging that 'shows the depth of the former prime minister's influence' on Trump.

Relations with Saudi Arabia

Saudi differences with the US emerged after the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings that had brought hundreds of thousands of Egyptians on to the streets of Cairo and other cities from mid-January onwards. The Saudi leaders watched with concern as a major US ally (and their own strategic partner) was removed from office under popular pressure, with no attempt being made by the Americans to protect their ally. This episode planted concerns that, in similar circumstances, the US would let the Saudi monarchy fall as well, despite the age-old partnership that had been put in place in 1945, and had proved its resilience and mutual benefit in the face of severe challenges – particularly the 1973 oil crisis and the 9/11 attacks, in which most of the participants had been Saudi nationals.

Once these doubts about the relationship had been planted, they continued to develop as fresh experiences of betrayal became apparent. The kingdom saw with deep concern that not only had the US countenanced the fall of Hosni Mubarak, but it had also been supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood-led alternative political order in Egypt, that was facilitated by Qatar. Qatar had maintained close ties with the Muslim Brotherhood for several years in support of US interests. As the American journalist Ian

Johnson has pointed out, ‘... starting in 2005, the State Department, taking account of the Brotherhood’s rising power in Egypt and elsewhere, launched an effort to woo the Brotherhood’.⁵³

Given Qatar’s close ties with the Brotherhood since the 1950s and that it hosted several of its leaders at home, Sheikh Hamad, the then ruler of Qatar, had no difficulty in facilitating the US engagement with this Islamic organization. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain – who view the Brotherhood as a political challenge to monarchical rule – then supported a military coup in Egypt to bring down the Brotherhood government in July 2013.

After the departure of Hosni Mubarak, the kingdom decided to abandon its normal low-key and moderate approach to regional issues, and challenge Iran directly in areas of its interest. It decided on regime change in Syria in order to replace the Shia regime of Bashar al Assad with a Sunni government, thus curtailing Iran’s regional influence and expanding its own. This plan for Syria was founded on the US carrying out a bombing campaign to destroy the incumbent administration, thus opening the way for Saudi political intervention.

President Obama had publicly stated that the US armed forces would intervene in the Syrian civil conflict if chemical weapons were used by the Assad regime. This apparently took place in August 2013, but Obama’s government did not intervene. This further shook the credibility of the US administration in Saudi eyes; it was now compelled to pursue its regime-change project with no help from the Americans.

But what irreversibly damaged the standing of the Obama administration in Riyadh was the opening of the P5+1 negotiations with Iran on the nuclear issue from 2013 and its successful completion in July 2015. This was the year of major changes in the Saudi political order. King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz (r.) passed away in January 2015, and was succeeded by his half-brother, Salman bin Abdulaziz.

- *Rise of MbS*

In a remarkable act that has had profound long-term implications for the country, on his accession to the throne, King Salman appointed one of his younger sons, Mohammed bin Salman (b. 1985), as defence minister. Three months later, the crown prince, Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, was removed and the interior minister, Prince Mohammed bin Naif was named crown prince, while Mohammed bin Salman became deputy crown prince. On 21 June 2017, Mohammed bin Naif was unceremoniously removed as crown prince and Mohammed bin Salman took his place. His other responsibilities were minister of defence, head of the royal court, and head of the supreme political and economic development councils. Thus, Mohammed bin Salman, at the age of thirty-two years – now referred to in the media by his initials MbS – became the de-facto ruler of the country, and the architect of its domestic and foreign policies.

MbS inherited from King Abdullah deep concerns relating to Iran's expanding influence in the region, its mobilization of support from among Shia communities in different neighbouring countries, and the challenge it posed to the kingdom, which had a 2-million strong Shia community, and to the region in general, which was viewed in Riyadh as its traditional area of influence. MbS' first act as defence minister was to initiate an air assault on Yemen on 26 March 2015: he viewed the Houthis, an armed militia of the country's Zaidi community, as Shia surrogates of Iran – despite there being hardly any doctrinal affinity between the Yemeni Zaidis and the Twelver Shias of Iran, or even evidence of substantial military ties between Iran and the Houthis.

In this background, Obama's engagement with Iran on the nuclear question was viewed by the Saudis, and MbS personally, as the ultimate betrayal of an old ally. This agreement not only exposed the Arab states to possible Iranian nuclear weapons in future, but it also freed Iran from sanctions, which, it was believed, would enable it to pursue its agenda to dominate regional affairs and expand its influence through 'interference' in the domestic politics in the region through its sectarian surrogates.

In this fraught background, Obama's remarks relating to Saudi Arabia and the regional situation in the *Atlantic Monthly* interview of March 2016

caused deep offence. He included Saudi Arabia in the list of countries he described as ‘free riders’, criticized its brand of Islam as inspiring terrorism, and then gratuitously advised the kingdom and the Iranians ‘to find an effective way to share the neighbourhood and institute some sort of cold peace’.⁵⁴

These remarks provoked Prince Turki Al Faisal, former Saudi intelligence chief and ambassador to the US, to give a sharp rejoinder. He strongly denied that Saudi Arabia had been a ‘free rider’. The prince reminded the president of Saudi intelligence support to the US that had prevented terrorist attacks, its cooperation with the Americans against the occupation of Kuwait in 1990-91, its active role in fighting the ISIS, its support for the Yemeni people against the ‘murderous’ Houthis, and its humanitarian relief efforts across the region.⁵⁵

Obama attempted some corrective measures. He boosted military sales to the kingdom: in the period, Saudi Arabia purchased US arms for \$9 billion, which was 18 per cent of total US sales. And, possibly to obtain Saudi support for the nuclear agreement with Iran, the US backed the Saudi war on Yemen from March 2015. But this did little good for the relationship. As the Obama presidency came to an end in 2016, US commentators were pessimistic about future ties, believing ‘the new normal will be a more diffident relationship’; that the ‘fabric of interests that once tied the two countries together has been fraying’, and that the ‘foundations of the relationship have weakened’.⁵⁶

None of these assessments reckoned with the profound difference that would be made by the Trump presidency.

- *MbS ties with Kushner and Trump*

As the Saudi government became increasingly disenchanted with Obama, MbS, in an astute move, sent an official delegation to the US in November 2016, after Trump’s victory, to assess the political situation. According to later reports, the team described Trump’s inner circle as ‘dealmakers who

lack familiarity with political customs and deep institutions’, and noted the central importance of Jared Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law, among those around the new president.⁵⁷

MbS, it appears, then decided to cultivate a personal relationship with Kushner. He achieved this during his visit to the US in March 2017. Kushner arranged for MbS to have a formal lunch with Trump at the White House. This occasion not only created close ties between MbS and Trump, but it also highlighted their shared understanding on a number of regional issues – the rejection of the nuclear deal with Iran, the war in Yemen, and arms sales to the kingdom, while Trump and Kushner sought Saudi backing for their plans to end the Israel–Palestine conflict. Kushner also ensured that the visit to Riyadh in May 2017 would be the US president’s first overseas tour.

During the Riyadh tour, besides the bilateral content, Trump also got to meet the heads of the GCC countries as also the heads of selected OIC countries. The conclave of Muslim leaders gave Trump the opportunity to deliver an address to match in significance Obama’s speech to the global Muslim community in Cairo in June 2009. Speaking of investments, Trump said, ‘We signed historic agreements with the Kingdom that will invest almost \$400 billion in our two countries and create many thousands of jobs in America and Saudi Arabia. It should increasingly become one of the great global centres of commerce and opportunity.’

He was particularly strident on Iran:

For decades, Iran has fuelled the fires of sectarian conflict and terror. It is a government that speaks openly of mass murder, vowing the destruction of Israel, death to America, and ruin for many leaders and nations in this room. ... Until the Iranian regime is willing to be a partner for peace, all nations of conscience must work together to isolate Iran ...⁵⁸

He also made clear that he would not be prescriptive on human rights: ‘We are not here to lecture,’ he said, ‘we are not here to tell other people how to

live, what to do, who to be or how to worship.’⁵⁹

- *US ‘Blank Cheque’ for Saudi Arabia*

The close ties between MbS and Trump were viewed as a ‘blank cheque’ for the kingdom by observers. A few days after Trump’s departure from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in association with the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, initiated a comprehensive land, sea and air blockade of Qatar, penalizing it for its links with the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran, and imposed very stringent conditions for lifting the ‘siege’.

In the Yemen conflict, MbS became increasingly reckless. In November 2018, despite US calls for a ceasefire, Saudi Arabia increased its air strikes on major towns – Sanaa and Hodeidah – that were under Houthi control, so that, according to distinguished commentator Bruce Riedel, ‘Saudi Arabia and its allies [are seen as] complicit in mass starvation and malnutrition in the poorest country in the Arab world’.⁶⁰

Trump’s support also enabled the Saudi crown prince to carry out harsh abuses at home from late 2017, which included the prolonged incarceration and mistreatment of senior royal family members, prominent business persons, and dissident clerics and human rights activists. Despite these transgressions, he was still viewed by foreign observers as taking the kingdom into ‘a new era of openness, prosperity, economic diversification, and [providing] ample opportunities for investment and tourism’.⁶¹

This view changed dramatically after the gruesome murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist who was critical of the crown prince, in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, on 2 October 2018, at the hands of senior officials known to be close to MbS. These officials had been specially dispatched to Istanbul for this purpose.⁶² This episode reflected ‘a new brutality’ linked directly with the prince, about which many till then had chosen to be oblivious.⁶³ In June 2019, the UN published a report on the murder and said, ‘The crown prince of Saudi Arabia should be investigated

over the murder ... because there is “credible evidence” that he and other senior officials are liable for the killing.’⁶⁴

Despite near-universal condemnation, Trump came to the defence of his friend; he reminded Americans that, after his trip to Saudi Arabia the previous year, ‘the Kingdom agreed to spend and invest \$450 billion in the United States ... a record amount of money’. He added that this included \$110 billion in military purchases; if these contracts were cancelled, Russia and China would benefit.⁶⁵ In separate remarks, he pointed out that ‘we may never know all the facts’ surrounding the murder, but Saudi Arabia was ‘a great ally in our important fight against Iran’, even as these relations ‘ensure the interests of our country, Israel, and all other partners in the region’.⁶⁶

Trump’s closeness to MbS evoked considerable criticism within the US. One critic said the administration was being ‘unduly solicitous’ of the crown prince’s sensitivities, and that the ties with Saudi Arabia had gone ‘badly astray’. Another said the crown prince ‘is toxic, his reputation permanently stained’.⁶⁷

Saudi Arabia responded to these strictures by inviting US troops back to Prince Sultan air base, outside Riyadh, in July 2019, from where they had been evicted in April 2003 following harsh criticisms from local clerics who objected to the presence of non-Muslim soldiers in the kingdom. No such criticisms occurred in 2019. In fact, a Saudi commentator said that this development was ‘another sign that the Trump administration better understands its own interests, but, at the same time will not leave its allies out in the cold’.⁶⁸

Relations with Saudi Arabia divided the president from Congress, with the latter wanting to end the war in Yemen and penalize the kingdom for the Khashoggi murder – largely by putting a freeze on sales of US weapons. Trump was consistently able to override these efforts by even invoking, in June 2019, a state of emergency against twenty-two hostile resolutions to sell weapons worth \$8 billion to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

‘Normalization’ of Ties with Israel

On 13 August 2020, just three months away from the presidential elections, the White House announced that Israel and the UAE had agreed to ‘normalize’ their relationship, the agreement being given the biblical title of ‘Abraham Accord’. This term was quickly expanded to include the normalization of ties between Israel and Bahrain as well. The formal agreements to give effect to the Abraham Accords were signed on the lawns of the White House on 15 September 2020.

The UAE’s foreign policy has possibly been inspired by Qatar’s role, since 1995, as an influential middle power in the region which robustly backed US interests, while projecting its own role as a significant regional player. The overt rivalry of the two GCC neighbours has ensured that, while Qatar backed the Muslim Brotherhood as the harbinger of political reform in the region, the UAE has gone in a very different direction.

The UAE sees a political challenge to its order from the Brotherhood, and has painted it as an extremist, even a terrorist, organization. On the other hand, it projects itself as the model of moderate and modern Islam, a polity that is at once accommodative and pluralistic, and as a promoter of and investor in contemporary technology – artificial intelligence, biotechnology, robotics, communications, and outer space. The UAE commentator, Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, has spoken of the UAE’s vision for ‘a stable and tolerant future for the Middle East and North Africa region ... [and] to establish itself as a force for moderation throughout the turbulent Arab World’.⁶⁹

In the region, during the war in Yemen, the UAE first used its special forces to support the US’s military actions against Al Qaeda locations in south Yemen.⁷⁰ Its more recent initiatives have consisted of backing the US’s strategic interests by taking control of the islands and ports in the western Indian Ocean,⁷¹ but recently focusing more on geo-economics and logistics, rather than on the military aspects of these acquisitions.

The UAE has now made its high-profile activism in regard to conflict-resolution as central to its foreign policy. The US-based Arab commentator

on West Asian politics, Hussein Ibish has spoken of the Emirates' 'outside ambitions' as a regional peace broker;⁷² he points out, the UAE was the 'prime mover' in the normalization of ties with Israel, which was in line with its commitment to conflict resolution, while backing US interests. In a presidential tenure that was largely defined by confrontation and conflict and the absence of any significant diplomatic achievement, these agreements were a welcome success story for Trump's electoral campaign, as they pandered to his Jewish and evangelical Christian support bases.

They were also very timely for Netanyahu, who had been indicted on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust, and was facing widespread protests for his mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic. They represented a great political win for the beleaguered prime minister as he could now project to his people his ability to get Arab states to normalize ties with Israel without conceding anything on the Palestinian question. The most he was required to do was to abandon his proposal to annex 30 per cent of the West Bank, which made little difference on the ground since the West Bank already has 500 settlements with 600,000 Israeli settlers.

From the UAE's perspective, there was the added advantage that the normalization initiative was popular across party lines in the US and also ingratiated it with the influential pro-Israel lobbies in the US. Its value was thus not just dependent on Trump's victory.

Seeing considerable political advantage in the normalization drive, the Trump administration made a major effort to get other Arab countries on board. It succeeded with just two of them – Sudan and Morocco. In October 2020, Sudan agreed to the treaty. The formal Abraham Accord was signed in January 2021, after the US withdrew Sudan from the list of states supporting terrorism and signed an agreement to provide aid of \$1 billion.

Morocco's agreement came after the US announced that it recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed territory of Western Sahara. However, the normalization agreement only provides for a partial resumption of diplomatic ties, i.e., there will only be the opening of liaison offices, rather than full-fledged embassies, but there will be direct flights,

and economic and technological cooperation. The flights will be a boon for Israel's million-strong Moroccan-origin community.

However, 88 per cent of the Moroccans oppose the agreement, with only 9 per cent favouring peace treaties between Arab states and Israel, and just 13 per cent Moroccans believe that such agreements will benefit the Arab region.⁷³ The ruling regime appears willing to accept this opposition since it is convinced that closer ties with the GCC countries, Egypt and Jordan are to its greater advantage.

The Trump administration mounted a major effort to get Saudi Arabia on board the 'Abraham Accords' as well, but the effort was not successful. The most that the US and Israel achieved was a short joint meeting of Pompeo and Netanyahu with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on 22 November 2020 in the remote area that is part of the prince's multi-billion-dollar megacity project – NEOM. Netanyahu was accompanied by Mossad Director Yossi Cohen, National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat, and his Military Secretary Avi Bluth. While Israeli Education Minister Yoav Galant called the meeting an 'amazing achievement' and 'a matter of great importance', the Saudi foreign minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, denied that the crown prince met with Israeli officials during the meeting with Pompeo. He said, 'the only officials present were American and Saudi'.⁷⁴

Saudi reluctance to join the 'normalization' bandwagon, or even to admit to a meeting with Netanyahu that has been widely reported outside the kingdom, reflects its leadership status in the Arab and Muslim worlds, which imposes on it special responsibilities as the guardian of the sanctity of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the aspirations of the Palestinian people. Affirming this, the Saudi foreign minister, at an international conference in Rome in December 2020, said, 'What we need to make [normalization of ties with Israel] happen is a peace deal that delivers a Palestinian state with dignity and with a workable sovereignty that Palestinians can accept.'⁷⁵

Despite Saudi caution relating to its engagement with Israel, officials of the two countries have been interacting with each other since at least 2014 in the context of the P5+1 negotiations with Iran on nuclear issues. They

had then organized major joint efforts in the US to subvert the negotiations and, when it was finalized, to deny it support in Congress.

Several commentators have said that the impetus for these earlier interactions and the recent normalization of ties with Israel have been their shared concerns relating to Iran's role in the region. Thus, commenting on normalization by the UAE, US analyst Kenneth Pollack said the agreement will 'more closely band together' Israel and the UAE to resist the spread of the influence of Iran and extremist Islamist groups.⁷⁶ Israeli writer Ben Caspit echoed this view, noting that many Sunni states, feeling threatened by Iran's encroachment, 'are sheltering behind Israel's broad back'.⁷⁷ Hussein Ibish pointed out that the UAE knows that, while the US leads an anti-Iran coalition, 'it's Israel that's doing most of the heavy kinetic lifting'; thus, normalization of ties with Israel is 'crucial' for the UAE's security.⁷⁸

But this argument makes little sense. Do the GCC nations linking themselves with Israel to enhance their security vis-à-vis Iran believe that with this affiliation Israel will come rushing to their rescue when they are threatened by Iran or create a new regional balance of power that will deter Iran? Both are unlikely scenarios.

Israel sees Iran as an 'existential' threat and contends with this perceived threat in the confidence that, with the influence of its supporters in the US, the latter will remain its military and political partner. Israel also carries out periodic attacks on Iranian assets and its interests not just in Iran, but in Iraq and Syria as well. Since 2007, it has assassinated at least seven Iranian nuclear scientists; it has periodically subverted its nuclear facilities, and, it carries out regular air attacks on Iranian targets in Syria: in 2020 alone, it attacked 500 Iranian targets.⁷⁹

The Israeli role is thus not to maintain peace in the region through a balance of power, but to use its lobby in the US to ensure that Iran remains demonized and all serious US–Iran engagement is subverted. This hardly suits the interests of the GCC nations across Gulf waters: if any of Israel's provocations spin out of control, they will be the first targets in any Iranian retaliation.

Again, despite the public bravado of the countries normalizing ties with Israel, their citizens will not allow their rulers to abandon the Palestinian cause. This became abundantly clear during the violence in Israel and Gaza in May 2021: the UAE condemned the ‘Israeli authorities’ storming of the Holy Al-Aqsa Mosque’, as well as the planned evictions of Palestinians living in East Jerusalem. It said that Israel had a ‘responsibility for de-escalation’ and insisted that Israel ‘end all attacks and practices that lead to continued tension’. Bahrain echoed this position and urged Israel to ‘stop these rejected provocations against the people of Jerusalem’.⁸⁰

The much-vaunted ‘normalization’ will not affect any significant changes in the regional strategic scenario; it will wither away, much like the Trump presidency it was meant to bolster.

The Trump Legacy

A year after the end of his turbulent presidency, Donald Trump remains a polarizing figure, with his policies, actions and his deep friendships and enmities in West Asia leaving behind a troubled legacy for his successor, Joe Biden. The Iranian-American writer Ray Tayekh is among very few commentators who rejects all criticism of the former president. In his view, Trump, with his ‘norm-shattering’ approach, has left ‘a region [West Asia] that is more stable than it was four years ago and an alliance network that is stronger than the one Trump had inherited’.⁸¹

Thus, Tayekh argues, Trump’s sanctions on Iran have placed the latter ‘years away from the nuclear bomb’, besides affirming, through the enforcement of sanctions, US centrality in the global economic and financial systems. Again, Trump achieved the ‘normalization’ of ties between Arab states and Israel, a situation that will in time compel ‘the Palestinians [to] come to their senses and return to the negotiating table’, he claims. Finally, even though the region is wracked with unresolved conflicts in Syria and Yemen, neither is Iran stronger nor is Saudi Arabia weaker. Trump’s ‘disruptive approach’ is what the region ‘of stale assumptions and

failed strategies' needed, and only an iconoclastic president like Trump could have stabilized it, he concludes.

Tayekh is obviously a glassy-eyed true believer in the messiah that was Trump. Most of his assertions and assessments have little connection with reality. On Iran, he neglects to mention that the sanctions failed to achieve either fresh negotiations or regime change; in fact, they have led to major advances in Iran's enrichment programme, so that the country is perhaps just months away from a weapons capability. Trump's much-touted 'deal of the century' hardly had any takers, and has now gone into irreversible oblivion. And, the Palestinians are quite unlikely to 'come to their senses' to negotiate the erasure of their identity, claims and rights.

Trump was certainly active in West Asian affairs, but his actions were not driven by a clarity of purpose; rather, they were propelled in different directions by 'strategic incoherence', as the distinguished US-based West Asia scholar Steven Cook says, being defined by the president's personal instincts rather than any depth of understanding or objective assessments of interests and capabilities.⁸² Thus, the sanctions on Iran or the assassination of Qassem Soleimani were not linked with any broader strategic aim and became ends in themselves – a reflection of US power rather than US gravitas.

The strong 'alliance network' that Tayekh refers to was in fact fragile since it was personalized and transactional: relations with Saudi Arabia and Israel were built on personal ties with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and were linked, respectively, to arms sales and the need to retain the support base of Jewish donors and Christian evangelists in the US, buttressed by 'blank cheques' being given to both in terms of their domestic and regional conduct. Neither of these personal ties have been passed on to the current resident in the White House.

Trump encouraged the region's conflicts with supplies of lethal weaponry and strong camaraderie with the region's potentates, but he has left behind a region where US credibility and standing are at their nadir. Trump's most significant legacy is the doubt that has been created, not

about US economic and military capability, but about the extent of its commitment to agreements (for instance, the JCPOA) and alliances: after so much sabre-rattling, did not the US president do nothing in retaliation for the attacks on the Saudi oil facilities in September 2019?

There are larger problems: do not the wild swings in policy – from internationalism to isolationism, from JCPOA to crippling sanctions – depict a superpower that has a dysfunctional political order at home, where powerful lobbies and special interest groups espousing the narrowest of concerns, determine policies that often do not serve national interest?

This will have long-term implications. Jonathan Kirshner, the Boston-based writer on US foreign policy, says in *Foreign Affairs* that ‘by producing a Trump presidency and calling attention to the underlying domestic dysfunctions that allowed previously inconceivable developments to occur, the United States is now looked at far differently than it once was’. The ‘deep and disfiguring scars’ that Trump has left behind, Kirshner writes, will not heal very soon.⁸³

The Biden Presidency

ON 6 JANUARY 2021, AS CONGRESS WAS TO MEET TO FORMALLY CERTIFY Joe Biden's electoral victory, the toxic legacy of the Donald Trump presidency was manifested in full force as hundreds of his followers – in a pre-planned demonstration – attacked the Capitol in Washington DC, and vandalized the offices of the guardians of the country's democratic order. Seventy-four million Americans had voted for Trump, only 6 million less than the votes that put Biden in the White House. But the defeated president and his close associates deliberately persuaded the voters that their hero had been the victim of electoral fraud. With the attack on the Capitol, they robustly registered their protest.

Biden has been a presence in US politics since 1973. His role as vice president in the Obama administration and the election campaign that he ran have made it clear that his foreign policy – in terms of content and style – will be different from that of his predecessor in several respects. Jonathan Kirshner has described Trump's foreign policy as 'short-sighted, transactional, mercurial, untrustworthy, boorish, personalist and profoundly illiberal'.¹ Biden, on the other hand, brings to his office maturity, experience, a sense of gravitas and reflection, and a gentlemanly courtesy in all interactions.

Given that he has entered the White House at the age of seventy-seven years, he could be a single-term president;² hence, he would like to devote his time to issues that, he believes, should be his priorities. At home, these are the management of COVID-19 pandemic and the economy, while abroad, the management of relations with China is his first concern, and, linked with this, the strengthening of ties with allies. Thus, as Biden commenced his presidency, West Asia did not figure in his list of priorities. In February, a month after he entered the White House, journalists Natasha Bertrand and Lara Seligman wrote in *Politico* that Biden ‘is tired of dealing with the Middle East’.³ The authors quoted an unnamed official as saying that the administration was ‘being extremely purposeful to not get dragged into the Middle East’.

Going back to Biden’s early engagements with West Asia, it is interesting to note that he got most things wrong. In 1991, he voted against the war on Iraq, while, in 2003, he supported the assault, which he later regretted. In 2007, he proposed the partition of Iraq into three semi-autonomous regions – Shia, Sunni, Kurdish – for which he was criticized by commentators at that time on the ground that this would foment further violence. In 2014, his emotions got the better of him and, in a speech at Harvard University, he blamed the US’s regional allies for the rise of the IS. He said:

The Turks ... the Saudis, the Emirates, etc, what were they doing? They were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni–Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad.

He completely failed to mention the US’s attack on Iraq, the devastation caused by the occupation, the deliberate institutionalization of the sectarian binary in the nascent political order, and the precipitate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq when violence was at its peak, all of which gave rise to ISIS.

Nearly a year since he has been in the White House, commentators are still struggling to understand the wellsprings of Biden's foreign policy. This is largely because there have been contradictions between his policy assertions and his actions. In a substantial analysis in *Foreign Affairs* in September 2021, American academics Joshua Shiffrin and Stephen Wertheim argued that Biden's foreign policy was anchored in 'pragmatic realism', i.e., remaining focused on the promotion of US interests, judging every challenge in terms of its impact on US security, and avoiding any normative or ideological principles to determine his actions.⁴

But the authors have had to concede that the president has often deviated from this approach. He has criticized Trump for being close to 'all the thugs in the world' and asserted that 'human rights will be at the centre' of US foreign policy – which has, for instance, led to the distance he has maintained from the Saudi crown prince and criticized him for the war in Yemen.

In fact, Biden's 'pragmatic realism' was to have led to a steady down-sizing of the US's military role in West Asia and, over time, the reduction of the country's armed forces in the region. But this has not occurred so far: during May–July 2021, the US bombed pro-Iran militants in Iraq and Syria 'more times in three months than the Trump administration did in all of 2020'.⁵ These were retaliatory attacks for drone and missile attacks on US troops in the two countries, and are a stark reminder that the US's preference for a low-key role in the region might not in fact suit its interests. Lina Khatib, the director of the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House, London, has also warned that US disengagement has meant the increasing footprint of China and Russia in West Asia, even as the region's autocrats will get further alienated from their citizens, so that the region could experience new competitions and conflict in coming years.⁶

In the following paragraphs, we will review some of the policy approaches of the Biden administration during its first year in office.

Iran: Return to the Nuclear Agreement?

Biden has been a rare politician in the US who, over four decades, has actually believed in the possibility of improved relations with Iran. After a careful review of his public statements, Nahal Toosi, the Iranian-origin US-based writer on West Asian affairs, has noted that, on Iran, Biden ‘has long tried to walk a careful path, one that is wary, yet hopeful; politically aware, yet politically risky; and often focused on incremental gains in the hopes of seeding long-term results’.⁷ Toosi points out that, in public remarks just after the 9/11 attacks, Biden said that ‘an improved relationship with Iran is in the naked self-interest of the United States and, I would presume to suggest, Iran’s interest as well’.

Biden, as vice president under Obama, was a strong supporter of the nuclear agreement and played a major role in obtaining congressional support for it, despite opposition from sections of the Republican Party and the pro-Israel lobbyists behind them. Biden said in a speech at that time that the agreement ‘will make us and Israel safer, not weaker’.

Through the election campaign, Biden sharply criticized Trump for withdrawing from the deal. He wrote an article for CNN in September 2020 in which he described Trump’s Iran policy as a ‘dangerous failure’ and said that the president had ‘recklessly tossed away a policy that was working to keep America safe and replaced it with one that has worsened the threat’.⁸ Biden pledged that as president:

I will offer Tehran a credible path back to diplomacy. If Iran returns to strict compliance with the nuclear deal, the United States would rejoin the agreement as a starting point for follow-on negotiations. With our allies, we will work to strengthen and extend the nuclear deal’s provisions, while also addressing other issues of concern.

As noted earlier, in order to maintain pressure on the US, Iran continued to expand its nuclear activities and incrementally violated its commitments under the JCPOA even after the presidential election results. Biden’s

remarks in the CNN article, though carefully worded, gave the impression that the country would be a priority concern for the new president, and that he would ensure that the US would rejoin the agreement as quickly as possible and would ease at least some of the onerous sanctions to ameliorate Iran's economic plight. This would be a prelude to addressing other issues of mutual concern relating to regional security.

This has not happened – Biden in office adopted a more cautious approach to matters relating to Iran. Besides differences among his senior officials about their approach to the Islamic Republic, the president also recognized that sanctions relief and re-engagement with Iran would be very divisive issues in the deeply polarized situation at home, and, hence, prioritized building political support for more urgent matters on his domestic agenda – the relief package for the COVID-19 pandemic and the trillion-dollar infrastructure development plan.

The internal debates relating to dealing with Iran were sharp and divisive. The main point being made by Secretary of State Antony Blinken has been to insist that there would be no automatic return to the JCPOA by the US; not only should Iran fully comply with its obligations under the JCPOA, i.e., reverse the violations it has carried out, but it would also need to agree to 'lengthen and strengthen' the deal to cover fresh issues such as 'Iran's destabilizing regional behaviour, and ballistic missile development and proliferation', which the Iranian governments have earlier refused to accept.⁹

The delay in commencing dialogue with Iran has encouraged the latter to effect further breaches of the JCPOA:¹⁰

- On 3 February 2021, Iran announced that it had enriched 3.6 grams of natural uranium metal.
- On 23 February, Iran suspended its compliance with the Additional Protocol.
- On 15 March, Iran began enriching IR-4 centrifuges at the Natanz facility.

- On 10 April, Iran began testing its most advanced nuclear centrifuge, the IR-9, at the Natanz enrichment site.
- On 11 April, an explosion at the Natanz nuclear facility destroyed the power supply and damaged or destroyed thousands of centrifuges used to enrich uranium; in response, Iran said it would replace the machines with more advanced models.
- On 16 April, Iran began enriching uranium to 60 per cent, bringing it very close to weapons-grade uranium of 90 per cent.

Iran's dialogue with the P-4+1 nations on the nuclear agreement began in Vienna on 6 April 2021. Since Iran refused to talk directly with US officials, they communicated through European envoys. The sponsors of the talks were Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia, who were referred to as the 'Joint Commission'. The discussions took place through three working groups: one dealt with the easing of US sanctions, the second looked at actions that Iran was required to take to correct the breaches of the JCPOA, while the third worked on sequencing the two actions.

By June-end, six rounds of these talks had concluded. While spokespersons on both sides agreed they had been difficult, the general view was that they were moving in the right direction. The talks continued, despite continued efforts by Israel to derail them through provocative actions. On 6 April, just hours before the Vienna talks were to begin, an Israeli commando unit attacked an Iranian naval vessel, while the 11 April attack on the Natanz facility, mentioned above, is also believed to be an Israeli initiative. A commentator with an Israeli think tank said:

The strike [at Natanz] is believed to have caused sufficient harm to the facility to delay the Islamic regime's nuclear weapons program, and was thus a warning to Tehran that Israel will not tolerate these advancements. The attack was also a signal to the Biden administration that Israel will continue its operations in Iran as it deems necessary regardless of any deals the US might make with the country.¹¹

A day after the attack, Netanyahu had said that a deal with Iran that ‘threatens our destruction will not obligate us’.

The talks in Vienna ended after the sixth round, to hand over the responsibility to see the agreement through to the new government that would take charge in Tehran on 5 August, under the newly elected president, Ebrahim Raisi. In an interview with *Kommersant* newspaper on 11 July, the Russian ambassador, Mikhail Ulyanov, said that, at the end of the sixth round, 90 per cent of the issues had been covered, but the remaining matters included several politically sensitive issues ‘that can hold the process back’.¹²

At his inauguration as president, Raisi struck a conciliatory note: he reiterated that nuclear weapons ‘have no place in the defence strategy of the Islamic Republic’; he called for the lifting of sanctions and affirmed ‘we will support any diplomatic plan that achieves that goal’. The US quickly responded by calling on Iran to return to the negotiations, adding that the talks were an ‘urgent priority’ and ‘this process cannot go on indefinitely’.¹³

However, what has surprised observers is that, for several weeks, neither side appeared keen to restart the dialogue; only at the end of October 2021 was it announced in Tehran that talks would take place from 29 November. In fact, during the hiatus, the US representative for Iran, Robert Malley speculated that Iran might not rejoin the dialogue and spoke of the need ‘to coordinate [a response] with Israel and other partners in the region’, hinting at possible military action.¹⁴

The lack of enthusiasm to initiate talks led to speculation that the US was seeking concessions from Iran on regional issues that had been outside the purview of the JCPOA and which, if conceded, would, in Iran’s view, seriously constrain its regional interests. Iran, on its part, was believed to be seeking assurances from the Americans that a US administration would not in future withdraw from the agreement and impose sanctions on Iran, even if it was in full compliance with the agreement. The nuclear deal, as the Iranian-American commentator on Iranian affairs, Seyed Hossein Mousavian has pointed out, is inherently uneven in that, if Iran does not

comply with any part of the agreement, it faces severe economic sanctions, while the P5+1 signatories do not face any such consequences if they fail to abide by its provisions.¹⁵

The seventh round of talks began in Vienna at the end of November, but, after a short break, were 'paused' in mid-November. Throughout this period, Western diplomats focused on Iran's violations of the JCPOA and maintained that the Iranians were not serious about reaching an agreement.

Iran's insistence that it is the US that withdrew from the agreement and hence should return to it, that it should remove all sanctions imposed under the 'maximum pressure' rubric, and that it should guarantee that a future US administration would not unilaterally withdraw from it, have found no resonance on the Western side. From Israel there have been several reports of war preparations, but these have been balanced by counter-arguments from writers on security issues that a military attack is not a viable option and will yield no advantage to Israel; it could, in fact, encourage Iran to pursue the weapons option that it has rejected so far.

Afghanistan: Ending the 'Forever War'

In dealing with Afghanistan, Biden, the president, caught up with his former self – the vice president. Before becoming vice president in 2009, Biden had supported military interventions for altruistic purposes, such as nation-building and the promotion of democracy. Thus, he had advocated a ten-year 'Marshall Plan' for Afghanistan, and a major commitment of US resources to make the American presence a success. Biden's optimism received a reality check when he actually visited Afghanistan as vice president-elect. Dorani describes the transformation thus:

Biden discovered through David D. McKiernan [commander of US forces in Afghanistan, 2008-09] and other US officials that there were no Al Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan but in Pakistan, and US forces told him they did not know why they fought in Afghanistan. Biden himself was lost on what US objectives in the country were.

In the same tour, he seemingly formed a view that it was not just the shortcomings in the Bush Administration's Afghan policy to blame for the US failure in Afghanistan, but also the 'incompetence' and unreliability of President Hamid Karzai and his corrupt government.¹⁶

These impressions remained with Biden and shaped his approach to the country when he became president twelve years later.

The road out of Afghanistan had already been prepared for him by Trump. In August 2017, Trump had, in a substantial address, set out US policy: he had agreed to the deployment of a few thousand additional troops, provided specific deadlines for their withdrawal, warned Pakistan to end its backing for the Taliban, and, made India a player in the Afghan scenario by providing economic assistance and building close ties with the government in Kabul.¹⁷ On this basis, the US began negotiations with the Taliban, in Doha, in December 2018, to finalize the terms for American withdrawal from the country.

These discussions culminated with the US–Taliban agreement of 29 February 2020. This provided for the withdrawal of all US and NATO troops by 1 May 2021, while the Taliban committed themselves not to attack American targets, not allow the Al Qaeda or other extremist groups to use Afghan soil to attack the US or its allies, and enter into discussions with the Ashraf Ghani government on a power-sharing agreement and to finalize a new Constitution.

Soon after the agreement was concluded, it became obvious that the Taliban were not fulfilling important parts of their undertakings: the Al Qaeda continued to have a presence in the country and maintained close ties with the Taliban, while the latter continued their lethal attacks on Afghan targets.¹⁸ Above all, the intra-Afghan dialogue hardly made any progress. It soon became clear that the Taliban had little interest in power-sharing, and instead sought full control over the country. Despite these transgressions, the US troop withdrawal continued – on 15 January 2021, Acting Defence

Secretary Christopher Miller announced that the number of US troops present in Afghanistan had reached 2,500, the lowest since 2001.

On 14 April 2021, Biden announced that the US would begin a ‘final withdrawal’ from Afghanistan from 1 May, and would complete it by 11 September 2021, ironically, the twentieth anniversary of the events that had taken US troops to Afghanistan, in the first place – to wreak vengeance for the 9/11 attacks on the Al Qaeda and their sanctuary-providers and partners, the Taliban. A few days later, on 19 April, the director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines, assessed that ‘the Afghan government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the Coalition withdraws support’.¹⁹

Biden’s April speech reflected the lessons he had learnt about Afghanistan in 2009. He now debunked the idea of the ‘forever war’, saying that it had been founded on false premises: the original reason to fight in Afghanistan had been to destroy the Al Qaeda and ensure no further attacks occurred on the US homeland. Once these aims had been fulfilled, there had been no justification for the US to stay on; it was the responsibility of the Afghan people to shape their own future.

Biden said in his speech that he was extending the US departure from 1 May to 11 September, so that the exit would be done ‘responsibly, deliberately and safely’.²⁰ In fact, the exit was precipitated and was largely completed by end-July. As the Americans withdrew in haste, their departure was neither deliberate nor responsible, as affirmed by the rapid advances of the Taliban fighters across the country and the capture of several provincial capitals by early August. Kabul fell to Taliban forces without a fight on 15 August.

Shifrinson and Wertheim, referred to above, have applauded Biden’s bold decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, seeing this as prioritizing US national interest rather than pursuing a nation-building project.

A great puzzle surrounding the Afghanistan imbroglio is that at no point in time have the Americans been able to ensure that Pakistan remains on their side and supports their interests. Pakistan, in pursuit of its regional strategic interests, has never abandoned the Taliban and, with its military and political support, sustained the organization for over two decades after

9/11, despite the presence of over 150,000-strong coalition forces in the country.

The supreme irony is that the Americans, in their anxiety to leave Afghanistan, had to depend on Pakistani military men and politicians to get the Taliban to the negotiating table, and then get an ‘agreement’ which would give the much-needed fig leaf for US withdrawal. After this, they watched without protest as the Taliban went on a rampage through the country, describing themselves as an ‘Afghan Islamic national liberation movement’ intent on ridding their country of imperialist occupation.²¹

The US also misrepresented the situation to make the Taliban’s policies acceptable to home audiences. As the Taliban adopted tough positions in the discussion rooms of Doha and the battlefields of Afghanistan, the US continued to speak of a ‘softer, gentler Taliban’, even describing it as a moderate entity that prioritized seeking international approbation. In early August, US officials in Kabul accepted that the Taliban were carrying out massacres as revenge killings, while the former US diplomat Ryan Crocker spoke of a ‘harder, harsher Taliban’ who were ‘not interested in talking to anybody unless it’s about terms of surrender for the Afghan government’.²²

Though camouflaged by better media control, the US defeat in Afghanistan is much more humiliating for itself and far more horrendous for the local population than the events in Vietnam.

Israel: Searching for a Policy

As Biden entered the White House, there were expectations that he would correct the blanket support that Trump had extended to the Netanyahu government. Trump had not only supported Israeli positions on Jerusalem, the settlements and the Golan Heights, but his support had also encouraged a more repressive approach to Palestinian agitators in early January 2021, as also the approval of plans to build 800 new housing units in the West Bank.

Earlier, in 2018, perhaps, due to the confidence in Trump’s backing, Israel also passed the ‘Nation-State’ law, which defined Israel as a state for

the Jewish people. This law sanctions discrimination against Palestinian Arabs in Israel and in the West Bank in terms of land development, housing, citizenship, language and culture. Netanyahu had frequently (and accurately) described Trump as ‘the best friend Israel ever had in the White House’.²³

As first steps towards course correction, the Biden administration affirmed its commitment to a ‘two-state’ solution, while its acting permanent representative at the UN said that the US would restore funding to the UNRWA that Trump had abruptly terminated. Israel’s distinguished historian, Ilan Pappé, however, cautioned that there would be no real change in policy under Biden. He said there would be ‘a very different style from the Trump era and less overt support for colonization and oppression, but also no retraction from the transition of the embassy, no condemnation for the nationality law, and no pressure whatsoever on Israel to change its policies’. Trump, he pointed out, had merely taken forward the policies of the past, and there was no reason to believe why Biden would not continue in that tradition.²⁴

Biden has a long history of supporting Israel, to the extent that he has been labelled ‘Israel’s best Catholic friend’. But the domestic political situation in the US is changing in ways that might call for new policies. American Jews have become increasingly averse to Netanyahu’s hard right agenda. In May 2021, only 40 per cent of US Jews thought Netanyahu was a good leader, a support base that fell to 32 per cent among younger Jews. In fact, a former Israeli ambassador to the US has advocated that the Israeli government should make greater effort to win over ‘passionate’ evangelicals, rather than the Jews, who, he noted, were ‘disproportionately among our critics’.²⁵

Biden’s position as Israel’s ‘best Catholic friend’ was tested during the communal violence in Israel, and the conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza in May 2021. These conflicts forced a reluctant Biden to get involved. Since the Israel–Palestine issue was not on the president’s priority list, the administration missed many of the early warning signs, particularly from the settler movement and the government. Later, as the confrontations raged

on, the administration found itself increasingly ill-prepared and, finally, adopted positions that displeased the Palestinians, liberals in the US, and, above all, the 'progressive' section of Biden's own Democratic Party.

The outbreak of violence started on 10 May 2021 and continued until a ceasefire came into effect on 21 May. It was triggered by protests in East Jerusalem over an anticipated decision of the Supreme Court of Israel on the eviction of six Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah. It escalated with communal violence in mixed cities and then expanded with over 4,000 rocket attacks on Israel by Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, and 1,500 Israeli land, sea and air strikes targeting Gaza. By the end of the confrontation, over 250 Palestinians had been killed, including sixty-six children, as against thirteen Israelis. Several protesters also gathered at Israel's borders with Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

The US sent a middle-level official to the region, but otherwise avoided taking a public position. Later, Biden said that the administration had conducted 'intensive, high-level discussions hour by hour' with Israel and other regional leaders. The president avoided taking a public position for fear that Netanyahu would rebuff the overture and discredit him early in his tenure. For this reason, he also avoided playing the lead role in talks leading to the ceasefire, letting Qatar and then Egypt take the initiative.²⁶

Clearly, this round of fighting was in keeping with earlier occasions, when it was the Israeli government that determined when its objectives had been achieved and the fighting could stop. The US, in keeping with its tradition, simply fell in line: the Biden administration blocked four resolutions in the UNSC during Israel's bombing of Gaza and prevented a Senate debate on a resolution tabled by Bernie Sanders criticizing Israeli actions against the Palestinians.

The fighting also affirmed, as Ilan Pappé had predicted, that, in terms of extending full public support to Israel, the Biden administration would be no different from its predecessors. The president said there had been 'no significant overreaction' on Israel's part when it responded with air strikes to Hamas' rocket barrage. Secretary of State Blinken distinguished between Israel targeting terrorists and 'a terrorist organization targeting civilians'.

Later, Blinken said that Israelis and Palestinians ‘deserve equal measures of freedom, dignity, security and prosperity’, but this seems to be a vague platitude since the administration took no action to give effect to it.²⁷

The president faced flak from the ‘progressives’ in his party in Congress. Thus, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez asked, ‘Do Palestinians have a right to survive?’, and then asserted, ‘If the Biden administration can’t stand up to an ally, who can it stand up to? How can they credibly claim to stand for human rights?’ Senator Bernie Sanders wrote in the *New York Times* that the US ‘can no longer be apologists for the right-wing Netanyahu government and its undemocratic and racist behaviour. We must change course and adopt an even-handed approach.’²⁸

Observers have concluded that, while some of the Biden rhetoric may become a little more moderate as compared to Trump, real change in policy towards Israel is unlikely: the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem will not be reversed and there will be no change in the status of the Golan Heights. The reopening of the Palestine mission in Washington that Trump had closed down is likely to prove very difficult, since the former president had signed a law that would make the mission vulnerable to claims for damages for earlier bombings and shootings, which could run into millions of dollars. Even US financial assistance to UNRWA is restricted by an act passed during Trump’s tenure that makes this aid subject to the Palestinians accepting certain conditions.²⁹

The Biden administration is also expected to continue the US tradition of being a major supplier of military equipment to Israel – a \$735-million arms sale took place in May 2021, while an additional \$1 billion of military assistance is on the cards.³⁰

Saudi Arabia and Turkey: Possible Course Correction

Two relationships were deeply personalized when Trump was president: one was with Saudi Arabia, where, as noted earlier, there were close ties between the president and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The other personalized relationship was

between Trump and the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. These relationships largely shaped the political ties between the US and the two countries concerned; both are likely to see major changes under Biden.

In a presidential debate with Trump during the election campaign, Biden said that he would make the crown prince a 'pariah' in Washington and internationally. Biden also had some harsh words about the kingdom's role in the war in Yemen, which had caused the deaths of over 100,000 persons and created the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

In this background, as Biden came into the White House, he pledged to 'reassess' ties with Saudi Arabia. In the early days of his presidency, the White House spokesperson, Jen Psaki, said that the US would 'recalibrate' its ties with the kingdom. She noted that, as part of this effort, the US would go back to 'engagement counterpart-to-counterpart', emphasizing that Biden would only maintain ties with his 'counterpart', i.e., King Salman bin Abdulaziz. Thus, the personal links of the White House with the crown prince were now put away

Again, while Trump had turned a blind eye to human rights abuses in the kingdom under the auspices of the crown prince, the new administration has insisted that the Saudi human rights record would be under close scrutiny. The administration placed seventy-six Saudi nationals under visa restrictions for their role in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi; the crown prince was not included on this list, possibly to maintain a channel of high-level interaction between the two governments. The Biden presidency has also suspended supplies of 'offensive' weapons to Saudi Arabia to indicate its unhappiness with its continued war in Yemen, but allows the supply of 'defensive' weapons to protect the kingdom from Houthi drones and missiles.

In the face of this coolness from the White House, Saudi Arabia has made some placatory overtures. The imprisoned human rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul and two others have been released. Again, the kingdom took the lead in ending the 'siege' of Qatar in January 2021, without waiting for any significant change in Qatari conduct or policy.

In June 2021, the crown prince's younger brother, Assistant Defence Minister Khalid bin Salman, paid an official visit to the US, being the senior-most Saudi official to visit the country after Trump's departure. The prince met Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin, the national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, and the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, General Mark Milley. They are believed to have discussed security issues of shared concern – Yemen, Iran and Lebanon, focusing on the increased use of drones and missiles by pro-Iran militants against Saudi and US targets. It appears that the security-based relationship is back on track, despite the administration engaging with Iran on the revival of the JCPOA.³¹

Under Biden, the 'blank cheque' that Trump had awarded the crown prince stands withdrawn. The Saudi performance on human rights will receive close attention from the administration, and the latter will not veto any penal action that US human rights bodies may recommend. But the deep bilateral economic ties and Saudi purchases of US arms – valued at \$134 billion since 2010 – will ensure that relations will continue to serve mutual interests, albeit with some conditions from the US side and fresh efforts to broaden ties with other major powers on the part of Saudi Arabia.³²

Biden appears to be following in Trump's footsteps in maintaining the centrality of defence supplies in relations with the kingdom: on 26 October 2021, the administration announced a new \$500-million military contract with Saudi Arabia. This will enable the kingdom to maintain its fleet of attack helicopters, which have been used in combat missions in Yemen. This seems to contradict Biden's earlier public position when he had announced that he was 'ending all support' for the war in Yemen that had created 'a humanitarian and strategic catastrophe'.³³

Turkey is the other country with which the Biden administration is looking at a course correction. From the US perspective, relations with Turkey through the Erdogan presidency have been in a near-constant downward spiral – despite Turkey being a NATO member and having a customs union agreement with the EU. The US authority on Turkish affairs,

Max Hoffman has described the relationship as ‘worn thin by nearly a decade of increasing tension and deteriorating trust’.³⁴

During Trump’s presidency, the ties were complicated by the fact that, while administration officials had serious reservations about many of Turkey’s policy approaches, Erdogan himself enjoyed a free pass with Trump. Thus, in the teeth of opposition from the administration, in October 2019 Trump abruptly announced the withdrawal of US troops from northeast Syria and their replacement by Turkish forces – thus leaving the Syrian Kurds, US allies in the fight against the Islamic State, at the mercy of their sworn enemies. Again, Trump ensured that no sanctions were imposed on Turkey under CAATSA (Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act), despite its purchase of Russian military equipment, the S-400 missile system. Turkey also confronted the US’s European allies, particularly Greece and Cyprus, by challenging their claims to gas reserves in the east Mediterranean.

Trump’s departure was thus a great loss for Erdogan. He showed his feelings by sending a late message of congratulations to Biden after the election results came in, while also sending a special message of thanks to the former president. In this background, just after the Biden victory was known, commentators were certain that he would carry out a major change in approach and insist that Erdogan ‘behave like an ally’.³⁵

Given its geographical location between Asia and Europe, and its borders with major West Asian and Transcaucasian nations, Turkey has had great geo-strategic importance for its NATO allies, particularly through the Cold War. With Erdogan assuming the leadership of the country from 2002 as the leader of an Islamist party, the country has, in the framework of ‘strategic autonomy’, begun to assert considerable independence of policy and action across West Asia, the Caucasus and the Mediterranean. Some commentators have viewed this approach as an expression of ‘neo-Ottomanism’, i.e., an assertion of political and military outreach reminiscent of the Ottoman rulers in their heyday.³⁶

Thus, even though it is a NATO member, Turkey has sought to develop substantial political, military and economic ties with Russia, best

exemplified by its acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile system. The concern among NATO members is that this system would involve Russians in its operations, which would enable them to monitor NATO aircraft overflying Turkey, including, at some stage, the latest F-35 aircraft that is under development.

On 24 April 2021, Biden provoked Turkey by announcing the commemoration of the Armenian ‘genocide’ day, recalling the mass killing of Armenians by the Ottoman rulers during the First World War. This was a major departure from the position of earlier US presidents, who had been more concerned about the offence this would cause Turkey. Erdogan, in his response, was surprisingly low-key: he said that Biden’s remarks relating to the ‘genocide’ were ‘unjust and untrue’, and had caused a ‘deep wound’; he then added that the two leaders should ‘put aside their disagreements’ and ‘keep the door open for a new period’ in their relations.³⁷

The two presidents had their first meeting on 14 June 2021, on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Brussels. After the meeting, Biden said that he felt ‘very good’ about it, but left the details for the Turkish side to spell out. Erdogan referred to his ‘life-long friendship with Biden’ and said that both sides had agreed ‘to open direct channels of communications’.³⁸ Details of the discussions are not available in the public domain, though Turkish reports indicate that there was no agreement either on the S-400 issue or the Turkish insistence that the US detach itself from the Kurds in northeast Syria. The issue of the Armenian genocide was apparently not raised by the Erdogan with US, much to the surprise of Turkey’s right-wing politicians.

While both the US and Turkey value their relationship, the latter wants to place these ties in a new paradigm which would better reflect its understanding of the present state of the world order and its own place in it. Turkey sees the world as multipolar, and believes it plays a central role in regional and global affairs. It is serious about upholding its strategic autonomy which ensures that it is not required to choose between the US and Russia. Thus, while it has opposed the US and its Western allies in respect to its military ties with Russia, its role in Syria and the eastern

Mediterranean, it has also upset the Russians by backing the Al Qaeda-affiliated Hayat Tahreer al Shaam at Idlib in Syria, supporting Azerbaijan against Russia-backed Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh, opposing the Russia-supported armed forces in Libya, and by supplying drones to Ukraine.

Thus, for the US, a ‘reset’ of ties means the return of Turkey to the Western fold, but for Erdogan, ‘reset’ has a very different meaning; as the London-based authority of Turkish affairs, Galip Dalay has pointed out, it means acceptance of Turkey’s ties with Russia and China, and Turkey’s understanding that its interests lie in obtaining ‘a form of balancing act between different powers’.³⁹ Not surprisingly, within two weeks of the Biden–Erdogan meeting, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu hosted his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov. He appears to have conveyed that Turkey remained steadfast on the S-400 acquisition.⁴⁰

Turkey, thus, is at the centre of a complex, even untidy, regional scenario, which the Biden administration would need to understand and accommodate.

The first year of the Biden presidency presents a picture of continuity rather than change. And, as he swings between idealistic rhetoric and pragmatic action, commentators are unable to see any consistent value-base shaping his positions, particularly in West Asia. In his address at the UNGA in September 2021, the president had committed his country to promoting human rights, and had challenged ‘authoritarians of the world [who] may seek to proclaim the end of the age of democracy’.

Hardly any of these proclamations have been translated into reality. After linking arms supplies to Egypt to a real improvement in its human rights situation, the State Department has announced a waiver on supplies of weaponry valued at \$170 million (out of a total assistance of \$300 million made conditional by Congress on the human rights situation), while the \$1-billion military assistance remains unconditional. Again, as noted above, military cooperation with both Saudi Arabia and Israel remains in place, even though they contradict the president’s vocal backing for Yemeni and Palestinian interests, respectively.⁴¹

As Biden veers uncertainly between idealism and pragmatism, he has been losing credibility by the day and hardly seems capable of challenging China by posing as an upholder of human rights and democracy or revitalizing the US's role in the world that Shifrinson and Wertheim fondly believe will be his significant contribution after the nightmare of the Trump era.⁴²

The ‘Enduring’ Arab Spring (2010–21)



TEN YEARS AFTER THE FIRST UPRISINGS TOOK PLACE ACROSS THE ARAB world in 2011, referred to collectively as the ‘Arab Spring’, commentators continue to discuss the wellsprings of these agitations, the reasons for their wide territorial spread, and what implications they have for politics in West Asia. The first uprisings in Tunisia from December 2010, which gave birth to the Spring, have been described as belonging ‘to the genuine surprises in human history’,¹ largely because no scholar or diplomat appears to have predicted them.

The first demonstrations took place in a remote village in south-central Tunisia – Sidi Bouzid. This village shares the name of the province in which it is located and is part of the region that is referred to as ‘La Tunisie Profonde’, the region that was marginalized and excluded from the developmental initiatives of successive governments, which were largely focused on the coastal cities and the capital, Tunis. These marginalized communities sustained themselves through ‘local solidarities’, generally based on tribal kinship.²

The exclusion of this region from national development is confirmed by its poor showing in almost every development indicator vis-à-vis the capital and the eastern coastal cities – in terms of poverty, housing, health,

illiteracy, education, fertility and infant mortality. For instance, in 2010, poverty in this region was 32 per cent, compared to per cent in the developed areas; life expectancy was seventy years in the region, while it was seventy-seven years in Tunis and coastal areas.³

From the 1980s, this region periodically exhibited anger at its exclusion from state politics and the economy through regular agitations, which later spread to the rest of the country. In 2000, there were nationwide strikes by workers, students and taxi drivers. These were followed, in 2008, by strikes in the mining industry that began in the south-central Gafsa region and then spread across the country. This was the background in which the first Arab Spring uprising took place.

On 17 December 2010, in the village of Sidi Bouzid, an unlicensed fruit seller, Mohammed Bouazizi, was accosted by two police officials. Since his business was illegal, they broke his cart; and for good measure, he was also slapped by the female police official. As his protests received no official attention, he immolated himself at the office of the local governor. The self-immolation led to local protests, which got no immediate national publicity due to a government-enforced news blackout. Bouazizi's mother later told reporters that the policewoman slapping him in public was viewed as an insult 'to his patriarchal, tribal culture'; in her words, 'It was not the first time they had confiscated his merchandise, but to be slapped by a woman like that, in the middle of the street, that burned him on the inside. According to our tribe, the Hamama, this is not acceptable.'⁴

It took ten days after the self-immolation for the protests to garner the first 1,000 protesters in Tunis. Given official media control, the local news went global before it became national. Local accounts on Facebook were seen by Tunisian activists in Europe, who publicized the news with regular updates, till it was captured by the Qatar-based television channel, Al Jazeera, on 20 December 2010. Its broadcasts led to local protests in Tunisia from 25 December, followed by major demonstrations in the capital two days later.

By the time Bouazizi died on 4 January 2011, the whole country was rocked by protests that soon demanded the removal of the president, Zine

el-Abidine Ben-Ali, who had been in power for twenty-four years. The president, ill-prepared for such an outburst of national anger, promised free elections, freedom and human rights, and the creation of 300,000 new jobs. But the people remained unmoved from their key demand. On 12 January, he ordered the army to open fire on the protesters, but the generals refused and sent the soldiers back to their barracks instead. He addressed his people on national television the next day saying, 'Now, I understand you.'

On 14 January, the president and his family fled Tunisia, and sought refuge in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Thus, Zine al Abidine Ben-Ali became the first Arab tyrant in modern times to lose his position under popular pressure.

Within a few days of Ben-Ali's arrival in Jeddah, the streets of Egypt's principal cities were overwhelmed by popular demonstrations demanding that President Hosni Mubarak, in position for over thirty years by then, leave office. The most iconic protests were at Cairo's Tahrir Square, where over half-a-million people gathered day after day to insist that their president quit immediately. Here again the armed forces refused to use force on the demonstrators; Hosni Mubarak relinquished office on 11 February 2011.

After this, there was no holding back: through January–March 2011, there were major uprisings in six countries in the Arab world – Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain – and smaller public protests in many others – Morocco, Algeria, Jordan and Kuwait. They led to the fall of two more potentates – Ali Abdullah Saleh, president of Yemen for over thirty years; and Muammar al-Qaddafi, the Libyan head of state for over forty years.

The period between mid-January and mid-March 2011 was truly euphoric across WANA as writers struggled with words to express their exultation. A Saudi editorial said after Mubarak's departure:

Egypt led the enlightenment in the Arab world and led its ideological approaches and tendencies at times of war and peace.

Egypt [now] will be a new state regaining its historical and political vitality and asserting its leadership in different areas.⁵

An Iranian scholar described the uprisings as a ‘post-modern resistance ... [with] universal aspirations for freedom and democracy’; these aspirations, he believed, could be institutionalized ‘systematically and for the long run’.⁶

Many observers found a kinship of these events with the French Revolution, while others saw a parallel with events that occurred 200 years later, the Velvet Revolutions of 1989 that gave several eastern European nations freedom and democracy at the end of the Cold War. But, as events turned out, it was more a reflection of the uprisings in Europe in 1848, which were also described as the ‘Springtime of Nations’, but where, as in West Asia, the rebellions for change had been cruelly overturned.

Counter-revolutionary initiatives in different countries ensured in the early 2010s that no more leaders would fall and that states would revert to the earlier authoritarian order that has characterized West Asia over the previous century. However, it soon became clear that the forces unleashed by the Arab Spring events had not withered away entirely: in four Arab countries witnessed large-scale street demonstrations – in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq – calling for a complete overhaul of the political, economic and social order. These demonstrations led to the departure of two more authoritarian rulers, those of Sudan and Algeria, and the resignations of the incumbent prime ministers of Lebanon and Iraq.

Before examining the political developments relating to the Arab Spring, in the next section we will discuss the socio-economic factors that prepared the ground for the uprisings.

Socio-economic Malaise

An alarm bell had been rung many years earlier when the first AHDR was published in 2002.⁷ It was prepared under the auspices of the UNDP and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development. It had presented a

devastatingly negative picture of the socio-economic situation in the Arab world as compared to other regions. The report pointed out that:

- Over the past twenty years, growth in per capita income in the Arab world, at 0.5 per cent per annum, was the lowest globally, with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa. If these trends continued, Arab workers would expect to double their income in 140 years, as against in ten years in other regions.
- Labour productivity in the Arab world was very low and declining; this was accompanied by a decline in real wages, which was increasing poverty levels.

The report highlighted three deficits in the Arab world – freedom, the status of women, and the state of the knowledge economy. These deficits were examined in greater detail in subsequent reports. Thus, AHDR-2004 looked at the deficit relating to freedom and good governance, and called for the full engagement of all Arab citizens in comprehensive reform to spearhead a human renaissance in the region. Of all the restrictions on human development, political restrictions were seen as the most stubborn.

The main reason why these reports were ignored by Arab governments can be traced to the revenues generated by oil sales. As the US-based academic David Siddhartha Patel has pointed out, ‘domestic political life in Arab states was frozen from the late 1970s until the 2000s’ largely because, during the period, the massive oil revenues strengthened the authoritarian ruling regimes.⁸ And, while oil prices fell from 1986 to around 2003, they again recovered from 2003 and remained high till 2014.

During this period, rulers of the oil-producing countries (as well as those in the non-oil producing countries whose citizens benefited from employment in the former and supported family members through remittances) shaped a ‘social contract’ between ruler and citizen. This entailed the state providing employment to the citizen in the public sector, access to free education and health facilities, and subsidized food and fuel. In return, the citizen gave the ruler loyalty and obedience, which included

bestowing on the latter full authority over political and economic decision-making, acceptance of non-transparent and non-accountable use of state resources by the ruler and his coterie, and avoidance of dissent at all times.⁹

But the oil revenues also provided rulers with resources, as Patel has noted, ‘to build multiple intelligence and security agencies that could deter popular political mobilisation, prevent successful coups, and limit external involvement in domestic affairs’.¹⁰ The fall in oil revenues in the 1990s did create political difficulties for several Arab states, particularly as some subsidies had to be reduced and challenges confronting the leaders were enhanced by technological innovations – transnational television, the internet and the mobile phone – which reduced governmental control over their people.

Oil prices began to increase from 2003 and, despite a brief fall in 2008 in the wake of the global recession, they soon recovered and remained robust till 2014. From mid-July 2014, largely due to global oversupply following the entry of US shale oil into world markets, prices fell from \$114 to \$53 per barrel at the end of that year and then reached a low of \$30 in early 2016. After that, prices climbed to around \$50 per barrel, generally chastened by the economic collapse and subsequent uncertainties in economic outlook generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the later part of 2021, prices climbed to around \$80 per barrel in response to economic recovery and tight supplies due to production controls exercised by OPEC + countries, i.e., OPEC members coordinating production cuts with Russia.

Besides oil prices, Arab economies have been adversely affected by other factors as well. An overview of the economy of WANA countries reveals that, by 2010, economic conditions had been deteriorating for some time. Over the previous three decades, the GDP growth across the region had averaged at 3 per cent, while the rest of the developing world had grown at 4.5 per cent. In the same period, the GDP per capita had grown at 0.5 per cent, as against 3 per cent for the rest of the developing world.¹¹

Under the influence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), WANA countries began to implement ‘neoliberal’ economic policies, i.e., policies where state role in the economy would be minimal, while market forces

would rule. This approach in effect meant that market-oriented policies would be imposed on economies firmly dominated by governments, with rulers exercising monopoly control over all aspects of the economies.

This institutionalized two aspects of the economy – crony capitalism, where economic policies would be moulded to benefit the ruler and his immediate coterie, and the attendant corruption that would be an integral part of all economic decision-making. Thus, privatization of state assets, in terms of neoliberal policies, effectively meant that the ruler and his immediate circle were the principal beneficiaries. In Egypt, for instance, the son of the president came to own 60 per cent of the country's steel industry, while in Syria, a cousin of the president controlled the country's telecommunications network.¹²

All of the WANA countries experienced a 'youth bulge', the result of low mortality and high fertility rates, and this section constituted 29–35 per cent of the populations in different WANA countries. Across the region, they were also 25 per cent of the unemployed in each country. Those who were educated formed a large part of the unemployed youth, while the less educated sought a place in the informal sector, with low wages, and squalid living and working conditions.

Elena Ianchovichina, lead economist at the World Bank, has explained that the private sector's failure to provide employment was due to crony capitalism that enabled old, large firms to enjoy monopoly control over various market segments, while small start-ups set up by young entrepreneurs would be squeezed out of the market.¹³

Observers have also pointed to the food crisis that harshly impacted the WANA region on the eve of the uprisings. All Arab countries were food importers – Syria, following four years of drought from 2006, was the last Arab country to become a food importer. As food prices began to rise globally from 2007, there were bread riots in several countries, with governments responding by providing even higher subsidies. However, prices continued to rise so that in the period, they had doubled in international markets.¹⁴ Before the uprisings, over 50 per cent of the Arab

people lived below the poverty line and spent more than half their income on basic food.¹⁵

Through the 2000s, it became clear that the old social contract was no longer sustainable, largely due to the high fiscal outlays for public-sector employment and subsidies. A combination of demographic challenges that had engendered unemployment, the food crisis and rising poverty, coupled with the rulers' resort to coercive force in several cases, led to a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction, what Ianchovichina has called the loss of 'subjective well-being'. She argues that the breaking of the social contract led to the Arab Spring uprisings.¹⁶

She looks at four possible symptoms that would explain how the contract had broken. The most important of these was the sense that standards of living and the state of the labour market had deteriorated. After this come governance issues – such as crony capitalism, nepotism and corruption – and, finally, the absence of freedom¹⁷ – as she points out, '... as material benefits erode, the premium on freedom increases, creating the impetus for economic but also for political change'.¹⁸

There is one point on which commentators tend to dispute Ianchovichina's analysis; this is when she says that 'the protesters ... were mostly middle-class young people'.¹⁹ The London-based academic and political commentator, Gilbert Achcar has pointed out that, while some people of middle-class background did join the uprisings, 'the vast majority in the streets and squares belonged to middle- and low-income urban layers, [the] working class and [the] unemployed'.²⁰ Thus, in Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain, the lead role in the uprisings was played by labour unions. Even in Sudan, in the second wave of the uprising, the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) included low-income groups, who joined the various neighbourhood 'resistance committees', made up of students, low-income workers and the unemployed, thus making the uprisings into true grassroots movements.

Having discussed the socio-economic factors that constitute the wellsprings of the uprisings, in the next sections we will look at the details of the uprisings themselves.

The Arab Spring Uprisings

While specific developments in each country were the result of its unique political situation, there are several similarities that link them with a ‘unifying thread’:²¹ all of them called for freedom, democracy and personal dignity; the common slogans were based around bread, freedom and social justice. Again, almost all the demonstrations, involving hundreds of thousands of protesters, were peaceful, despite bringing together diverse participants – men and women, Muslims and Christians, Islamists and secularists, lower and middle classes, urban and rural communities. At times, the protesters were deliberately provoked by thugs sent to disrupt their marches, insult women and divide them on communal or class lines, but they maintained a remarkable unity despite such provocations.

The uprisings had different trajectories in different countries:

- In two countries, Tunisia and Egypt (in the early period), political change marked by the departure of the ruler was orderly, in that it was negotiated between the demonstrators and the effective authority in the country, the armed forces.
- In two countries, Libya and Yemen – though their situations were different – the popular protests led to nationwide civil conflicts that have persisted to this day, largely due to the interventions of external players.
- In two instances, Bahrain and Syria, the demonstrators were harshly put down by state security forces; regional players then became actively involved – in the case of Bahrain, to support the ruling regime, and in Syria, to overthrow the regime.

Looking back, it is apparent that the diverse trajectories of the uprisings were determined by three factors: one, the role played by the armed forces in each setting; two, the role of external players, that was, in turn, influenced by the ‘strategic value’²² of the country concerned to foreign

parties; and, three, the personal decisions taken at crucial points by the principal actors in the evolving drama.

The three trajectories in the countries concerned are examined in the following paragraphs.

Negotiated Transitions

In Tunisia, a major role in fomenting the uprisings was played by the local and regional branches of the national trade union, the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT, in its French acronym). While the top leadership was aligned with the government, its middle and lower levels supported the workers' concerns and helped make the Bouazizi self-immolation protests into a national movement. Their efforts were backed by the police and the army.

Between the self-immolation and Ben-Ali's departure on 14 January, the escalating confrontation saw the beleaguered president regularly increasing his promises while, in parallel, calling for harsh action: at the town of Kasserine, government snipers killed twenty-one protesters. The president's departure became inevitable because of the army chief's refusal to attack the demonstrators. The Tunisian army, unlike that of most other Arab states, is of relatively small size (36,000) and had never been involved in politics or war.

The other interesting aspect of the Tunisian scenario has been the role of the country's Islamist party, Ennahda, and its leader, Rachid Ghannouchi. During Ben-Ali's rule, Ennahda had been banned and Ghannouchi exiled to London, where he acquired a well-deserved reputation as a major intellectual of political Islam.

Ghannouchi returned to Tunis from exile after Ben-Ali's departure and soon led his party to victory in the national elections. However, recognizing the complexity of national issues and his party's lack of experience in governance, Ghannouchi accepted the setting up of a government of technocrats. He later backed the finalization of a democratic Constitution that makes no reference to Sharia in shaping legislation, and gives full

rights to women and minorities. In 2016, Ghannouchi declared that Ennahda would no longer be affiliated with political Islam, but, instead, function as an 'Islamic Democratic' party, like the Christian Democratic parties in Europe.

While developments in Egypt were initially similar to what had occurred in Tunisia, very soon their paths diverged, and Egypt took the path of violence and reversal to autocracy. After Mubarak's departure, power devolved to a twenty-eight-member Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). The SCAF's principal concern was to protect the corporate interests of the armed forces and, hence, needed to control the transition to civilian rule.²³ Towards this end, it accommodated the Muslim Brotherhood in the political process, given that it was the only organized political entity in the country outside the Hosni Mubarak set-up.

As Kamrava has noted, in the early months of the post-Mubarak transition, the system 'continued to operate as an authoritarian-democratic hybrid', with the military as the dominant force.²⁴ Even when the Brotherhood leader, Mohammed Morsi, became president, he appointed army officers to senior positions; neither the military nor the Brotherhood, Kamrava says, 'showed any appetite for dismantling the country's legacy of political authoritarianism'.²⁵

Despite this, the political transition to civilian rule was difficult, even painful. The army retained effective authority, while the distrust between the Brotherhood and the military deepened, as did the divide between the government and the people – particularly since the elections had given only a razor-thin majority to the Brotherhood in the presidential elections of 2012. Problems were heightened by the Brotherhood's total lack of experience in governance, the deeply conservative outlook of its leaders, and Morsi's own apparent ineptitude in office – all of which ran in tandem with the extraordinarily high expectations of the populace.

Morsi naively assumed that electoral success in a democratic framework would win him international support, which would ensure that the army would not overthrow a democratically elected government. His assumptions were wrong: he failed to understand the power-lust of his generals and the

visceral hostility to the Brotherhood government from the Gulf sheikhdoms – particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The latter viewed the Brotherhood's grassroots politics that sought to blend Islam with Western-style democracy as a threat to their monarchical order.

It is now known that they funded the popular opposition to the Morsi government:²⁶ an organization called Tamarod held demonstrations across the country, with an estimated 10 million joining the protests on 30 June 2013. The army chief and defence minister, Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, presented Morsi with a forty-eight-hour ultimatum to resign. Morsi rejected the demand, but al-Sisi overthrew the government through a coup d'état on 3 July 2013, bringing to an end Egypt's first attempt at a democratic order.

Civil Conflict

Yemen had several weaknesses: a fragile state order, a weak, venal and corrupt leader, President Ali Abdullah Saleh, in place for over thirty years, an army divided on regional and tribal basis, tribal chiefs functioning outside central control, and a separatist movement in south Yemen that had joined North Yemen only in 1990. It was also the poorest country in the Arab world, with 50 per cent illiteracy and 35 per cent unemployment. Besides this, there was the intrusive presence of Saudi Arabia: sharing a 1,400-km porous border with Yemen, the kingdom had an abiding geostrategic interest in Yemen's domestic affairs. Due to the presence of Al Qaeda elements, the US also had an interest in the country, and saw Ali Abdullah Saleh as a useful ally against extremist forces.

Saudi Arabia was particularly concerned about the country's Zaidi community – a Shia community that had dominated North Yemen for several centuries and, after unification with the south, accounted for 40 per cent of the country. The Saudis viewed them as surrogates of Iran and ensured that, from the 1990s, they were excluded from political and economic affairs of the state. Fearing a threat to their identity and chaffing at their marginalization, the Zaidis in the northern Al-Jouf province

organized themselves initially as an educational and cultural movement under the leadership of the Al-Houthi family. This became a militant movement, the Ansarullah, after facing attacks from the national armed forces.²⁷

The Saudi policy was to back President Ali Abdullah Saleh, but to balance this by supporting an opposition grouping – the Al-Islah party – a largely Sunni, Brotherhood-affiliated party that also included Zaidi tribal chiefs who were on the Saudi payroll. This gave Yemen a weak state order that projected a deceptive semblance of stability. In power since 1978, the president in 2010 initiated an amendment to the Constitution that would have made him president for life.

In January 2011, a coalition of opposition groups began protests in Sanaa against the proposed amendment. Saleh responded quickly and positively: he accepted their demands and also agreed to set up an employment fund, increase wages, and restart the national dialogue for political reform that had ended some months earlier. The fall of Mubarak on 11 February, however, triggered similar demands for regime change from the Opposition. Following the events in Cairo, they set themselves up at Sanaa's Tahreer Square, which was now renamed Taghrayr (Change) Square, and demanded Saleh's departure.²⁸

Seeing the increasing popularity of the demonstrators, prominent pro-government figures began to defect, setting up a conflict between the protesters and elements loyal to Saleh. After a slow recovery from a bomb attack in March, Saleh accepted in November a Saudi proposal to hand over power to his deputy, Vice President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, in return for immunity from further investigation, retaining his wealth, and staying on in Sanaa.

Acceptance of the last condition was a crucial error on the part of the Saudis. Saleh was anxious to arrange the succession of his son, General Ahmad Ali Saleh, to the presidency; remaining in Sanaa gave him the ability to mobilize to his advantage those sections of the armed forces that were still loyal to him and undermine the Hadi presidency. His plans benefitted from a new source: the Houthis, seeing the Hadi government as

weak, descended on Sanaa in September 2014 and, in alliance with Saleh, took control of the city. Hadi fled to the south and then to Riyadh. The country plunged into civil conflict, with the Houthi–Saleh forces confronting the pro-Hadi sections of the armed forces, backed by tribal militia.

From March 2015, Saudi Arabia began its aerial bombardment of Yemen and built up an Arab coalition to dislodge the Houthis through military action from the south and a naval blockade across the Red Sea. In seven years of war, over 350,000 Yemenis have been killed, millions have been displaced, and the country faces a major humanitarian disaster. In a skirmish among rebel ranks, Saleh himself was killed in November 2017.²⁹ However, on the ground, the military situation remains a stalemate, with the major cities of Taiz and Sanaa and the port city of Hodeidah still under Houthi control. In an offensive in February 2021, the Houthis occupied large parts of the oil-rich Marib province as well.

Like Yemen, Libya too was a fragile state, having been created by its colonial power, Italy, in 1934, by bringing together three neighbouring entities. In 1969, a young military officer, Muammar al-Qaddafi, led a coup to overthrow the ruling dynasty and initially shaped his country on Nasserite lines, with a pan-Arab vision, later replaced by the idea of pan-African unity.

From 1977, he opted for the façade of ‘direct democracy’ by renaming his country Jamahiriya (state of the masses) and doing away with all national institutions of governance, and replacing them with ‘people’s congresses’. Al-Qaddafi, an observer has said, ruled his country through a combination of ‘megalomania, repression and corruption’.³⁰ Libya’s attraction for other countries, particularly those in Europe, was its oil wealth – it provided 10 per cent of the imports of EU countries, with Italy importing 25 per cent of its needs.

Popular demonstrations began in Benghazi on 14 February 2011, three days after Mubarak’s fall, and quickly spread to other cities. Soon, the peaceful demonstrators were replaced by armed insurgents, so that the confrontation between the latter and al-Qaddafi’s security forces became a

violent life-or-death struggle.³¹ From 21 February, the rebel forces were buttressed by defectors from the ruling group – ministers, soldiers, officials and diplomats – who set up the National Transition Council (NTC) as the principal body to spearhead regime change.

The formation of the NTC was announced in Benghazi on 27 February 2011 as the ‘political face of the revolution’. On 5 March 2011, the council declared itself to be the ‘only legitimate body representing the people of Libya and the Libyan state’. The NTC issued a Constitutional Declaration in August 2011 in which it set up a road-map for the transition of the country to a constitutional democracy with an elected government. It obtained international recognition and occupied Libya’s seat in the UN.

Unlike the experience of other countries during the Arab Spring uprisings, foreign powers, represented by the UN and NATO, began to intervene in the Libyan situation within two weeks of the first demonstrations to weaken al-Qaddafi politically and get him out of office. France, under President Nicolas Sarkozy, took the lead, with full British support. They castigated the violence of the government against its opponents, and called for an investigation by the International Criminal Court. This aggressive posture made it impossible for any party to promote a negotiated settlement, or to activate mediation efforts by the UN or the African Union.

France and Britain, with the backing of the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, pushed through Resolution 1973 at the UNSC on 17 March that imposed a no-fly zone over Libya. Just as al-Qaddafi’s troops were moving on the rebels at Benghazi, the Security Council invoked the principle of ‘responsibility to protect’, that enabled Western powers to launch ‘Operation Odyssey Dawn’. This operation came under NATO command from 27 March and was renamed ‘Operation Unified Protector’.

Though this operation was supposed to protect civilians, since its main aim was regime change, the NATO attacks caused heavy civilian casualties and led to many becoming refugees. Western powers also provided advisers

on the ground to direct air attacks and boost the fighting capacity of the rebels.

Besides Western countries, a major role player in the anti-al-Qaddafi coalition was Qatar. As the commentator of North African affairs, Karim Mezran has noted, it played many roles – financing, arming and training rebel fighters; sending Western-trained advisers to the rebels, and backing Islamist elements in the conflict.³² Its television channel, Al Jazeera, played a significant role in supporting the rebel cause by highlighting inflammatory news (some of it fake, most of it grossly exaggerated), which encouraged defections to the NTC. The country is said to have provided hundreds of millions of dollars that were used to set up Islamist militia.³³

The International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant against al-Qaddafi and his entourage on 27 June 2011. He was ousted from power after the fall of Tripoli to the rebel forces on 20 August 2011. Resistance continued for another two months by forces loyal to al-Qaddafi, especially in his hometown of Sirte, which he declared the new capital of Libya on 1 September 2011. His regime came to an end with Sirte's fall on 20 October 2011, NATO air strikes against his convoy, and his murder by the rebel forces that had captured him.

Despite the success of the rebellion, many armed units refused to give up their weapons and, in fact, fought each other on several occasions. The NTC tried to manage the situation by registering the fighting units and placing them on official payroll. On 11 September 2012, militants allied with the Al Qaeda attacked the US consulate in Benghazi, killing the US ambassador and three others. A major government crackdown was launched on the unregistered militias, with the Libyan Army raiding several now-illegal militias' headquarters and ordering them to disband. The violence eventually escalated into the second Libyan civil war from 2014.

State Repression

Syria and Bahrain stand out as two states, very different from each other, that were able to retain the existing regimes in power through the harsh

repression of protesters and the robust support of foreign powers.

Bahrain, with a total population, including expatriates, of 1.6 million, is one of the smallest countries in the world. Being one of the first Gulf sheikhdoms to experience direct British rule (albeit from British India), in the region, it has traditionally been in the vanguard in regard to education, political consciousness and women's emancipation. Hence, not surprisingly, it experienced popular agitations throughout the twentieth century – from the 1920s to recent times. The country has a majority Shia population.

In February 2001, its ruler, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, backed constitutional reforms under the National Action Charter that was approved in a national referendum on 14 February 2001. It provided for an elected national assembly and a constitutional monarchy. The elections of 2006 and 2010, however, were found to be fraudulent and opposition activists were arrested, and, perhaps, tortured. These political grievances were backed by economic dissatisfaction, largely due to unemployment and perceptions of widespread corruption.

The fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian presidents inspired Bahrainis to gather at the capital's iconic Pearl Square on 14 February 2011, the tenth anniversary of the approval of the National Action Charter. Their numbers increased to several thousand within two days. The government's first reaction was to open fire and disperse the protesters, and encourage counter-demonstrations by Sunni groups. The protesters countered this with a cross-sectarian pro-democracy march on 25 February that attracted about 200,000 Bahraini citizens, reflecting, as the US-based scholar of West Asian politics, Kristian Coates Ulrichsen says, given Bahrain's small population, 'a level of societal mobilisation unprecedented in any of the Arab Spring movements before or since'.³⁴

This encouraged the monarchy, represented by the crown prince, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad, to reopen dialogue with the protesters at Pearl Square. While they made progress on political reforms, the government could not commit itself to a constitutional monarchy. The talks ended on 14 March. That night, a thousand Saudi troops, backed by 500 military police from the UAE, crossed the King Fahd Causeway into Bahrain. The demonstrations

were broken up, thousands of people were arrested across the country, and a national emergency was declared. The Pearl Square monument was torn down.

For Saudi Arabia, already shaken by the fall of Hosni Mubarak, the prospect of reform in Bahrain was simply unacceptable. In its view, any political reform would only mean the empowerment of the majority Shia community. This, the Saudis believed, would open the doors for the penetration of Iranian influence within the very portals of the GCC family. On the domestic side, the kingdom also feared that Shia empowerment in Bahrain, following the precedent in Iraq under American auspices, would have a cascading effect across the GCC and undermine the kingdom in its own home – with Iran reaping political and strategic advantages.

The defeat of the reformist movement in Bahrain has had significant domestic and regional implications. The leaders in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have been projecting the reform movement as a purely Shia movement backed by Iran. This has led to widespread arrests, incarcerations and abuse of the country's Shia populace, and their marginalization in national affairs. Regionally, the affect has been even more dramatic: by accusing Iran of harbouring hegemonic aspirations with the support of Shia communities and militant organizations across West Asia, the kingdom, according to Justin Gengler of the *Washington Post*, has 'transformed a fundamentally domestic event [in Bahrain] into a new regional cold war'.³⁵

The impact of this Saudi perspective was felt in Syria, Iran's principal Arab ally at the edge of West Asia.

The first demonstrations in Syria, which began on 15 March 2011, were relatively low-key and were quickly dispersed. The situation turned ugly soon thereafter: in early March, ten schoolchildren had been arrested for putting up graffiti calling for the fall of the regime headed by President Bashar al Assad, who had been in power since 2000. The children were imprisoned and tortured. When their families took to the streets to demand their release, they were fired on and many of them were killed. Their

funerals attracted several thousand angry demonstrators. Anti-government rallies now took place all over the country, including in Damascus.

Foreign players quickly entered the scene to undermine the Assad regime. Saudi Arabia attempted to break up the Syrian army through financial inducements; some officers and soldiers did defect and were organized into the Free Syrian Army (FSA) from July 2011. Qatar worked with Turkey to organize Islamic militants, particularly through the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. These state-supported actions were complicated by the entry of a non-state actor: as noted earlier, in early 2012, the newly rejuvenated Islamic State of Iraq, under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, sent a detachment of jihadi fighters, called Jabhat Nusra (Al-Nusra), headed by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, into Syria. By the end of the year, Al-Nusra had become the most effective fighting force in the country. Hence, in April 2013, al-Baghdadi announced the merger of the ISI and Al-Nusra into the renamed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS – signifying the erasing of the Iraq–Syria border and affirming the independence of ISIS from its parent, Al Qaeda, and the leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri. The head of al-Nusra, al-Jolani rejected this overture and insisted that Al-Nusra would remain an independent organization and, following the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, would accept only Ayman al-Zawahiri as its head. ISIS fighters now entered Syria in large numbers, fought Al-Nusra cadres, and, in late 2013, took the town of Raqqa, which became the ISIS capital in Syria.

While these extremist non-state actors were settling scores, Syria also became the battleground for inter-state competitions – particularly between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Saudi Arabia became disillusioned with the FSA since it did not become an effective fighting force due to lack of internal cohesion, while the Qatar-backed Islamic militants gave an excellent account of themselves against the national army.³⁶ This led Saudi Arabia to assume the leadership role in the fighting against the Assad government by bringing all the militants under the umbrella of the FSA. A commentator, Hasan Hasan, wrote in June 2013, ‘Riyadh has now taken Qatar’s role as

the rebel's primary patron'; the author added that this had been done under US pressure.³⁷

To counter Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Iran organized the deployment of fighters from the Lebanese Hezbollah to back Assad, the first time, as Marina and David Ottaway note, that Iran 'sent thousands of Lebanese Shia abroad to further an Iranian cause in an Arab country'.³⁸ Despite the backing of the Hezbollah and Iran, by 2015, Assad had lost control of most of his country, with the national landscape reflecting a complex mosaic of local fiefdoms controlled by diverse militia, backed by different powers. The entry of Russia into the Syrian imbroglio on the side of Bashar al Assad from September 2015 fundamentally changed the national and regional political scenario (details below).

Besides the six Arab countries that faced the brunt of the Arab Spring uprisings, the monarchies too were affected by their reverberations, though no change of regime took place.

Monarchies Face the Arab Spring

With the exception of Qatar, all the Arab monarchies experienced some impact of the Arab Spring, particularly from Brotherhood-affiliated groups. However, none of them went through the popular uprising that occurred in Bahrain or its tragic aftermath. The trajectory of developments in each country reflected its own national situation and the manner in which the monarch concerned coped with the challenge.

Jordan

In Jordan, the Brotherhood-affiliated group was the Islamic Action Front (IAF) that was a licensed political party, had been part of governments earlier, and was believed to be close to the monarchy. It boycotted the January 2013 polls on the ground that the election law favoured pro-government tribal districts rather than urban voters. In response to domestic unrest, King Abdullah II replaced his prime minister and introduced a

number of changes, including reforming the Constitution and introducing laws governing public freedoms and elections. Proportional representation was reintroduced to the Jordanian parliament in the 2016 general elections, a move which the king said would eventually lead to establishing parliamentary governments.

Observers believe that Jordan survived the Arab Spring through a combination of the ‘maturity’ of the Jordanian public, Western financial support, the UN’s management of the influx of Syrian refugees and, last but certainly not least, the kingdom’s official ‘web masters’.³⁹ Despite the king’s adroit management, Jordan has continued to experience public protests demanding economic reform and participation in governmental decision-making, to which the king has responded with changes of prime minister and more promises. As West Asia expert James Dorsey noted in June 2018, ‘protesters are no longer pacified by cosmetic changes. They appear to be demanding systemic change that would involve greater transparency, accountability, and political participation.’⁴⁰

Morocco

Demonstrations took place in Rabat on 20 February 2011 and then spread to other towns – Casablanca, Marrakesh and Tangier. The principal demand was for a new Constitution that would limit the authority of the king. King Mohammed VI moved quickly to placate the demonstrators: he obtained a new Constitution that provided for an empowered prime minister, freedom of the press and judicial reform, and limited royal appointments to 250 from the earlier 1,200.⁴¹

In the elections held in November that year, the Islamist Justice and Development Party won a majority of the seats and formed the government. What was significant in the Moroccan context was that the king accepted the need for reform, but ‘determined the pace, scope and limits of political reforms’.⁴² Morocco continues to see a number of popular demonstrations and there is a pervasive view among activists that, from 2011, no real change in the political order has occurred. A news report from February

2019 said, ‘Today, Morocco is still dealing with poverty, corruption and unemployment that February 20 sought to solve. Frustration is rife – but so are protests.’⁴³

Kuwait

Kuwait is different from other Gulf sheikhdoms in that it has had a Constitution from 1961 and regular elections to the national assembly. The natural evolution of the political process should have led to a constitutional monarchy, but this has not occurred, largely due to opposition from within the royal family. This has led to popularly elected representatives coming to the assembly, but their efforts to monitor governmental performance being thwarted by dissolutions of successive assemblies.

The Arab Spring protests in Kuwait were led by the bidoon (stateless persons). Dozens of them demonstrated in Kuwait City on 19 February 2011 against their second-class status. Opposition leaders called for further protests in March to pressure Prime Minister Nasser Al-Sabah to resign. In November 2011, about 50,000 Kuwaitis protested in Sahat al-Irada (Square of Determination), demanding that the prime minister step down over allegations of corruption. The assembly was taken over at night by protesters. The prime minister had to resign, marking the first such incident of its kind in Kuwait.

After these first protests, demonstrations against the government became a regular feature in Kuwait. On 21 October 2012, about 150,000 persons took to the streets against a new electoral law designed to reduce opposition, which was passed by the emir without parliamentary approval (as Parliament was dissolved). Kuwait’s political order has thrown up constant clashes between the elected representatives on the one hand, and the country’s ruling family and wealthy merchants on the other, leading to political paralysis.⁴⁴

Oman

Besides Bahrain and Kuwait, Oman was the other GCC member that experienced public protests when several hundred Omanis demonstrated in Muscat, Sohar and Salalah in January-May 2011. Their main demands were for improved economic conditions and employment opportunities, and the removal of corrupt ministers. Sultan Qabous, on the throne since 1970, was perhaps stunned by this unprecedented expression of public anger. He peremptorily removed most of his cabinet ministers, even those with impeccable reputations for rectitude. The powers of the legislature were expanded, and the system made more representative and transparent. Huge doles were promised to the unemployed.

After these first, possibly panicky, responses, the state slid back into its earlier somnolence. The sultan remained the fountainhead of all authority, with the legislature remaining toothless. However, the personal popularity of the ruler and the state's status as the principal source of employment and patronage ensured that Oman remained largely stable.

The UAE

The Arab Spring made itself felt in the UAE in March 2011 with a petition, addressed to President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan and the Supreme Council of Rulers in March 2011 and endorsed by 133 intellectuals, with some members of the Brotherhood-affiliated Al-Islah party among them. The petition criticized the government's failure to introduce legislation to increase the pool of voters for the country's only elected body, the Federal National Council (FNC). Notably, four professional organizations (the associations for jurists, teachers, national heritage professionals, and university faculty), all of which were traditionally known for their Brotherhood links, signed the petition.

In early April 2011, five of the petition's signatories were arrested. They were charged with "publicly insulting" the UAE's president, vice president and the crown prince of Abu Dhabi in comments posted on an online discussion forum'. All five were convicted in November 2011. Shortly after

their sentencing, the five (none of whom was an Al-Islah member) were released through a presidential pardon.⁴⁵

However, the Brotherhood figured prominently in national concerns. These concerns were articulated not by a royal family member but by the police chief of Dubai, Lt Gen. Dhahi Khalfan al Tamim. In a strongly worded public statement, he launched an attack on the Brotherhood as having ‘strayed from the true path’. He said the revolution in Egypt (i.e., the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak) ‘would not have been possible without Iran’s support’. He then added that if the Brotherhood ‘threatens the Gulf’s security, the blood that flows will drown it’.⁴⁶

In July 2012, the UAE state media announced that about sixty Emiratis belonging to the Brotherhood-affiliated Al-Islah group had been arrested; some had confessed that their organization was running an ‘armed wing’, which had been plotting to seize power and set up an Islamic state in the UAE. The report added that the UAE group was linked with similar groups in three other Gulf countries and had received AED10 million (\$3.67 million) from another Gulf Arab country – possibly hinting at Qatar. Following this news item, there were two further reports, in December 2012 and January 2013, relating to the uncovering of underground Brotherhood cells that were aimed at overthrowing ruling regimes in the Arab states. At the end of 2012, sixty-nine Al-Islah members were awarded prison sentences of seven to fifteen years.

In November 2014, the UAE released a list of 82 organizations that it considers terrorist groups. This list includes organizations such as the Al Qaeda and ISIS; it also comprises groups like Al-Islah and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. In December 2019, the national daily, *Gulf News*, reported that Turkey and Qatar were collaborating to target the UAE’s rulers. The author, Sami Moubayed, explained the reasons thus: ‘The reasons ... related primarily to Sheikh Mohamed’s [i.e., Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, the effective head of the country after the president’s illness] commitment to Islamic moderation, which stands in sharp contrast to everything the Brotherhood has worked for since its creation in Egypt back in 1928.’⁴⁷

Saudi Arabia

Given its regional and global importance, the Arab Spring challenges for Saudi Arabia were both domestic and regional.

In his first response to the Arab Spring uprisings, particularly just after the Tunisian president landed in Jeddah, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz announced major financial outlays, estimated at \$140 billion, to support certain disadvantaged categories, including the young and the unemployed – these included loans for those in need, such as housing loans and loans to facilitate marriages. The state created 60,000 jobs in the Ministry of Interior, while an anti-corruption body was set up.

The king then received three separate petitions seeking changes in the country. The first, titled ‘The Declaration for National Reform’, was submitted by liberals and moderate Islamists. It called for a constitutional monarchy, a federal order and an elected Shura Council.

The second was titled ‘Towards a State of Rights and Institutions’. It expressed commitment to Islamic principles and called for a written Constitution, an elected prime minister answerable to the Shura Council, judicial reform, freedom of speech and expression, the release of political prisoners and an end to corruption. It was supported by the distinguished Islamic scholar, Salman al-Audah, who had been active in the Sahwa (‘Awakening’) reform movement of the 1990s.

The third petition came from a newly set up body called the Association for Civil and Political Rights in Saudi Arabia (HASM in its Arabic acronym), that criticized the then interior minister, Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz for violations of human rights and Islamic law. Its leaders were handed long prison sentences.⁴⁸

Al-Audah made a powerful plea for reform: in his book, *Questions on Revolution*, he said that domestic unrest could be prevented through fundamental reforms rather than ‘bribes’ to people in the form of loans, grants and lower food prices. He said that to move forward from the current crisis, Arab regimes needed to reconfigure ‘the relationship between ruler

and ruled ... on the basis of people's consent which comes from freedom and living in dignity'.⁴⁹

The Shia community in the Eastern Province organized public demonstrations and called for a constitutional monarchy, three separate branches of government and political parties. In March 2012, various Shia activist groups came together to form the Coalition for Freedom and Justice. A Saudi liberal pointed out that, while the group may belong to a particular confession, no sectarian slogans had been raised by the demonstrators; they had, in fact, raised nationalist slogans, and made social and political demands.

Having examined the ramifications of the Arab Spring in different states, the next section focuses on the survival policies adopted by the six monarchies of the Gulf, and how these have shaped competitions and conflicts in West Asia.

The Gulf Monarchies

The six monarchies of the region, collectively partners in the GCC, share several characteristics. Each of them is headed by a royal family that was recognized as pre-eminent by British rulers in the nineteenth century, and, who later, from the late 1960s, also gave them national borders and the institutions of modern governance, thus shaping them into sovereign nations.

However, the state order that emerged was largely founded on the pre-oil tribal formations that accepted the legitimacy of the ruling family: the family provided domestic and external security, as well as welfare to its nationals, while the latter, in turn, gave the royal family their loyalty and obedience. The 'social contract' in the GCC order has meant provision by the state of education, health services and employment with state institutions. The monarchs, on their part, well funded by oil revenues, have generally ruled without question or dissent from their subjects, and without any participation in national decision-making by the latter or even the

demand that governance should imply transparency – including with regard to national income and expenditure accounts.

As Kamrava has noted, a unique attribute of GCC royal authority has been its ability to shape the ‘identity dimension’ of its citizens, and, flowing from this, its ability to set the national agenda in terms of domestic and international policies.⁵⁰ The shaping of identity and agenda-setting are mutually intertwined, and are crucial to realizing the interests of the ruling family in the face of challenges that emerge at different points in time.

The authority of Gulf monarchs has been greatly enhanced by the ‘political taming of Islam’, by making Islamic institutions a part of the state order.⁵¹ In this way, the states have set up an ‘establishment ulema’ by making them state employees as imams in mosques, teachers in schools and universities, judges, and members of state-sponsored bodies, which provide the rulers with religious sanction for their political actions. State control over faith-based institutions has meant that dissent, when it emerges, has to be expressed through the precepts and institutions of political Islam that are outside state control, and, in fact, challenge the standing and credibility of the establishment ulema on political matters. The state has usually dealt very harshly with these expressions of faith-based political dissent.

The capacity of Gulf rulers to sustain the social contract and maintain control over religion has been largely facilitated by the availability of oil revenues. Thus, despite challenges thrown up at the monarchies during the early days of the Arab Spring uprisings, the GCC states had substantial funds immediately available to reaffirm the social contract by co-opting potential dissidents. This was largely due to the continuous rise of oil prices during the period: from \$62/barrel in 2009, to \$77 in 2010, to \$109 in 2012 and \$106 in 2013. Hence, not surprisingly, ‘the preference of states across the GCC was to buy their way out of trouble rather than to confront it head-on’.⁵²

Thus, on the back of high oil prices, the GCC states could ride out the 2011 uprisings. The real challenge they, in fact, faced occurred from 2014 onwards when oil prices fell: they went to \$96/barrel in 2014, to \$50 in 2015 and then to \$40 in 2016. While citizens were being constantly

reassured that their rulers had the capacity to manage this challenge, governments did take quiet steps to effect changes: restructuring state enterprises, laying off several thousand expatriate workers, delaying or cancelling major projects, and even reviewing state subsidies and contemplating taxes, thus taking a new look at the existing social contract.⁵³

Taxes were a particularly sensitive matter due to concerns that there could be demands for transparency and accountability in national accounts, and an attendant popular role in government decision-making. The very rich hydrocarbon states – Qatar, the UAE and Kuwait – with their huge resources and small populations merely trimmed subsidies in petrol, electricity and water, and heralded major economic plans to work towards post-oil, technology-based economies, founded on the education and training of their youth – the latter being funded through state coffers.

From among the other three GCC states – Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman – only Saudi Arabia, with its large population, and heavy domestic and regional commitments (including financially supporting Bahrain, Jordan, Sudan, Egypt, Morocco and Pakistan), faced serious challenges. The war in Yemen, initiated by the kingdom from March 2015, within two months of the accession of King Salman to the throne and the appointment of his son, Mohammed bin Salman, as defence minister, became a huge drain on financial resources – writing in November 2021, the US-based research scholar, Asher Orkaby estimated that the kingdom has spent \$100 billion on the war in Yemen so far.⁵⁴

In response to the challenge of low oil demand and low prices, in April 2016, the Saudi crown prince announced the kingdom's 'Vision 2030', a plan to prepare the country for the post-oil era by diversifying the [economy](#) and developing public service sectors, such as health, [education](#), infrastructure, recreation and [tourism](#). The vision envisaged major investments in industrial development, the services sector, expanding pilgrimage services to attract more visitors, and upgrading training of youth to reduce dependence on expatriate workers. The plan also called for making the country self-sufficient in defence manufacture. The vision is meant to serve three purposes: to make the country the 'heart of the Arab

and Islamic worlds’; to make Saudi Arabia a global investment powerhouse; and to transform the country’s location into a hub connecting ‘[Afro-Eurasia](#)’.

However, the most significant effect of the Arab Spring uprisings on Saudi Arabia was geopolitical. The fall of Hosni Mubarak took away the kingdom’s strategic partner, while the electoral success of the Brotherhood was viewed as a political threat. In this background, the demand for reform in Bahrain and the attendant empowerment of the Shia was a source of great alarm and, as noted earlier, led to swift Saudi armed action to disperse the protesters and the later crackdown on dissent.

But this was not enough. The kingdom’s rulers utilized their ability to shape national identity by setting off the Saudi Sunni identity against the ‘threat’ posed by Shia Iran, focusing on its ‘hegemonic’ designs across the region with the support of Shia populations and the militants it has organized in different countries. These concerns went beyond Bahrain to embrace the kingdom’s own 2-million-strong Shia community, largely residing in the Eastern Province, that has a history of organized dissent against systemic state discrimination at home.

These sect-based concerns imbued the Saudi rulers with a deep sense of strategic vulnerability vis-à-vis Iran, and goaded them to challenge Iran’s long-standing ties with the Assad family in Syria by effecting regime change (details above). This initiative facilitated the shaping of the Saudi–Iran competition in a sectarian framework that later led to the Saudi military assault on Yemen to dislodge the Houthi militants from Sanaa in view of their Zaidi/Shia identity.

The increasing sectarianization of West Asia’s political competitions in the wake of the Arab Spring is discussed in the next section.

Sectarianization of West Asian Competitions

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its occupation of the country till 2011 brought sectarian identity to centre stage – this move didn’t only shape Iraqi politics, but also influenced large parts of West Asia as well. As Fanar

Haddad had noted, in Iraq, from 2003, ‘sectarian categories had gained unprecedented relevance and an outsized ability to colour social and political perceptions’.⁵⁵ Within a year of the US attack on Iraq, King Abdullah of Jordan said in an interview that West Asia was witnessing the emergence of a ‘Shia crescent’ that started from Iran, stretched across to the Gulf and then went on to the Mediterranean.⁵⁶

The monarch’s allusion was clearly to an aggressive Iran that, he believed, was poised to dominate the regional order by overturning existing regimes with the help of its proxies, i.e., the local Shia populations in different countries in the region. He was also highlighting the concern that regime change effected by US forces in Iraq had not just ‘empowered’ the Shia community in Iraq, but it had also empowered those politicians and groups with a long history of close affiliation with Iran doctrinally, politically and even personally, due to their long exile in that country.

Subsequent events appeared to confirm the validity of King Abdullah’s concerns. Iraqi politics during the occupation, as noted earlier, was firmly shaped on a sectarian basis: sectarian identity became the basis for the political institutions that the Americans now put in place in the country. This was institutionalized in the muhasasa system that provided representation in state institutions – particularly the national assembly and the council of ministers – in proportion to the assumed ethnic-sectarian demography of Iraq, with quotas being provided for Shia, Sunni and Kurd participation.

Again, as Shia ‘empowerment’ became the central driving force in Iraqi politics, the country’s Shia politicians sought Iran’s support for their interests and ambitions, even as Iran consolidated its influence with the mobilization of the Shia militia that fought the Americans and the jihadi extremists of the AQI – later named Islamic State of Iraq – and, from July 2014, the Islamic State. Iranian influence in Iraq affirmed the sect-related apprehensions of neighbouring states, mainly Saudi Arabia.

Not surprisingly, Iraq’s legacy of 2003 fed into existing security concerns and vulnerabilities among West Asian rulers, who could explain their authoritarianism at home on the basis of the threat from the ‘other’

sect – the Shia – where Bahrain and Saudi Arabia were concerned and, in the case of Syria (ruled by a Shia minority), the Sunnis. Thus, the Houthi demand for political and economic participation in Yemen, the cross-sectarian demand for reform in Bahrain, and the Shia protests against discrimination in the Eastern Province became for Saudi Arabia the expressions of Iran-sponsored interventions in support of its project to assert regional hegemony. This understanding was used to justify Saudi military deployment in Bahrain, the armed assault on Yemen, and the harsh action taken to put down Shia demonstrations at home.

This approach had its mirror-image in Syria as well. Syrian politics was already ‘sect-coded’, in that the Alawi identity of the al Assad family and its core support base had shaped political and economic patronage in Syria since 1970, when Hafez al Assad became president. The ‘opposition’ to the al Assads came from the Sunni Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, thus providing a sectarian binary in a state that was avowedly Ba’athist and, therefore, secular. Hence, not surprisingly, Bashar al Assad had little difficulty in describing the early Arab Spring uprisings in Syria as ‘a Sunni-centric, extremist, Islamist, anti-Syrian plot orchestrated by foreign powers’.⁵⁷

In Syria, this sect-based division worked for the other side as well. Bashar al Assad’s Sunni opponents saw in the early Syrian uprisings an opportunity to roll back Iranian influence not just in Syria but in the region at large. Regime change in Damascus and the installation of a Sunni leadership in the country would, it was believed, bring an important Sunni-majority country into the Arab mainstream; it would snap Iran’s outreach to the Mediterranean, and even close the Iranian lifeline to the Hezbollah, via Damascus, thus diluting Shia influence in another Arab country, Lebanon. Finally, it would make Iran-influenced politicians in Iraq realize the limits to the country’s backing for them and, in the words of an Iraqi politician (in 2012), make them ‘more reasonable’.⁵⁸

These sect-based perceptions relating to regional political competitions led different nations to see in Syria and Yemen either a threat or an opportunity for their own interests; this is what has made these conflicts so prolonged and so destructive, and, seemingly, without resolution.

Besides the lethal sectarian conflicts that the Arab Spring has unleashed, the competitions *within* Sunni political Islam, while less destructive, have also been a major feature of the West Asian landscape. These are discussed in the next section.

Competitions within Political Islam

Monarchies versus the Brotherhood

The principal competition within political Islam is between the Gulf monarchies and the authoritarian republics on one side *versus* the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups on the other. This is because the Brotherhood, with its foundations in Islam, its accommodation of democratic norms and institutions, and its popular activism is viewed as a threat to the authoritarian rulers – both monarchical or republican. Hence, not surprisingly, the coming to power of Brotherhood-affiliated parties in Tunisia and Egypt in the early months of the Arab Spring was viewed as a grave challenge to the authoritarian rulers in the Gulf and the Egyptian armed forces, and led to their working together to bring down the Brotherhood government and restoring military rule under the redesignated Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

As in the inter-sectarian conflict, Saudi Arabia is again at the centre of the fight against the Brotherhood. Here, its principal allies are the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt; ranged against this coalition are Qatar and Turkey. Qatar is the outlier in Gulf affairs, since, though a small sheikhdom, its views are rarely in sync with those of its GCC partners. Qatar's rulers were staunch supporters of the Brotherhood in Egypt and its various affiliates in West Asia. In an attempt to get Qatar to correct its positions, Saudi Arabia and its allies in June 2017 cut diplomatic ties with Qatar, and subjected it to an onerous logistical, economic and diplomatic blockade. This continued for over three years, till it was unexpectedly relieved, largely by Saudi initiative, at the GCC summit at Al-Ula, in January 2021, though there is no

indication of any change in Qatar's regional policies or stance towards the Brotherhood.

In pursuit of its agenda, Qatar has worked closely with Turkey. When the blockade was initiated, Turkey (and Iran) backed Qatar with immediate supplies. More importantly, in the face of a possible threat of regime change coming from Saudi Arabia, Turkey placed its troops in Doha to protect the ruler and his family.

Turkey's ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (its short form is 'AKP' in Turkish), is an Islamist party, which has been in power since 2000. Its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has shaped his politics on the basis of political Islam, which he has linked with the glory of Ottoman rule that, in his view, reflects Turkish military and political successes, and, with the sultan as caliph, its spiritual leadership of the Muslim world.

Hence, Erdogan poses a doctrinal and military challenge to Saudi Arabia: painting the kingdom as 'Wahhabi' and, thus, rigid, doctrinal and the source of extremist thought, he projects Turkey as modern, moderate and democratic (though his rule is being increasingly viewed as authoritarian). But he has complemented Turkey's doctrinal claims with a regionwide military outreach – Turkish troops are today deployed in Syria, Iraq, Qatar and Libya, even as its navy is challenging the littoral states in the east Mediterranean.

These confrontations are a mix of security concerns and Islamist interest. Initially, Turkey, with Qatar, backed the Brotherhood-affiliated militia in Syria against the al Assad regime. But when the retreat of government forces led to the Syrian Kurds controlling the Syria–Turkey border, Erdogan abandoned the Islamist agenda and turned his guns on the Kurds through a series of military incursions into north Syria and setting up of safe zones that would control Kurdish military activity.

But Erdogan has not altogether abandoned his Islamist interests in Syria: he has positioned Turkish troops around Idlib to protect the Islamist militants from different groups, including the Al-Nusra, in the hope that they would join a Turkish-sponsored militia that would ensure its interests against Assad and the Kurds over the longer term.

Turkey's interests and actions in Libya are overtly Islamist: here, it is backing the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) against the Tobruk-based House of Representatives, whose military forces, led by the warlord Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, are backed by Egypt, the UAE and a mercenary force from Russia. Erdogan has also used his links with the GNA to obtain a maritime agreement that gives Turkey control over large areas of the waters of the east Mediterranean.

Jihad in Regional Confrontations

The other competition within political Islam is between the forces of jihad and most established authorities in West Asia and beyond that are viewed as hostile to Islam the faith and Muslims in general.

Following the US attacks in Afghanistan after 9/11, the Al Qaeda reinvented itself: abandoning central control, the organization now functioned through regional affiliates that were largely autonomous – in Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, the Islamic Maghrib (south Algeria), Somalia (Al Shabaab) and north Nigeria (Boko Haram). However, it was the US assault on Iraq and the subsequent empowerment of the Shia that led to a lethal jihadi movement in that country, where faith-based politics had been largely unknown. It was headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and he named his organization Al Qaeda in Iraq.

As mentioned previously, after he was killed in 2006, his successors renamed the body as Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). After several setbacks, the ISI was rejuvenated under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2010. He not only consolidated the organization, but also captured Anbar and Mosul, which he declared was the capital of the Islamic State (IS). Within two years, the IS had territory the size of the UK, a standing army of 200,000, a functioning government, and revenues of several million dollars per month. It attracted about 30,000 militants from outside Iraq and Syria, including from several neighbouring Arab countries, North Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, and even Europe. By 2018, the state was destroyed by

government forces in Iraq and Kurdish fighters, armed and trained by the US, in Syria.

It is interesting to recall that some regional states opportunistically allied themselves with the jihadi fighters when it suited them. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia, then working with Turkey, brought seven jihadi groups together in the Jaish al Fatah, under a Saudi cleric. This included the Al-Nusra and Ahrar al Sham, both extremist groups. Saudi Arabia has also worked with Brotherhood-affiliated groups – the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and the Al-Islah in Yemen – and co-opted for a while the Al Qaeda in South Yemen against the Houthis.⁵⁹

‘Second Wave’ of the Arab Spring Uprisings

In 2018, just when it appeared that the Arab Spring uprisings had been effectively put down with brute force, with only Tunisia – with a democratic Constitution – showing any sign of real change, a ‘second wave’ of uprisings occurred in four other Arab countries – Sudan, Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon. These countries had been relatively subdued during the first wave of the uprisings. Asef Bayat, an authority on Arab revolutions, said these uprisings affirmed that ‘the Arab Spring did not die’,⁶⁰ while Dalia Ghanem of Carnegie Middle East Centre described them as ‘a new season of discontent’.⁶¹

These fresh uprisings took place in diverse national contexts, but, as the US-based academic who writes on Islam and West Asian politics, Alain Gabon has pointed out:

[T]he Arab Spring was destined to continue ... because the root causes of the 2011 uprisings had not been addressed. [These included] the massive economic and political disenfranchisement of the majority of Arab populations, by equally massive and systematic corruption [by] regimes that are desperate to maintain their grip on power at all costs [and which] have become even more brutal,

repressive and terroristic than they already were before the Arab Spring.⁶²

As the public agitations progressed in these four countries, it soon became clear that the demonstrators had learnt important lessons from the earlier protests – to remain peaceful and united at all times, despite provocations from the rulers, and not to call off the demonstrations till real change in the political order had been obtained.

Sudan

On 19 December 2018, [protests](#) began following a government decision to triple the price of goods at a time when the country was suffering an acute shortage of foreign currency and inflation of 70 per cent. In the face of these protests, President Omar al-Bashir, who had been in power for more than thirty years, refused to step down. This brought together the various opposition groups into a joint coalition. The government retaliated harshly with police firings and detentions of more than 800 opposition figures. About forty persons were killed, although local and civilian reports claim the number is much higher than that.

Though it was widely believed that these protests would peter out, the demonstrators remained resilient, signalling that a civil war was possible if the president did not step down. The armed forces stepped in on 11 April 2019, and declared that the president had been overthrown and was under house arrest. The armed forces then set up a Transitional Military Council (TMC) to run the country.

Despite the coup, the protests continued, with a massive sit-in in front of the army headquarters, with demonstrators demanding ‘freedom, peace, justice’. These agitations were spearheaded by the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), an umbrella association of seventeen different trade unions. While functioning from 2012, it emerged more formally in October 2016 as an association of unions of doctors, journalists and lawyers. In

December 2018, the group called for the introduction of a minimum wage and participated in protests against the rising cost of living.

The chiefs of staff, who were part of the TMC, then declared a three-month state of emergency. Over hundred people were killed on 3 June 2019 in street confrontations when security forces dispersed the sit-in using tear gas and live ammunition in what is known as the [Khartoum massacre](#). Following the massacre, the SPA called for ‘complete civil disobedience and open political strike’ on the grounds that the TMC was responsible for two days of mass murder, pillage, rape and violent repression of workers’ strikes. The SPA called on the Sudanese to follow the method of [non-violent resistance](#) ‘in all [their] direct actions, towards change’.⁶³

The protests came to an end when the [Forces for Freedom and Change](#), an alliance of groups organizing the protests, and the TMC, the ruling military government, signed the July 2019 Political Agreement and the August 2019 Draft Constitutional Declaration.

The transitional institutions and procedures include the creation of a joint military–civilian [Sovereignty Council of Sudan](#) as head of state, a new [chief justice of Sudan](#) as head of the judiciary branch of power, and a new prime minister, [Abdalla Hamdok](#), a sixty-one-year-old economist, who had worked previously for the [UN Economic Commission for Africa](#). He was sworn in on 21 August 2019, and immediately initiated talks with the [IMF](#) and [World Bank](#) aimed at stabilizing the economy, which was in dire straits because of shortages of food, fuel and hard currency. On 3 September, Hamdok appointed fourteen civilian ministers, including the first female foreign minister and the first Coptic Christian, also a woman.

Algeria

Popular agitations, referred to as ‘Hirak’, began in Algeria in February 2019 to protest the announcement by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika that he would be seeking a fifth term in office. Since the country had become free from French colonial rule in 1962, it had been ruled by a cabal of military, political and business leaders, with the president, an authoritarian central

figure, being kept in power with their support, while serving their interests. Thus, it was the Algerian 'deep state' that encouraged Bouteflika's candidature for a fifth term, despite his ill-health, largely to maintain continuity and avoid internecine competition among the various elements that make up this deep state.

Under popular pressure, Bouteflika stepped down on 2 April 2019, and many of his immediate associates were put on trial and jailed. But Hirak's demands now expanded to include a complete overhaul of the political order that had been marked by corruption, nepotism and repression, and its replacement by a genuine democratic system. However, against Hirak's wishes, the army pushed for presidential elections that brought Abdelmajid Tebboune, an old Bouteflika associate, to high office.

Following this, despite popular pressure, the old order remained in place and pursued its own agenda, taking advantage of a suspension of the demonstrations in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Tebboune appointed a body of experts to frame a new Constitution. A national referendum to approve this document was held on 1 November 2020. Before the referendum, several dissidents were arrested, including journalists, social media activists and free press campaigners, while a French television channel was banned from the country. Taking into account that 1 November marked the start of the freedom movement against French rule in 1954, the government slogan in support of the Constitution was 'November 1954: Liberation. November 2020: Change.'

The turnout for the referendum remained modest at best: just 24 per cent of an electorate of 25 million voted, of which 66 per cent approved the Constitution. Tebboune was anxious to declare that Hirak had completed its mission; the preamble of the Constitution said that it was a reflection of the 'will of the people' expressed through its 'authentic blessed Hirak' which had 'put an end to [past] errors'. However, the Constitution has not impressed the votaries of change: it was not prepared by an elected constituent assembly and it retained a powerful presidency by giving him substantial executive, legislative and judicial powers.

Iraq

Popular protests against corruption, violence and poor public services rocked Iraq from July 2018, beginning in Baghdad and Najaf, and then spreading to other provinces in [late September 2019](#). [After a short lull, protests started again on 1 October 2019](#), escalating into calls to end the existing political system based on an ethno-sectarian ‘spoils system’ and its replacement by an authentic democracy, as well as the restoration of Iraq’s sovereignty by ending foreign interference in its affairs. Violence by security forces, backed by Shia militia, and sharp criticism from Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, in October 2019, led to the resignation of Prime Minister [Adel Abdul Mahdi](#) and his cabinet.

Mustafa Al Kadhimi became prime minister on 9 April 2020, after three previous candidates failed to obtain a parliamentary majority. Al Kadhimi promised early parliamentary elections under new electoral rules that will provide for single-member constituencies. In January 2021, the cabinet agreed to general elections on 10 October 2021.

While popular agitations were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, they were revived in October 2020.

The street demonstrators demanded a thoroughgoing reform of the electoral system that would replace the existing ‘spoils’ system’ with genuine democracy, removal of corruption from public life, better delivery of services, improvements in the economy and better employment prospects. They also wanted their country to become a genuine sovereign nation, without the intrusive role of the US and Iran in national affairs.

These popular agitations led to the national assembly passing a new election law which was approved by President Barham Salih in November 2020. The new law effected some changes – the country’s eighteen provinces were now divided into eighty-three electoral districts, with each district having a number of constituencies, and each constituency would have about 100,000 residents.

The new law also did away with the earlier proportional representational system in favour of one candidate being elected from each

constituency on the basis of the first-past-the-post system. However, the short period between the passing of the new law and the elections did not allow for new parties with national appeal to emerge; hence, the principal contestants were still the old sect/ethnicity-based parties.

The elections in October had a modest turnout of about 41 per cent. The Sairoon movement, headed by the cleric, Muqtada al Sadr, improved its seats from fifty-four to seventy-three, and emerged as the largest party in the 329-member assembly. Its success was at the expense of the political parties representing the pro-Iran Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), whose number went from forty-eight seats to sixteen. The latter have condemned the entire election process as fraudulent and demanded fresh elections. They have organized widespread protests and have even accused the special representative of the UN secretary general for Iraq, Jeanine Plasschaert, of being the 'godmother of vote-rigging'. A drone attack was also launched at the prime minister's residence to pressurize the government to annul the elections.

The ongoing dispute in the country is whether there should be political majority government or a national unity government in which most parties would participate. Muqtada al Sadr is promoting a majority government, headed by him, and is in discussions with other Shia, Sunni and Kurdish parties and independent members to form a coalition that would have a majority in the assembly. The PMU parties are backing a unity government so that they continue to enjoy some political power in the country.

Iraq is gradually emerging from a prolonged period of diverse conflicts – domestic, regional and externally sponsored – but, given the numerous challenges it faces, the move towards normal politics is slow and contentious. However, its politicians appear to be recognizing the validity of the demands from the street which could, over time, shift the country towards a genuinely participatory and responsive democratic order. The fact that the recent elections brought 265 new members to the national assembly suggests that the country could be shedding its painful past.

Lebanon

Lebanese affairs are controlled by an oligarchy of the country's political and business elites, who, as a commentator has recently noted, 'have divided the country's public and private sectors between themselves and created a system in which they can extract rent on virtually any economic activity'.⁶⁴

On 17 October 2019, the first of a series of mass civil demonstrations erupted. They were initially triggered by planned taxes on gasoline, tobacco and online phone calls, such as through [WhatsApp](#), but quickly expanded into a countrywide condemnation of [sectarian](#) rule, a stagnant economy, unemployment, endemic corruption in the public sector, legislation (such as banking secrecy) that is perceived to shield the ruling class from accountability, and failures of the government to provide basic services such as electricity, water and sanitation.

The root cause of public dissatisfaction lies in the country's extreme inequality: since 2005, Lebanon has been characterized by extreme disparity in both income and wealth. The richest 1 per cent receives, on average, 25 per cent of national income, while the poorest half receives less than 10 per cent. The richest 10 per cent owns almost 70 per cent of total wealth. Additionally, the middle class and the poor have little chance of upward mobility.⁶⁵

As a result of the protests, Lebanon entered a political crisis, with the former prime minister, [Saad Hariri](#), tendering his resignation and echoing protesters' demands for a government of independent specialists. Other politicians targeted by the protests have remained in power. On 19 December 2019, the former minister of education, [Hassan Diab](#), was designated as the next prime minister and tasked with forming a new cabinet.

Through 2020, the country's economic situation only worsened: in June 2020, the outgoing economy minister, Raoul Nehme, announced that 60 per cent of the Lebanese would find themselves below the poverty line by the end of the year. In July 2020, the price of food items and non-alcoholic beverages increased by 24 per cent compared to the previous month and by more than 330 per cent compared to July 2019.

On 4 August 2020, [a massive explosion at the port of Beirut](#), Lebanon's main port, destroyed the surrounding areas, killing more than 200 people and injuring thousands more. The cause of the explosion was later determined to be 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate that had been unsafely stored, and had been accidentally set on fire that Tuesday afternoon.

Diab resigned in August 2020 in the face of popular demands to fix responsibility for the Beirut explosion. After a long spell of rule by a caretaker government, in July 2021, veteran politician and billionaire businessman, Najib Mikati obtained parliamentary support to form a new government. A new government emerged in September 2021, with the responsibility to handle the country's worst economic and financial crisis since the civil war of.

Conclusion

Ten years after Bouazizi's self-immolation and the departure of Tunisia's president, an overview of WANA reveals a dismal scenario. Major states – Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Libya – have experienced extraordinary violence, with no end in sight for the ongoing contentions, though several hundred thousand persons have been killed, millions have been displaced, and the states are going through severe humanitarian crises. In this scenario, it is easier to speak of an Arab 'winter of despair' rather than of an Arab Spring.

The existing regimes have shown an extraordinary capacity for survival. They have used different instruments and approaches for co-optation and, more frequently, coercion – specifically, through the abuse of human rights at home and the cynical use of sectarian sentiments to mobilize domestic and regional support. They have also exhibited their great propensity for violence against fellow Arabs – against sectarian enemies and those from rival expressions of political Islam. The last decade has confirmed that the existing political order cannot be reformed; it has to be rooted out if real change is to occur.

And, yet, this order lacks inherent resilience. Marc Lynch has noted, '... as long as such regimes form the backbone of the regional order, there will

be no stability’.⁶⁶ This is largely because, despite the coercion and violence, the sources of popular discontent remain the same: around 2030, WANA will need million new jobs; Egypt alone will need to create 3.5 million new jobs over the next five years. This is clearly beyond the capacity of the regimes in place, so that, as the Amsterdam-based scholar of West Asian politics, Paul Aarts has said, ‘an army of long-term unemployed people will come into being’ who will, in all likelihood, be seen as a threat to incumbent regimes.⁶⁷

The last decade in WANA has also suggested that political Islam, in all its three expressions, has eroded considerably in appeal. Saudi Arabia, for instance, has understood the limits of maintaining a coercive and intrusive order on the basis of an avowed ‘true’ Islam. It is presently seeking to anchor royal legitimacy in moderate Islam and appeals to nationalism.⁶⁸

The Brotherhood in Egypt, presently underground and in exile, is in the throes of internal introspection – with at least some of its intellectuals looking to reshape its entire ideological base with fresh ideas that address issues of concern to developing countries: ethno-nationalist, communal and sectarian divisions, neoliberal economic policies and inequality, food security, environmental degradation, etc. As Abdullah Al-Arian, West Asia scholar at Georgetown University-Qatar, has astutely observed, ‘... the more politically successful Islamists become, the more likely they are to shed any vestiges of their core identity’.⁶⁹ Ghannouchi of Tunisia, as noted earlier, has declared that Ennahda is no longer an Islamist party.

Popular opinion remains supportive of the Arab Spring uprisings. An opinion poll of 2016 showed that most Arab people had positive attitudes towards the demonstrations: Egypt (78 per cent); Tunisia (71 per cent); and Saudi Arabia (55 per cent). They also had very positive attitudes toward democracy: 77 per cent wanted to have a democratic order in their own country, while 72 per cent thought democracy was better than its alternatives.⁷⁰ A later 2019-20 Arab opinion poll again showed that 76 per cent preferred a democratic government; 58 per cent felt the uprisings had been positive events; and only 30 per cent believed that the Spring was over with the victory of the regimes.⁷¹

There is, therefore, little reason for pessimism in the region. The Arab Spring uprisings are not a single movement, with a single-point programme. They are, as Gilbert Achcar has said, ‘a long-drawn revolutionary process’ that is seeking a total overhaul of the Arab order.⁷² Marc Lynch has reminded us that democracy was just one demand of the demonstrators; theirs was, he says, a struggle that had gone over generations to reject a regional order that was mired in corruption, and had failed both politically and economically. In that sense, Lynch says, the two waves of the Arab Spring ‘have profoundly reshaped every conceivable dimension of Arab politics, individual attitudes, political systems, ideologies, and international relations’.⁷³

The first wave of the Arab Spring uprisings created ‘a culture of political activism and dissent’,⁷⁴ while the second wave has affirmed that the movements for change are founded on a wide but cohesive support base, they are now better organized, with leaders and a programme, and agitators are patient, persistent and unafraid.

The third wave of the uprisings could be with us sooner than we expect.

India and West Asia (1950–2021)

THE BASIC PRINCIPLES THAT WOULD SHAPE INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY during the Cold War had already been defined during the freedom struggle. From the 1920s, as Jawaharlal Nehru became the main articulator of the positions of the Indian National Congress (INC) on international affairs, the principles he expounded were that India would be in the vanguard of the anti-imperialist struggle globally and, linked with this, the country would back national liberation movements fighting colonial domination. Nehru, on his part, had no doubt that, as noted in a State Department report of 1949, India was 'the cultural fountainhead of the new Asia'.¹

After independence, as Nehru became India's first prime minister and external affairs minister, he remained firm on upholding these principles – though, on occasion, their implementation had to be modified in keeping with India's interests at the time. One factor that greatly influenced his approach on specific issues was the Pakistan factor, particularly the latter's partnership with the Western Alliance. This brought the Cold War divide to India's borders, and posed a challenge to its commitment to non-alignment and created problems for its ties with the US.

Factors Influencing Indian Foreign Policy

India's differences with the US became apparent in 1949 itself, when Nehru visited the US on a twenty-three-day goodwill tour. US Secretary of State Dean Acheson, as US-based scholar of Indian politics and foreign policy, Francine Frankel has pointed out, believed that, in dealing with the Soviet Union, 'good intentions' were worthless and moral principles were 'traps'; the only effective approach was the use of power to 'make people do what they don't like'.² None of this resonated with Nehru, who thought US diplomacy 'was immature and reflected too much emphasis on physical might'.³

Besides these fundamental differences in world view, Pakistan also emerged as a divisive factor in India's approach to the US. From 1949, Pakistan perceived a strategic advantage for itself vis-à-vis India in moving close to the Western Alliance, particularly the US, even as India remained committed to non-alignment.

Shortly after Nehru's visit to the US, Pakistan's prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, visited the US in May 1950. His programme replicated that of Nehru's, giving the clear signal that the US would maintain parity between the two countries. India's ambassador in the US, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, read this move as the US building up Liaquat Ali Khan 'as a great Asian leader', debunking Nehru for his 'socialist' leanings, and giving Pakistan 'a more secure place of leadership'. Nehru himself accepted this assessment and believed that the US was making a concerted effort 'to build up Pakistan and build down ... India'.⁴

Nehru soon found in the US-sponsored regional security pacts specific reasons for concern – he saw these agreements as a form of imperialism aimed at diluting the influence of national liberation movements and the independence of governments that emerged from these struggles. The first such organization, proposed by the US in 1952, was the Middle East Defence Organization (MEDO) that was aimed at protecting West Asia's oil resources and the security of the Suez Canal, and resist aggression.

Nehru worked closely with Gamal Abdel Nasser to ensure that Egypt excluded itself from this entity. But the US and the UK brought in Pakistan as a role player in regional security – though they knew it would offer no

material support while the Kashmir issue remained resonant. MEDO went nowhere as the regional states rejected cooperation among themselves in defence planning under the US's and UK's direction. With Truman's exit from the White House in 1953, the proposal died away.

This Western affinity with Pakistan took a more concrete form with the Baghdad Pact: discussions to bring the 'Northern tier' states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan into a security structure across the southern borders of the Soviet Union began in July 1953. Alongside these negotiations were the bilateral talks between the US and Pakistan to provide military assistance to the latter; again, these talks continued despite the US knowing that Pakistan's military contribution to the Cold War confrontation would be negligible.

The US–Pakistan 'Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement' of 19 May 1954 and Pakistan's membership of the Baghdad Pact, finalized in February 1955,⁵ were seen by Nehru as attempts to 'make Pakistan virtually a colony of the United States, and the whole country into a base from which attacks against India could be launched'.⁶ These concerns seemed to be confirmed when India's military commanders conveyed to Nehru that, by June 1957, the military equipment acquired by Pakistan from the US would place India at a 'distinct disadvantage'.

India's West Asia Policies during the Cold War

These factors consolidated India's anti-US perceptions and encouraged it to make every effort to expand the net of non-alignment across South, Southeast and West Asia. Nasser, on his part, worked assiduously against the Baghdad Pact and ensured that Syria, Lebanon and Jordan did not join it. In April 1955, India signed a treaty of friendship with Egypt to demonstrate a rejection of military pacts and promote the idea of a peaceful settlement of disputes.

In this background, we will examine India's ties with select West Asian countries during the Cold War.

The Israel/Palestine Issue

India's approach to this issue was already made clear in the resolutions of the INC from the 1920s. The party saw the Zionist movement as one directly influenced by British and American interests. In 1936, Nehru described the 'Arab struggle against British imperialism in Palestine ... as much a part of this great world conflict as India's struggle for freedom'. He contrasted this with the Zionist movement that refused to identify itself with the nationalist movements in Asia, and concentrated its efforts on obtaining political and material support from the US and the UK.⁷ Two years later, he wrote:

Palestine is an Arab country and Arab interests must prevail there. ... the real conflict [in Palestine] is with British imperialism and this struggle, whatever its varying phases, is a national struggle for freedom. It is the misfortune of the Jews that they have aligned themselves with British imperialism. ... British imperialism has had its day and fades away before our eyes.⁸

Throughout the period before independence, both Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru were approached by prominent American Jews and US politicians to persuade them to be more sympathetic to the Zionist cause. Despite these efforts, Gandhiji stuck to his position that Palestine belonged to the Arabs and condemned Zionist collaboration with imperialist Britain. Nehru also continued to view the Palestine issue within the framework of the Arab nationalist struggle against British imperialism, and the Jewish issue as a concern relating to a religious minority. To address the latter, he advocated a federal solution that would guarantee the religious rights of the Jews.

During the debates in the UNGA in April–October 1947, the US supported the partition of Palestine between Arabs and Jews, while India proposed a federal plan, though it was rejected by the two contending parties and enjoyed little support among UN members. Among those who attempted to influence Nehru at this time was Albert Einstein, who wrote to

Nehru on 13 June 1947. Einstein described the Jews as an ‘ancient people whose roots are in the East’; he backed the Zionist cause, he said, as ‘a means of correcting a flagrant wrong’. He recalled that the Jews had, for centuries, been ‘victimised and hounded as a people’, and that Zionism would end this discrimination and ‘their pariah status among peoples’.⁹

In his reply, Nehru made it clear that he supported the federal plan due to India’s own traumatic experience with Partition. He said that he had sympathies with both the Jews and the Arabs, but wondered why the Jews had failed to win the goodwill of the Arabs and were intent on compelling ‘the Arabs to submit against their will to certain demands [partition and Jewish statehood]’.¹⁰

In the event, the UNGA vote went in favour of partition, after which Israel proclaimed its independent statehood on 14 May 1948. The US immediately recognized the new state, but India demurred. Despite the influence brought to bear on Indian diplomats in the US, and even on Nehru personally by Jewish leaders, he delayed the recognition. According to correspondence exchanged between those who had met Nehru in the US in 1949, the latter had spoken of the ‘painful’ experience of Indian Muslims as a result of Partition and their support for the Palestinian cause as reasons for denying recognition to the new state.

India finally recognized Israel in September 1950, though it refused to establish diplomatic ties. This was largely because India was seeking stronger ties with the Arab states to counter the US initiatives to set up regional security organizations, commencing with the Baghdad Pact. In fact, India’s rejection of these pacts, even as Pakistan had joined them, obtained some plus points for the country: the Saudi ruler of the time, King Saud bin Abdulaziz, criticized Pakistan for associating itself with ‘those who have joined hands with the Zionist Jews’.¹¹

Though India and Israel did not have diplomatic ties through the Cold War, there were sporadic interactions, particularly between the armed forces of the two countries. Three months after the war with China in 1962, the Israeli chief of army staff and the head of military intelligence visited India, and had substantial discussions with senior military officers. During the

1965 and 1971 conflicts with Pakistan, Israel provided heavy 160 mm mortars to the Indian army.¹²

In 1974, India recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the 'sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people'. An office of the PLO was set up in Delhi the following year, and it was accorded diplomatic status in 1980. In November 1988, India became the first non-Arab state to recognize the 'State of Palestine'.

Egypt: The Suez Crisis

The problem began when, in October 1955, the Soviet Union offered a loan of \$200 million to Egypt for the Aswan Dam project. Soon thereafter, Egypt approached the World Bank and obtained an assurance of support for the dam from the US and the UK, possibly to counter the Soviet offer. However, in July 1956, the US withdrew its support, followed quickly by the UK; the assistance from the World Bank was also withdrawn.

A riled up Nasser responded by nationalizing the Suez Canal Company, which had been operating the canal since 1889 and had a majority Anglo-French shareholding. Nasser declared that the yearly income from the canal – \$100 million – would be enough to fund the Aswan Dam project. The nationalization of the canal was largely on economic grounds, though Nasser felt that the Western denial of support had been done to punish Egypt for not joining the Western Alliance.¹³

Nehru's approach was to uphold Egypt's right to affect the nationalization, and was assured by Nasser's commitment to ensure free navigation and fulfil Egypt's international obligations. He also believed that the abrupt US withdrawal of financial support for the Aswan Dam was deliberately aimed at embarrassing the leaders of the Non-aligned Movement, given that Nehru, Nasser and Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia had just met on 18-19 July.

India then played an active role to achieve a peaceful settlement of the issue. It provided a five-point formula that would reconcile the interests of both sides; to accommodate Western concerns, the proposal also provided

for a 'consultative body of user interests' based on geographical representation and having advisory functions. The US, on the other hand, called for the internationalization of operations of the Suez Canal, so that Egypt would only enjoy nominal sovereign rights over the canal, while effective control over the operations would be outside its influence. Here, the Cold War divide made itself felt: countries such as Pakistan, Iran and Turkey supported the US plan, while the Indian plan was backed by the Soviet Union, Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

The US plan was rejected by Egypt, which viewed the Americans as being more interested in controlling the canal rather than in running it efficiently. Britain also attempted coercion by encouraging pilots and other essential personnel to leave the company. In September 1956, British Prime Minister Anthony Eden even threatened that, if Egypt did not 'cooperate', the UK would be 'free to take whatever steps are open to them'.¹⁴ For the UK, the issue became a matter of British prestige – Eden believed that Nasser remaining in power would be a 'death-blow to Britain's prestige vis-à-vis the Arabs in particular and Afro-Asian nationalists in general and consequently to Britain's greatness'.¹⁵

Discussions on the issue shifted to the UNSC in October 1956. Here, the Indian proposals were slightly modified by UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld, but, following a Soviet veto, they were only issued as guidelines for future discussions. While consultations between Delhi, London, Washington and Cairo were underway, on 29 October, Israel launched a military attack in the Sinai, which was followed the next day with British and French troops attacking several Egyptian cities, including Port Said, Alexandria and Cairo.

The UK wished to reverse the nationalization of the canal, and restore British prestige and influence in Egypt and the region at large. France wanted to punish Nasser for his support of the nationalist uprising in Algeria; it also feared that the loss of ownership of the canal would reduce its international standing. Israel feared a military threat from a nationalistic Nasser, who had said, 'We demand vengeance, and vengeance is Israel's death,'¹⁶ and, therefore, it was anxious to take pre-emptive action.

India condemned the invasion as a ‘reversal of history and the revival of colonialism’. Nehru repeated his criticisms in letters to Eden and President Dwight Eisenhower. The latter backed Nehru’s position, seeing in the attacks a replay of ‘old’ colonialism, which would weaken the Western effort to confront the ‘new’ colonialism of the Soviet Union in eastern Europe. Under US pressure, on 6 November, Britain and France accepted a UN ceasefire, and withdrew their forces from Egypt; the Israelis withdrew their troops in March 1957.

Looking back, the Suez crisis appears to be the last significant effort of the ‘old’ colonial powers to turn the tide of Arab nationalism and retain their political overlordship over West Asia. To this end, their military effort was intended to achieve ‘regime change’ in Egypt, heralding a pattern of Western interventions in the region that continues to this day.

The US, in fact, had precipitated the crisis by seeking to undermine the conciliatory Indian proposal that was pushing for an international advisory council over the functioning of the Suez Canal, which would have safeguarded the interests of users. For the US, the primary motive force in this matter, as the distinguished Indian scholar Zorawar Daulet Singh has pointed out, was ‘basic hostility to Arab nationalism’ and ‘distrust of Nasser’.¹⁷ Neither of these impulses worked to American advantage: Suez made Nasser a hero among the Arabs, and Arab nationalism remained the principal driving force of regional politics till his death in 1970.

On the Suez crisis, Nehru’s words provide a valuable epitaph. He said on 16 November 1956:

The story of the past three and a half months ... is full of tragic drama, and events have happened which I would have thought could not possibly occur in this modern age. I find it a little difficult to deal with this record of unabashed aggression and deception.¹⁸

Saudi Arabia

As noted above, in the early 1950s, Saudi leaders, King Saud bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince Faisal bin Abdulaziz, were unhappy with Pakistan joining the Baghdad Pact, and were attracted by India's policy of non-alignment. In 1955, King Saud paid a seventeen-day visit to India. Besides visiting Delhi and Bombay, he travelled in a special train to Hyderabad, Mysore, Bangalore, Benares, Aligarh and Agra. The Aligarh Muslim University conferred on him an honorary doctorate. In public remarks in Bombay, he expressed his happiness at the conditions of Muslims in the country, and praised the government for its policies of 'equality and equity'.¹⁹

Nehru paid his visit in return to Saudi Arabia in September 1956. He was welcomed as a 'messenger of peace' by enthusiastic crowds that thronged a football stadium in Jeddah to hear him. In the joint statement after the visit, the two countries referred to the ongoing Suez crisis; they called for a 'peaceful settlement' that would uphold 'the sovereign rights of Egypt over the Suez Canal'.²⁰

However, as the Suez crisis boosted Nasser's standing in the Arab world, the kingdom began to feel threatened, particularly as the Egyptian president's attacks on its rulers became more strident. Saudi Arabia now sought security in a closer US embrace, and found a valuable political and defence partner in Pakistan – another US ally in the Cold War binary. At the same time, Nehru found ideological kinship with Nasser, their personal ties being strengthened by Nehru frequently stopping over in Cairo on his westward tours. Thus, the divide between India and Saudi Arabia began to widen.

As noted earlier, the war of 1967 delivered a mortal blow to Nasser's standing, and helped swing the pendulum of regional influence in favour of the kingdom. The latter lost no time in consolidating its position on the basis of its Islamic credentials. It convened a summit of leaders of Islamic countries at Rabat in September 1969. India was invited too, but, on Pakistan's insistence, the credentials of its delegation were withdrawn and the team left Rabat in ignominy. This humiliation sounded the death knell

on political ties between India and Saudi Arabia, even as Saudi–Pakistani ties flourished.

India also remained estranged from the Jeddah-based OIC that served as a platform to project Saudi interests in the Islamic world. Another event that deepened the Indo-Saudi estrangement was the India–Pakistan war of 1971. Despite the atrocities committed by Pakistani troops on their Bengali brethren, the kingdom viewed the war as an attack on an ally that broke up the country.

After Nehru’s visit to the kingdom in 1956, the first major high-level interaction between the two countries took place in 1982, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visited Saudi Arabia at the invitation of the country’s crown prince, Fahd bin Abdulaziz, who was also the prime minister. Though the exact reason for the invitation is still not clear, the visit took place in the background of momentous events in the region – the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Iran–Iraq war, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that was then being combatted by the Afghan mujahideen backed by Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the US, while India had refused to criticize the Soviet Union.

There can be little doubt that the visit was a major effort by Saudi Arabia to reverse the earlier estrangement and to re-engage with India politically on matters of common concern. The most significant outcome of this interaction was the following paragraph in the joint communique issued:

The Crown Prince particularly welcomed the visit of Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi to Saudi Arabia at this critical juncture when the prevailing hostilities and tension in the region posed a very grave threat to regional and international peace. *The Crown Prince and the Prime Minister recognised that the stability and security of the Gulf region and that of the Indian Sub-Continent were closely interlinked.* In this context they emphasised the need and importance of closer and regular contacts as also of deeper and more diversified exchanges between India and Saudi Arabia. [Emphasis added.]²¹

This paragraph not only saw a seamless connectivity in the security of South Asia and the Gulf, it was also a signal to other Gulf countries to build fresh ties with India.

Again, the paragraph relating to India–Pakistan ties said:

The two sides ... underlined the importance of maintaining an atmosphere conducive to further negotiations between India and Pakistan to attain the objectives of non-aggression and non-use of force through mutually acceptable arrangements. ... *It was agreed that the consolidation of India and Pakistan relations would serve the interests of the peoples of the two countries and would contribute to security, stability and peace in South Asia and in the entire region.* [Emphasis added.]

Here, the Saudi side projected a balanced approach as between India and Pakistan, and emphasized the positive impact that good Indo-Pakistan ties would have on both South Asia and West Asia. Again, though the visit took place during the Iran–Iraq war and the early stages of the mujahideen struggle in Afghanistan, there does not seem to have been any effort on the part of the Saudis to insist that India take sides. It is possible that Crown Prince Fahd may have been making a valiant effort to get India to join the Western Alliance in the face of the Soviet threat in the neighbourhood. However, the opposite could also have been weighing with him: the kingdom itself could have been seeking to reshape its regional engagements vis-à-vis Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq, and work with India in this endeavour to build a new regional security order. A piquant thought!

Whatever Crown Prince Fahd may have had in mind, the entire project appears to have broken down with Indira Gandhi's assassination on 31 October 1984. Saudi Arabia, the US and Pakistan consolidated their ties on the battlefields of Afghanistan; the 'global jihad' in Afghanistan continued till 1989, while the destructive Iran–Iraq lasted till 1988. And India and Saudi Arabia continued to remain politically estranged for another twenty years.

Iran

There were serious constraints in the development of India–Iran relations through most of the Cold War: this was largely due to India’s support for national liberation movements, and Iran’s membership of the Western Alliance in the Cold War and its strong ties with Pakistan. These were followed by several events in which Iran and India found themselves on opposite sides. Iran established diplomatic ties with Pakistan in May 1948, but did so with India only two years later.

In 1953, India supported the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company by Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddegh; his overthrow in a US-sponsored coup, which restored Mohammed Reza Shah Pahalavi to the Iranian throne aggravated differences between the two countries.

From the 1960s, the shah effected changes in his foreign policy which made him more independent of the restraints placed on him by the alliance with the US. In September 1962, he assured the Soviet Union that he would not give rocket bases to any foreign nation. He also extended full support to India in the 1962 war against China. This led to visits to Iran in 1963 by President S. Radhakrishnan and Nehru, the latter’s second visit.

But this period of bonhomie did not last long – Iran extended substantial political and material support to Pakistan during the 1965 war with India. Hardly had ties recovered following the shah’s visit to India in 1969 when the India–Pakistan war of 1971 again saw Iran backing Pakistan, particularly by routing US supplies through its territory. Ties were then revived through a flurry of high-level visits. In 1975, Iran agreed to invest \$630 million to set up the Kudremukh iron ore project in India and to set up the ‘Irano Hind’ shipping company to ship iron ore from India to Iran.

In the 1970s, the shah was hoping to cement his position as the principal power in the Gulf and sought partnership with India to enhance Iran’s strategic influence in the region. India accepted this overture, as it wanted to balance the burgeoning security ties between Pakistan and the Gulf Arab states. But these early explorations came to naught as the shah was

overthrown in January 1979 and was replaced by the Islamic Revolution in the country.

In the early days of the revolution, there were several positive vibes between Iran and India. In March 1979, India sent an unofficial goodwill delegation to Tehran to express its support for the revolution. Iran withdrew from CENTO, and terminated all military and security cooperation with the West. It joined the Non-aligned Movement on the basis of Ayatollah Khomeini's principle of 'neither East nor West'. In fact, in December 1979, while speaking of countries from which 'good things' could be learnt, Khomeini mentioned Japan and India.²²

However, differences soon became apparent. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, while India provided political and economic backing to the communist government in Kabul, Iran condemned the invasion. Again, though the Islamic government remained distant from Pakistan, it began to provide covert assistance to the mujahideen in Afghanistan. But the main cause of the India–Iran divide was India's public ambivalence but covert backing for Iraq in the Iran–Iraq war. Through the war, India maintained trade and defence ties with Iraq, while the latter awarded several high-profile projects to Indian companies.

India–West Asia Ties after the Cold War

The end of the Cold War was marked in West Asia by the dramatic entry of Iraqi troops into Kuwait in August 1990, and the formal incorporation of Kuwait into Iraq as its nineteenth province. This event had two immediate implications for India: one, over 170,000 Indian nationals were trapped in Kuwait and needed to be urgently repatriated home. And, two, given that Iraq and Kuwait together accounted for the bulk of India's oil imports, India suddenly had to arrange for oil supplies from alternative sources in very turbulent times.

The repatriation of the Indian nationals was treated by the government as a national priority. After a much-publicized meeting of the Indian external affairs minister, I.K. Gujral, with President Saddam Hussein, the

Indian side got permission to move the nationals out of Kuwait by bus to Baghdad and thence to Amman. From Amman, all the stranded Indians got back home – the operation lasted over two months and 488 special flights were used to repatriate them. This is recognized as the largest air evacuation in history.

The issue of oil supplies was also quickly addressed. An Indian minister was sent to Saudi Arabia in August 1990 to negotiate oil sales to India. It was assumed that the kingdom would insist on some form of condemnation of the Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait. Hence, late into the night the minister and the Indian ambassador worked on different formulations which would satisfy the Saudis, while not being deemed offensive by Iraq, for several thousand Indians were still stranded in Kuwait at the time.

In the event, no such statement was necessary. The next day, as the Indian team met the Saudi oil minister, the latter said, ‘I have been instructed by His Majesty to inform you that Saudi Arabia will meet all of India’s oil needs.’ The meeting ended rather quickly after this.²³

Though not known at that time, this meeting marked the beginning of India’s new ties with West Asia – over the next thirty years, relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel would obtain the highest place, while ties with Iran would remain subject to the vagaries of US sanctions.

Saudi Arabia

The 1990s were a period of turbulence and uncertainty for both Saudi Arabia and India. From 1990, the kingdom was preoccupied with handling the implications of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the threat this posed for Saudi Arabia itself. In this situation, King Fahd had no hesitation in getting the Americans to put together a coalition to reverse the occupation and protect the kingdom at the same time.

At home, this invitation to the Americans led to serious opposition, particularly from dissident clerics: the moderate among them launched a petition campaign seeking wide-ranging reforms, while the more radical attacked government and US facilities in Riyadh and Dammam. In 1995,

King Fahd suffered a debilitating stroke which incapacitated him. This led to some jostling among senior royals: Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz even proposed a 'regency', but this was resisted by other senior royals. In any case, by the end of the decade, a degree of stability had been achieved in the country, and it was now ready to explore new relationships that the end of the Cold War had provided.

India too experienced a prolonged period of uncertainty through the 1990s. The decade began with the collapse of the economy and the effective bankruptcy of the country, which required 47 tonnes from India's gold reserves to be physically transported to the Bank of England against a loan of \$405 million to the country. The assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, on 21 May 1991, traumatized the nation, which was further shaken by the destruction of Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992 by Hindu zealots and the attendant communal riots – which heralded the advent of a new, disruptive force in national affairs.

Though the minority Congress government of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao remained in power for its full term of five years (1991–96) and even initiated wide-ranging reforms in the country's economic order, it was followed by three years of political instability, which ended only in 1999 with the election of a coalition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, led by the leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Thus, by 1999, both Saudi Arabia and India had acquired a modicum of stability in domestic matters, and were now ready to take a fresh look at each other and explore how their relations could be taken beyond oil imports and the recruitment of Indians for employment in the country. In 1990, the number of Indians working in the kingdom had gone up from 250,000 in 1982 to 750,000; this continued to increase through the 1990s, so that by 2000, Indians were well over a million in Saudi Arabia and over 3 million in the GCC countries taken together.

The initiative to explore a new relationship began with the Saudi assistant minister for foreign affairs, Dr Nizar Obaid Madani, visiting India

in 2000 to invite the Indian external affairs minister, Jaswant Singh, to Saudi Arabia.

Jaswant Singh's three-day visit to the kingdom in January 2001 marks the revival of political engagement between the two countries, which had last interacted with each other in 1982. At the outset, Jaswant Singh's host, Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal, carefully removed the old cobwebs that had bedevilled bilateral ties through the Cold War. He read out a long and substantial statement setting out the kingdom's position on the Kashmir issue; at the end of it, Jaswant Singh said, 'I do not disagree with a single sentence or phrase in your remarks.'²⁴ In this way, a major issue that had divided India from Saudi Arabia for several years was laid to rest.

The Saudi statement made no reference to UN resolutions, to plebiscite or to third-party mediation on Kashmir, issues that rile India. It spoke of the issue as a bilateral matter to be addressed by the two countries concerned. The furthest the prince would go was to speak of its resolution on the basis of 'international legitimacy' and in accord with the wishes of the people concerned – formulations that were sufficiently vague as to cause no offence to the Indian side.

Prince Saud Al Faisal went further: he said that Saudi Arabia valued its ties with India on their own merits and would not view India through the prism of its relations with any other country. Thus, the Pakistan factor, which had been an obstruction in the promotion of Indo-Saudi relations all through the Cold War, was firmly ejected as an influence in the further progress of bilateral relations. After this opening, the two ministers had a free-flowing conversation on a range of regional and global issues, and found themselves in accord with each other on the substance of the matters discussed as also the high degree of personal rapport they felt in each other's company.

This sense of goodwill permeated through the rest of the visit. Crown Prince Abdullah learnt with great joy that the Indian minister shared his love for horses, and insisted that he visit the royal stables. There Jaswant Singh was greeted by the crown prince's son, Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, who told the minister, 'My father said, "I like the Indian minister; he is

honest, he is a Bedouin like us.”” This was a reference to Jaswant Singh’s origins from Rajasthan. In an exceptional gesture, the crown prince gifted Jaswant Singh two Arabian horses from his stable that were flown to India a few weeks later in a special aircraft.

This overture to India was clearly an effort by the kingdom to move out of the constraints of the Cold War binary and build new ties. India was an attractive partner: it had had long-standing ties with the region, going back several centuries, which had left a legacy of mutual cultural comfort. Despite the political distance, the people-to-people relations had remained constant, with the Saudis seeing India as their principal health, education and tourism centre.

Again, over the half century since Independence, India had built a reputation as a state that was non-prescriptive, non-intrusive and non-hegemonic, characteristics that were particularly valued by the kingdom, given its unique political order. India was also admired for its economic and technological achievements within a democratic and pluralistic order, particularly in the IT sector. More mundanely, through the 1990s, India’s economic reforms had yielded high national growth rates and made it a major buyer of Gulf oil.

With Jaswant Singh’s visit, the positive impact of the opening with India was felt within a few weeks: an Indian business delegation that visited the kingdom in May 2001 was approached by hundreds of Saudi business persons in the cities of Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam; two years earlier, this same team had not met more than ten persons in each city.

High-level political interactions were briefly interrupted by the events of 9/11 that year, when the kingdom had to use all its resources to re-engage with the US and other Western nations, and re-affirm its traditional alliance. However, soon thereafter, King Abdullah was the chief guest at India’s Republic Day celebrations in January 2006, the first visit by a Saudi monarch to India since 1955. On arrival, the king said that India was his ‘second home’ and proceeded to sign with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh the Delhi Declaration, which stated that India and Saudi Arabia were ‘strategic energy partners’. This fresh opening with Saudi Arabia had

reverberations across the region: in the period, the head of state or government of every GCC country visited India.

The evolution of the Indo-Saudi ‘strategic energy partnership’ to ‘strategic partnership’, achieved in 2010, is a story in itself. The long interaction with Pakistan through the Cold War had led to the senior royals of Saudi Arabia accepting the Pakistani view that India was forcibly keeping the Kashmiri people within its territories against their will. Hence, the violence in the state since 1989, described by India as a jihad promoted by Pakistan, was in fact seen by GCC leaders as the insurgency of an angry and bitter people rebelling against Indian domination.

Despite the best efforts of successive ambassadors in the kingdom, the royals would not be persuaded that the Kashmir issue was a historic legacy and was already being discussed between the two countries. What we were witnessing in Kashmir and other parts of India was a jihad sponsored by Pakistani state agencies as an instrument of state policy to harm India’s interests. It took the deadly attacks on Mumbai in November 2008 to change Saudi perceptions and confirm what Indian diplomats had been saying for years.

As the attacks unfolded over three days, they were followed closely on television across the region by a stunned and deeply apprehensive Gulf community. They saw for themselves that the attacks were jihadi in character; the perpetrators had come from Pakistan; they had clearly been indoctrinated and trained by Pakistani agencies, which had also provided them with logistical support and weaponry to carry out their assaults. And, above all, these attacks had nothing to do with the Kashmir issue – as the bodies of murdered innocents piled up at different locales, it was obvious that the extremists were only intent on inflicting wanton damage on ordinary people.

The most important effect of these attacks in the Gulf was one of deep concern – all the GCC countries had long coastlines and many were much closer to Karachi than Mumbai. They were all potential targets of jihadi attacks planned and directed from Pakistan.

The 26/11 attacks in Mumbai thus created a shared understanding between India and the GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia, that we all confronted the same enemy and that we were all equally vulnerable. Flowing from this perception, during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Riyadh in February 2010, he and King Abdullah signed the Riyadh Declaration that had the subheading 'A New Era of Strategic Partnership'. India and Saudi Arabia became partners in the area of counterterrorism, and began to share real-time information relating to the movement and activities of extremists in the region.

King Abdullah went a step further: he understood that strategic ties acquire a long-term value if they are anchored in solid economic partnerships; accordingly, he instructed Saudi businesses to prioritize ties with India. This led to several business delegations visiting India and seeking opportunities for investments and joint ventures. At the same time, recruitment of Indians continued to expand: by 2020, Indians in the kingdom were well over 3 million, while they were over 8 million in the GCC countries collectively. They were the largest expatriate community in every GCC country, and the majority community in three countries – the UAE, Qatar and Bahrain. The Indian community in the Gulf remitted home \$35 billion annually.

The GCC also became the principal source of India's oil imports: it provided about 40 per cent of India's oil imports, with Saudi Arabia's share being about 18 per cent. The GCC also became India's principal trade partners, being in the top three globally in terms of India's trade with economic groupings: India-GCC trade has gone up from \$33 billion in 2000-01 to \$121 billion 2018-19.

Thus, nearly a decade after the opening created by Jaswant Singh and Prince Saud Al Faisal, India and the kingdom had fully reversed their earlier estrangement, and had become political and economic partners.

Israel

After the Cold War, India's relations with Israel witnessed the same sea change that had occurred with Saudi Arabia. The roots of this new engagement lay in India's economic crisis of the early 1990s. India had initiated economic reforms in the early days of the Narasimha Rao government, which were spearheaded by his finance minister, Dr Manmohan Singh. The French scholar of Indian foreign policy, Nicolas Blarel has pointed out that India's need for financial assistance and investments from the IMF, the World Bank and the US was the principal factor in pushing its opening with Israel; the Indian government knew that better ties with the country would promote more enthusiastic US backing for India.²⁵

In December 1991, India supported the US move to revoke UNGA Resolution 3379 that had equated Zionism with racism. In January 1992, India announced the establishment of diplomatic ties with Israel, finally bridging the gap since its recognition of the country in 1950.

From the outset, defence ties have been an important component of this relationship. India's former air chief, Air Chief Marshal N.A.K. Browne has said that, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, India needed foreign assistance to upgrade its weapons capability and access the latest technology. Israel's advantages were 'its experience with weapons and systems of both the former Cold War blocs, the no-questions-asked policy that governs its arms trade, its reputation as a reliable supplier coupled with its expertise in technological innovation and upgradation skills'.²⁶

In the early stages, these ties had to address issues relating to technology transfer since some of the weaponry was based on technology that Israel had developed with US companies. But the US did not prove to be a hindrance in the expansion of Israel's ties with India – after India's nuclear tests in 1998, while the US imposed sanctions that banned the export of defence material and technology, an Israeli team visited India to promote the sale of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), as also electronic equipment for aircraft. These deals went through despite US objections that they violated arms control treaties.

These were followed by the sale to India of the Phalcon Airborne Warning and Control System (popularly known as AWACS), valued at \$1 billion. Earlier, in 2000, the US had forced Israel to cancel a similar contract with China. This time, India and Israel lobbied jointly in the US, and obtained approval in 2003. Blarel has noted that, in these lobbying efforts, India ‘actively engaged American Jewish organisations to gain the approval of the US administration’, while India–US organizations promoting India’s interests have also established close ties with bodies like the influential American-Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC) to strengthen the country’s relations with the superpower.²⁷ From the mid-2010s, as India began to diversify its weapons purchases, US and Israeli companies also began to compete with each other – particularly in regard to the anti-tank missile systems.²⁸

These defence ties with Israel proved particularly useful during the Kargil conflict in 1999, when Israel supplied the Indian army around 40,000 rounds of 155 mm and 30,000 rounds of 160-mm mortar ammunition, as also laser-guided bombs and UAVs. Recalling Israeli support during the 1965 and 1971 wars, and the later Kargil conflict, President Pranab Mukherjee said, during his visit to Israel in October 2015, that they had backed India ‘when India needed them the most’.²⁹

Iran

From the Indian perspective, ties with Iran have considerable strategic value, since its ports give it access to logistical connectivity with Afghanistan, Central Asia and Russia, bypassing Pakistan. The two countries were partners in the 1990s in backing the Northern Alliance against the Taliban, and even today share concerns relating to the burgeoning extremist groups in Pakistan, which have initiated attacks both against India as also in Iran’s Sistan–Baluchistan province that borders Pakistan. Again, as a major oil and gas producer, Iran is a significant partner for India’s energy security interests. These considerations pulled the countries towards one another after the Cold War.

As India attempted to reform its economy in the 1990s, it attached great importance to ties with Iran as a major energy supplier and economic partner. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited Tehran in 1993, with a return visit by President Rafsanjani in 1995. India then signed the agreement with Iran and Russia to set up the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) that would link India with an Iranian port (initially Bandar Abbas, and later Chabahar) and then move northwards through Azerbaijan to Moscow.

This momentum in bilateral relations was maintained with the visit of Prime Minister Vajpayee to Iran in 2001 and the return visit of President Khatami in January 2003, as chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations. During the Vajpayee visit, the two countries signed the Tehran Declaration which affirmed that 'only an equitable, pluralistic and cooperative international order can address effectively the challenges of our era'.³⁰

This was taken forward in the Delhi Declaration of 2003. It stated that relations of the two countries were founded on:

... a vision of a strategic partnership for a more stable, secure and prosperous region and for enhanced regional and global cooperation [and to] explore opportunities for cooperation in defence in agreed areas, including training and exchange of visits.³¹

The declaration envisaged cooperation in sea-lane security, joint naval exercises, upgrading of Iran's defence systems, and the setting up of a joint working group on counterterrorism and drug trafficking. The two countries also agreed to expand their cooperation in third countries – a reference to Afghanistan. Noting that their strategic convergence needed to be underpinned by a strong economic relationship, they also agreed to develop the Chabahar port, the Chabahar–Fahranj-Bam railway link, and the Iran–Pakistan–India gas pipeline.³²

However, despite the strategic value of the relationship, bilateral ties have been regularly affected by Iran's deteriorating relations with the US

and Israel, and the sanctions imposed on it, which are made applicable to third countries' ties with the Islamic Republic. India has made several attempts to balance its commitments to the US with maintaining its interests in Iran, but these have rarely worked out successfully.

The first signs of difficulty appeared during Indo-US negotiations on the civil nuclear cooperation agreement, commencing from 2005. In September 2005, India voted with the US on an IAEA resolution that found Iran non-compliant, though India clarified:

In our Explanation of Vote, we have clearly expressed our opposition to Iran being declared as non-compliant with its safeguards agreements. Nor do we agree that that the current situation could constitute a threat to international peace and security.³³

In February 2006, when India voted to refer Iran's non-compliance to the UNSC, its explanation was even more unconvincing:

While there will be a report to the Security Council, the Iran nuclear issue remains within the purview of the IAEA. It has been our consistent position that confrontation should be avoided and any outstanding issue ought to be resolved through dialogue ... Our vote in favour of the Resolution should not be interpreted as in any way detracting from the traditionally close and friendly relations we enjoy with Iran.³⁴

The reason for this laboured wordplay was that India's discussions with the US on the nuclear agreement were taking place within the framework of the US's Henry J Hyde United States-India Peaceful Atomic Energy Cooperation Act of 2006: this provided that the president would need to certify that India's foreign policy was 'congruent to that of the US's, and that India was joining US efforts to isolate and even sanction Iran. Article 3 (b4) says the president should:

... secure India's full and active participation in United States efforts to dissuade, isolate, and, if necessary, sanction and contain Iran for its efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction, including a nuclear weapons capability ... and the means to deliver weapons of mass destruction.³⁵

After the signing of the Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement with the US on 2 March 2006, India pursued re-engagement with Iran with External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee visiting Tehran in February 2007. The Indian minister upheld Iran's right to continue its peaceful civilian nuclear energy programme, but also cautioned the Islamic Republic to remain sensitive to prevailing opinion and avoid 'any further escalation of tension'.

But bilateral relations remained hostage to US sanctions. Initially, India attempted to resist sanctions on its purchases of Iranian oil through alternative banking channels, as also by using the Indian rupee as currency for payment. However, the Obama administration insisted on a significant decrease in India's oil imports. India complied with this: the value of India's oil imports fell from a high of \$11.76 billion in 2011-12 to \$4.46 billion in 2015-16, while the share of Iranian oil in India's total oil imports during this period decreased from 9 per cent to 6.7 per cent.³⁶

During, India worked closely with Iran and Pakistan to realize the tripartite Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline. It was envisaged that this 1,800-km pipeline, valued at about \$7 billion in initial investment, would carry natural gas from the Iranian coastal town of Asaluyeh to Pakistan and then terminate at the Indian border, where it would join India's domestic gas grid. This project was viewed as a win-win for all three countries – Iran would get to sell its gas; Pakistan, primarily dependent on gas for its energy needs, would be able to make up for shortages in its domestic production, while India would use the gas to set up power plants across electricity-starved north-west India.

Though this gas pipeline project was the first experience for Pakistan and India to examine such a high-value and complex transnational project, over two years of discussions between officials and later ministers yielded

remarkable progress in finalizing the technical aspects of the pipeline, its routing across Iran and Pakistan, its safety features, and even the price of the gas at the Iran–Pakistan border. All that remained by end-2006 was for India and Pakistan to determine the details and cost of the additional security measures to be taken in Pakistan to protect the project, which would determine the cost of the gas at the Indian border.

The Americans did attempt, through their embassy in Delhi, to persuade India to withdraw from the project, but the Indian side remained committed to it. However, it failed to take off eventually – and this had everything to do with Pakistan’s domestic politics and not US pressure. From early 2007, Pakistan’s president, General Pervez Musharraf, began to lose his grip over the country and started making mistakes in handling domestic challenges. As he became more vulnerable, he was persuaded to accept a political partnership with his arch-rival, Benazir Bhutto. Her assassination in December 2007, followed by the fall of Musharraf as president in August 2008, made it clear that the country would be too unstable to guarantee the safety of the pipeline. Finally, the attack on Mumbai in November 2008 ended all prospects of a project that involved Indo-Pakistan cooperation.

The Modi Period: Towards Strategic Partnerships

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has outdistanced all his predecessors in the frequency of his personal interactions with West Asian leaders, and the results he has obtained have imparted to the ties both variety and substance. In his first term as prime minister, in 2015-16 he visited the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Qatar, and hosted at home the Abu Dhabi crown prince, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. In January 2019, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi was the chief guest at India’s Republic Day celebrations. In February 2018, Modi went to Palestine, the UAE and Oman. And, then, early in his second term as prime minister from May 2019, he visited the UAE and Bahrain.

The GCC Countries

Modi's engagement with the GCC countries had two broad features: one, to go beyond the traditional ties of energy, trade and investment, and explore new areas for bilateral cooperation. And, two, to impart a greater strategic content to the relationships.

Thus, in pursuit of new areas for cooperation, the joint statement issued after Modi's visit to Riyadh in April 2016, besides referring to pursuing ties in the traditional areas of energy, trade and investment, also identified new areas: renewable energy, space technology, desert ecology, biotechnology, and information and communications technology. Other joint statements noted frontier areas such as food security, education and skill development, defence industry, electronics, and digitization, including cyber security, innovation, and support for start-ups. To take these initiatives forward, the UAE set up a fund to invest in India's infrastructure development, while Saudi Arabia offered \$100 billion for the same purpose.

Since then, there has been considerable forward movement: in the traditional areas, the national oil companies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Aramco and Adnoc, have agreed to jointly invest \$44 billion in a new refinery in western India. Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), is the one going into frontier areas. It is seeking to invest \$1.5 billion in Jio Platforms, India's leading telecommunications and digital services company. PIF has also supported the 'Vision Fund' of SoftBank, which has made investments of several billion dollars in Indian start-ups such as Delhivery, Firstcry, Grofers, Ola, Paytm and Policybazaar.³⁷

Every visit of the prime minister emphasized the centrality of strategic partnerships, founded on the high degree of shared perceptions and approaches on security issues. Thus, the 2015 joint statement with the UAE mentioned 'shared threats to peace, stability and security', and sought a 'shared endeavour' to address these concerns. It referred to the need for the two countries to establish a 'close strategic partnership', and called upon

them to ‘work together to promote [regional] peace, reconciliation and stability’.

Similarly, the joint statement with Saudi Arabia of April 2016 recalled the words of the joint communique issued in Riyadh in 1982, after Indira Gandhi’s visit, and noted ‘the close interlinkage of the stability and security of the Gulf region and the Indian sub-continent and the need for maintaining a secure and peaceful environment for the development of the countries of the region’.³⁸

Following from this, it spoke of the two countries’ responsibility to promote peace, security and stability in the region. It also called on the two nations ‘to strengthen maritime security in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean region’.

India and Saudi Arabia have since set up a ‘Strategic Partnership Council’, headed by the Indian prime minister and the Saudi crown prince. This council met in Riyadh in October 2019 and set up two bodies at the ministerial level: one dealing with political, security and socio-cultural matters, and the other dealing with economic and investment issues. These bodies are backed by several working groups that meet regularly.

Iran: ‘Maximum Pressure’

Modi paid a high-profile visit to Iran in May 2016. There, he signed the agreement for India to develop the Chabahar port and then, with the participation of the then Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, signed a tripartite agreement to link Chabahar with Zahedan by rail. The projects approved were:

- A contract for the development and operation of two terminals and five berths at Chabahar, spread across ten years.
- The extension of credit lines of \$500 million for the port and of ₹3,000 crore (\$500 million) for importing steel rails and the implementation of the port.

- MoUs on the provision of services by Indian Railways, including financing to the tune of \$1.6 billion, for the Chabahar–Zahedan railway line – which is also a part of the trilateral agreement between India, Iran and Afghanistan on a transit and trade corridor.

However, within a year, Donald Trump was in the White House and all these agreements came to nought.

Even as India's ties with Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries have flourished, US sanctions on Iran have severely restricted Indo-Iranian relations. The 'maximum pressure' policy of the Trump administration, which required that imports of Iranian oil be reduced to zero from May 2019, meant that the country moved from being the number-two oil exporter to India to the status of a non-supplier.

Again, though the US granted a waiver to the development of the Chabahar port, it became very difficult to pursue construction activity, since international companies were afraid of being subjected to US sanctions. These sanctions also curtailed trade ties with Iran, so that activity at Chabahar was drastically reduced. Perhaps due to the absence of any progress in developing this port, in July 2020, Iran announced that its own companies would be executing the Chabahar–Zahedan railway line. Iran diplomatically said that the Indian companies could rejoin the project at a later stage.

These negative developments have created fresh challenges for India. In July-August 2020, Iranian media and the *New York Times* carried reports of a wide-ranging and ambitious twenty-five-year 'comprehensive strategic partnership' agreement between Iran and China that would involve a Chinese investment of about \$400 billion in Iran's energy, infrastructure, industrial and defence sectors.³⁹ There are also reports of closer links between the Chabahar and Gwadar ports, and even an extension of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects to connect with Iran and Afghanistan.

These reports, even if timed to project to the US that the two countries on its hit list are pursuing important ties with each other, should ring alarm bells in India. The former US diplomat Philip H. Gordon has written that even the partial implementation of the agreement ‘would signal a major escalation in the US strategic competition with China and blow a hole in the administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran at the same time’.⁴⁰ US-based commentators on West Asia, Ross Harrison and Alex Vatanka have noted that both Iran and China share the motivation ‘to push back against US efforts in the Middle East’, and that these two countries could be cooperating across the Eurasian landscape – from the Mediterranean to Syria to Central Asia, the Caspian and the Gulf.⁴¹

Israel: Defence and Beyond

Modi brought to ties with Israel a long history of personal engagement. He had visited Israel in 2006 as the chief minister of Gujarat, and had encouraged Israeli investments and technology in his state’s agricultural, dairy and irrigation sectors. As prime minister, he not only strengthened ties with Israel beyond defence, but also made the interactions more overt – ending the earlier practice of having covert official engagements with the country.

Israel remains a major source of India’s niche defence requirements, particularly in the area of missiles, including the joint development of long-range surface-to-air missiles (LRSAM) for the Indian and Israeli navies, and of medium-range surface-to-air missiles (MRSAM) for the Indian air force. Beyond defence, India and Israel are partners in other high-tech areas relating to agriculture, health, biotechnology, nanotechnology, desalination, waste-water recycling, and waste management and reprocessing. From 2018, a new area for bilateral cooperation that emerged was that of energy with the signing of an MoU of cooperation in the oil and gas sectors.⁴²

During his first visit to Israel as prime minister in July 2017, the first by a sitting Indian Prime Minister, Modi signalled that India’s ties with Israel would be ‘de-hyphenated’ from its interactions with the Palestine Authority.

He did this by not visiting Ramallah, as had been the practice of Indian leaders till then. But he tried to balance the two relationships: he received the president of Palestine, Mahmoud Abbas, in Delhi, in May 2017, before his visit to Israel; he then paid a separate, standalone visit to Palestine in February 2018, a month after Netanyahu's visit to India.

Despite the obvious bonhomie between Modi and Netanyahu, some commentators have struck notes of caution. On the eve of Netanyahu's visit, the Israeli daily, *Haaretz* carried an article headlined: 'India wants an affair when it comes to Israel, not a serious relationship'. The writer, Orshit Birvadker, attempted to explain to her readers that India took 'balanced positions' between Israel and Palestine because it wished to assert its 'political independence' in international affairs. She also recommended that, while ties with Israel enjoyed bipartisan support in India, the two sides should 'remain pragmatic in their engagement with each other and not allow sentiment to cloud their decisions'.⁴³

On the same lines, Indian commentator Mohan Guruswamy wrote on the expanding bilateral defence ties just after Modi's visit to Israel, 'They [the Israelis] are not doing us any favours. It's all hard cash and the rest is Israeli guile.'⁴⁴

At this point, it would be useful to discuss a diplomatic initiative that has brought India into a new West Asian 'minilateral' – the Quad 2.

The 'Quad 2': Strategic Game-Changer?

A regional cooperative initiative that has obtained considerable attention in the Indian media is being referred to as 'Quad 2' by commentators in Delhi. Briefly, on 18 October 2021, when the Indian external affairs minister, Dr S Jaishankar, was on a visit to Israel, he and his Israeli counterpart, Yair Lapid, joined the UAE minister of foreign affairs, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, and the US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, in a virtual four-way conversation. This meeting had been preceded by a meeting in Washington on 13 October of the ministers from the US, Israel

and the UAE to commemorate the so-called 'Abraham Accords' finalized a year ago.

By joining this trio on 18 October, India appeared to be signalling its participation in a new regional quartet, referred to in Indian media as a 'minilateral'. And, since this meeting took place soon after the summit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in September 2021, which had brought together the US, Japan, Australia and India, it was natural to view the new quartet as 'Quad 2' since it included two countries from 'Quad 1'. What we know so far is that the Quad 2 will focus on cooperation in trade, climate change, energy and maritime security, and that the four ministers have set up a joint working group to coordinate progress on these subjects.

Indian media have exhibited a high level of enthusiasm for this new entity – seeing it, variously, as a 'strategic shift in the Middle East'; as India and the US taking on China with this Quad; India finding 'a new role in a changing Middle East', and, finally, the Quad providing a 'significant impetus to India's prominence in West Asia'. A Pakistani commentator has pointed out that Quad 2 indicates a 'massive geo-political expansion of the US's containment strategy' directed at China, while a Gulf scholar, Hasan Al-Hasan, highlighting the importance that India has traditionally placed on its ties with Iran, has also pointed out that 'the palpable threat posed by China' has pushed India into taking sides in West Asian rivalries, though, he believes, India will attempt to balance its relations with Iran with its close links with the US.

However, in public remarks that are likely to embarrass India, the Israeli ambassador in India, Naor Gilon, said that, while Quad 2 was not against any one country, one of the major factors bringing the four countries together was the instability caused in the region by Iran. The Iranian embassy in Delhi responded with a sharp statement – referring to the 'alleged childish remarks of the adventurous envoy', it recalled that Israel is 'a terror house in which its illegitimate establishment has been rooted in bloodshed, assassination and massacre of Palestinians and other nations in the Middle East'.⁴⁵

What is missing in most of the discussion is any serious analysis about this initiative – its timing, what it implies for regional politics, and what realistically could be India’s role in it. The following observations may be noted in this regard:

- There are grave uncertainties about the US’s role in West Asia, as also its approach to the challenge posed by China to the US-led world order. Hence, to believe that Quad 2 is a well-thought-out US-led strategy to ‘contain’ China is premature.
- India itself fits in very poorly in a minilateral that has a regional security content. For the last three decades, India’s approach to West Asia has been based on two guiding principles – its approach to ties with the regional states has been bilateral and transactional. This has enabled India to maintain relations with all the nations of West Asia, despite the contentions between them. While it has been argued later in this chapter that there is need for a review of India’s approach to the region, it is not suggested that India affiliate itself with one grouping or the other in the contentious region. Thus, there is no prospect of India picking and choosing as between the Sunni, Shia and/or Jewish states in the region; its ties with Iran will remain important, though subject to the vagaries of US policies periodically.
- Flowing from the point above, India is not and is not likely to be a security-provider in West Asia; there is no indication that India is looking at aligning with a larger grouping with has a regional security agenda.
- It is important to recognize the limits of the so-called ‘Abraham Accords’ – only four Arab nations have joined them; these accords enjoy no popular support in most countries of West Asia. The ‘normalization’ of ties with Israel by four states (besides Egypt and Jordan earlier) highlights not so much the steady inclusion of Israel in regional affairs as the persisting divide between the rulers concerned and their people. Israel is still and will remain an outsider in West Asian affairs until it reaches a settlement with the Palestinians.
- The issues identified for deeper cooperation among the Quad 2 members are already being addressed at other platforms; Quad 2

hardly brings any additionality to the ongoing dialogue on these subjects.

- It is absurd to mention the ‘containment’ of China by Quad 2 collectively or its members individually. All West Asian states, without exception, have the closest possible ties with China – economic, political, cultural and logistical – even as most of them are enthusiastic participants in China’s Belt and Road Initiative, the Digital Silk Road Initiative and Health Silk Road Initiative. Both Israel and the UAE have cemented their substantial ties with China with formal agreements – Israel entered into the ‘Innovative Comprehensive Partnership’ with China in 2017, while the UAE and China signed the ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’ in 2018, the highest level of ties that China has with foreign partners. As the UK-based scholar, Guy Barton has pointed out, Quad 2 could, at best, evolve into a platform for ‘greater commercial cooperation rather than transform geopolitics’.⁴⁶

The US too is more interested in ‘managing’ its relations with China, and has no interest in a direct confrontation. It is very likely that high-level dialogues between the two countries in coming months will address many issues that divide them and prepare the ground for better management of bilateral relations.

My view of the ‘Quad 2’ conclave is that there is no strategic interest that actually binds the quartet. As argued above, this grouping can hardly be the platform to confront Iran, as Israel would like, or China, as India or the US would like to suggest, possibly complementing ‘Quad 1’ whose base of operations is the Indo-Pacific.

The conclave, put together rather hastily after the 13 October meeting in Washington, was a public relations necessity for its core participants – the US, Israel and the UAE. The Biden administration, under pressure from domestic constituencies, felt the need to ‘celebrate’ the Abraham Accords, even though they serve no US interest and have negligible resonance across West Asia. The administration also needed some fresh diversion to make up for the fiasco accompanying its exit from Afghanistan.

The new government in Tel Aviv was anxious to affirm to its people that some ‘important’ Arab states had normalized ties with it, without seeking any concessions from the government on behalf of the Palestinians. And the UAE, by joining a high-level and high-profile conclave, could project to its people its special status in the region and convey to the Americans (and the Israel lobby in the US) that it represents modern and moderate Islam and is the emerging bastion of high-technology.

India joined in to project at home that, despite the eighteen-month stand-off at the border with China and bad publicity being given globally to domestic contentions in different parts of the country, it remains a sought-after associate in important global counsels. This was theatre as an end in itself, and served no real Indian interest.

India is a misfit in this entity. Thankfully, it will very likely wither away under the weight of its own irrelevance.

The West Asian Security Scenario

Every one of the joint statements that were issued after Modi’s visits to West Asian capitals refer to the two countries’ ‘strategic partnership’ in the context of the regional security scenario, and affirm ‘their responsibility for promoting peace, stability and security in the region’. Some statements specifically refer to cooperation to promote maritime security in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Despite these clear pronouncements, neither India nor any of its partners have made any effort to address the various security issues that bedevil their shared strategic space. It seems that the interest of the countries concerned is to continue the bilateral and transactional nature of engagements that has defined ties over the last few decades.

This approach is outdated and serves no useful purpose – particularly since the security interests of South Asia and West Asia are interlinked. This had been noted by India and Saudi Arabia as long ago as 1982 and was reiterated in the joint statement of 2016, nearly thirty-five years later.

A holistic approach to address issues of regional security is mandated by several factors:

- The entire landscape from India to the Mediterranean, and thence across North Africa, constitutes a seamlessly connected security space. With regard to Afghanistan – which the US has just vacated – India, Pakistan, Iran and the GCC countries have deep concerns about stability and peace in the country, and fears that it could become a sanctuary for extremist elements. Again, several countries, regional and extra-regional, are involved in the Syrian and Yemeni conflicts, while nations from the Gulf, West Asia and North Africa are playing a direct political and military role in Libya. Thus, peace efforts to address these contentions have necessarily to be regional rather than local.
- Due to civil conflict, state order has broken down in several regional states, which has made them the arena for sectarian conflicts by proxy; Syria, Yemen and Iraq have become battlegrounds for such contentions.
- Regional conflicts have encouraged the proliferation of extremist forces: though the Al Qaeda and ISIS are no longer as lethal as they once were, their pernicious influence remains, and several attacks by so-called ‘lone-wolf’ radicals inspired by them continue to take place in different parts of West and South Asia, and even in Europe. For instance, even an obscure entity like ‘Islamic State – Khorasan’ was able to carry out a suicide bombing at Kabul airport in end-August 2021, in which nearly 200 persons, including thirteen US soldiers, were killed.
- The US is showing little enthusiasm to be the gendarmerie in West Asia: presidents, as different from each other as Obama, Trump and Biden, have advocated the same idea – that regional states assume responsibility for regional security.
- The pandemic has accelerated trends that were in nascent form earlier, i.e., the reshaping of world order, with China and Russia jointly asserting a new role for themselves at the head of the global high table. While the outcome of these assertions remains unclear, it can safely be concluded that the regional and global scenarios will certainly be turbulent as – with the US on one side, and China and Russia on the other – the major players will seek partners to buttress their positions, particularly in South and West Asia. This will

aggravate ongoing regional contentions and make the region even more unstable.

Today, the biggest problem for those concerned with security issues is the fact that the new order could be both binary and confrontational – as exemplified by the term ‘New Cold War’ that is being increasingly applied to the emerging global scenario. The Trump administration certainly contributed to this through its policies of militarizing foreign relations at home and adopting the rhetoric of confrontation with China, but the origins of this binary predate him by a few years.

In this background, West Asia calls for a new approach to addressing regional security concerns.

Regional Cooperative Security Arrangements

In January 2021, two distinguished scholars, Dr Abdulaziz Sager of Saudi Arabia and Hossein Mousavian from Iran, wrote a joint article in *The Guardian*, in which they called for dialogue between the leaders of their countries. This was a follow-up to their earlier joint article with the same message written two years ago. They noted that since then, the regional security situation had deteriorated and pointed out that ‘we remain at the mercy of a single miscalculation that could turn the protracted cold war between our states hot’, with disastrous consequences for the region.⁴⁷

To avoid misunderstandings and to get over mutual suspicions, the writers recommended a direct dialogue between their leaders. To ensure that the dialogue would be fruitful, they set out a number of ‘fundamentals’ that should inform the interaction. These included mutual respect, respect for national borders, non-interference in internal affairs and rejection of the use of force, rejection of sectarian divisions, freedom of navigation, and prohibition of development or procurement of WMDs by both sides. While accepting that Biden’s presidency offered the opportunity for a ‘new

beginning’, Sager and Mousavian recommended urgent action to initiate dialogue.

The Saudi–Iran interactions that have been taking place since April 2021 and the statement from the Saudi crown prince that he wants ‘good relations’ with Iran would suggest that the writers’ words have been heeded. However, given the sense of an ‘existential’ threat that the kingdom perceives from Iran and the deep bitterness that has accumulated between them over the last decade, aggravated by barbarous, though inconclusive, proxy conflicts in Syria and Yemen – it is not surprising that no movement forward has been announced so far, not even the restoration of diplomatic relations.

It would appear that both sides were awaiting two developments, both related to the Biden presidency: the Saudis were trying to fathom the attitude of the new president towards them, while the Iranians were wondering whether the JCPOA would be quickly revived and some easing of sanctions would follow. Both sides have reason to be disappointed. This leaves the responsibility of addressing the issues that divide them squarely upon the two countries themselves. The new Iranian president, Ebrahim Raisi, has attempted to improve the atmosphere by saying, at his first press conference, that improving relations with his Gulf neighbours will be a priority for him.

There are added reasons for concern. Alastair Crooke, the head of Conflicts Forum, has pointed to the strides that Iran has made in developing sophisticated drones that are not easily detectable by American defensive facilities, thus depriving the US of its coercive leverage against Iran.⁴⁸ US-based West Asia scholars, Vali Nasr and Maria Fantappie have written about the proliferation of new missile and drone technologies in the region. They also note that, while Iran needs to boost regional confidence in its intentions, it also needs the reciprocal assurance that the JCPOA, once revived, will not again be subverted by the US. Iran would also like to see the end of the debilitating efforts being made by the US and its Gulf allies to foment disharmony among its minorities.⁴⁹ All of this make a regional peace process an urgent necessity.

There is no dearth of good advice on how to move forward. The Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG), in its report of April 2020, said the region was ‘in as dangerous a condition as it has been in its modern history’ and that ‘a single incident could spark an escalation’.⁵⁰ It called for the revival of ‘a collective and inclusive security dialogue’ to reduce prevailing tensions, and eventually lead to a ‘collective and inclusive regional security arrangement’. It regretted that, while some governments had floated initiatives, none of them had taken ‘decisive steps’ to take the peace process forward. The ICG report then set out a step-by-step approach to address issues of concern to the principal players and some basic principles that should guide the peacemakers. Beyond suggesting that the peace process could be initiated by ‘coalitions of the willing’ or ‘groups of friends’, the report could not be specific in regard to the lead players.

Another proposal has come from ‘Tafahum’ (‘mutual understanding’ in Arabic), which is a Track-II joint peace initiative of the Centre for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO) and the Gulf Research Centre Foundation. Its brief of July 2019, authored by Christian Koch and Adnan Tabatabai, sets out steps towards promoting trust between the regional antagonists – Saudi Arabia and Iran. It gives the EU a central role in this initiative, though the authors themselves recognize that the EU has neither a clear idea of its role nor of the strategy it should adopt.⁵¹

A more recent peace proposal is from the American scholars Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan.⁵² They note that several influential US commentators have called for the US to ‘do less’ in West Asia since it (the region) ‘isn’t worth it’, and that the Trump approach to the region has been ‘incoherent’ – wanting US soldiers to leave from there while getting increasingly tough with Iran. The authors advocate that the US approach should be ‘to try using aggressive diplomacy to produce more sustainable results’. While the peace proposals suggested are in line with standard approaches from other writers, what these authors miss out on is the very low credibility the US has as a regional peacemaker, with its long history of resorting to military force to obtain ends that were frequently unclear even to its own policymakers.

In July 2019, Russia published its West Asia peace proposal, titled ‘Russia’s security concept for the Gulf area’.⁵³ It provided for an incremental approach that would finally put in place a collective security system in the region. The principles informing the initiative would be:

- It would be shaped as a ‘single counterterrorism coalition’ that would bring in all the stakeholders.
- It would function under the rubric of the UN and all its peacemaking operations would be based on UN resolutions.
- States in the region would be active participants in the peace process: they would commit themselves to the peaceful settlement of disputes, they would maintain military transparency, and accept arms and non-proliferation regimes.
- Regional peace would be guaranteed by a ‘security and cooperation organization’ which, besides the Gulf countries, would include Russia, China, India, the US, the EU and other stakeholders.

In a recent paper, the author of this book has proposed that India, supported by like-minded countries with an abiding interest in regional peace, become the peacemakers to lead the process. The paper proposes that the process would carefully adapt the principles offered by the Peace of Westphalia to address the issues thrown up by regional contentions in West Asia. (These principles have been discussed in some detail by distinguished scholars of West Asia and medieval Europe.)⁵⁴ The proposed application of these principles is presented in this author’s paper.⁵⁵

Briefly, the next steps would be:

- Track 2 and Track 1.5 discussions will be organized by the peacemakers to identify the issues/concerns that divide the region.
- Appointment of special envoys by the peacemakers, who, with a UN special envoy, would work with interlocutors in regional capitals to shape confidence-building measures (CBMs); the CBMs to facilitate

these discussions would be the ‘fundamentals’ set out in the article by Sager and Mousavian, discussed above.

- Based on these CBMs, Iranian and Saudi envoys would meet each other, with the peacemakers providing their good offices to take their conversations forward. These discussions would be facilitated by ceasefire arrangements in Syria, Yemen and Libya, the return of displaced persons, humanitarian assistance and the restoration of essential services in war-torn areas.
- The principal focus of the Iran–Saudi negotiations would be to address their competition in Syria, Yemen and Iraq; and the best way forward would be for external interventions to end, and the conflictual states encouraged to shape their own political destinies.

The conference to discuss collective regional security would be a prolonged diplomatic effort that would bring together all stakeholders committed to regional peace. This will be a lengthy process, as had been the case at Westphalia, and test the patience, acumen and imagination of all the diplomats involved.

So far, one major impediment to addressing regional security issues holistically had been the comfort that GCC states had derived from the security umbrella that the US had provided for them. This had led them to reject out of hand the Russian collective security proposal put forward in July 2019, as also the Iranian proposal, ‘Hormuz Peace Endeavour’, or HOPE, presented by President Rouhani in his address at the UNGA in September 2019. (This had called for all the eight littoral states of the Gulf to discuss issues of security, freedom of navigation and other matters of mutual concern.) Now that the US is no longer viewed as a credible security-provider, the opportunity has emerged for the littoral nations to commence some interactions among themselves towards shaping a regional security arrangement.

The order in which India and West Asian nations could complacently pursue their security interests on a bilateral and transactional basis is now in retreat as more uncertain and contentious regional and global scenarios are

emerging. These developments call for new ideas and new approaches – indeed, what academics would call a new ‘strategic culture’ that shapes a vision for regional peace and, to realize it, a strategic approach that is holistic in perception and long-term in its application.

12

The West Asian Malaise and Outlook for the Region



AS WEST ASIA CROSSES THREE-QUARTERS OF A CENTURY SINCE THE END OF the Second World War, it presents a picture of confrontation and conflict both within and between regional states, as well as sustained interventions in regional affairs by external players. These interventions are accompanied by periodic military assaults that enhance the fragility of the states, and aggravate insecurity and instability across the region by deepening existing fault lines and giving rise to new bases for contention.

Three forces have shaped this regional system in turmoil: the persistent ‘weakness’ of most regional states, the absence of a region-wide, consensually accepted regional security arrangement, and the robust activism of external powers – primarily the US since the 1970s – in dividing regional states into allies and enemies. The US has translated this binary into hostile postures against the enemy, while accommodating the excesses and abuses of friends at home and in the region, even when they adversely impact on the US’s own interests, standing and credibility. These three forces are, of course, deeply intertwined and constantly influence each

other, resulting in further turbulence and uncertainty, as well as greater regional disorder and, frequently, bloody conflict.

The Socio-economic Malaise

Foreign affairs' studies rightly tend to focus on the interplay between regional state powers and the influence of major players from outside the region on their conduct. Such studies, by their very nature, concentrate their scrutiny on public statements of government leaders and state institutions, and attempt to tease out from these official pronouncements and actions an understanding of the drivers of national policy and where the states concerned are headed.

Such an approach is not particularly helpful in studying the dynamics of West Asian affairs. For positions on regional issues and actions taken by leaders are usually the result of the domestic situations in the countries concerned, which are themselves the product of the nature of the state order. At the root of the sense of persistent instability and conflict across the region is the socio-economic malaise that afflicts most West Asian states with three maladies – poverty, inequality and injustice.

Beyond the dazzle of Dubai, Doha and Riyadh, it comes as an unpleasant shock to learn how pervasive poverty is in the Arab world. According to a report of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) of January 2019, in ten Arab states, 116 million people were poor (41 per cent), while another 25 per cent were vulnerable to poverty. Extrapolating from these figures, it would appear that 66 per cent of the Arab population, i.e., 250 million out of 400 million, is poor or vulnerable.¹

Due to poor education and limited employment opportunities in the formal sector, most Arabs have to seek employment in the informal sector. Given that the region will need to create million jobs by 2030, the number of those in informal employment will continue to increase and entire families will be condemned to long-term poverty and exclusion from the national success story.

Associated with rampant poverty is the problem of inequality: West Asia is the most unequal region in the world, with the top 10 per cent controlling 61 per cent of national wealth, as against 47 per cent in the US and 36 per cent in western Europe. The issues of poverty and inequality have come together to engender in the people the sense that their state order is inherently unjust, with their resentment being aggravated by the pervasive corruption they witness on the part of their leaders and the elites closely associated with them. A reflection of this pervasive dissatisfaction is the severe decline in trust in government: from a high of 53 per cent in 2011, it declined to 34 per cent by 2018. This is largely due to the continued inability of all governments in the region to address the problems that were raised in the Arab Spring uprisings from 2011.

Observers have noted that this malaise leads to large sections of the people ‘self-alienating themselves from the state system’, and seeking comfort and self-affirmation in institutions beyond state order – such as religious, tribal or ideologically militant groups. As the distinguished Lebanese journalist, Rami Khouri has pointed out, such alienated people, particularly the youth, begin to support protest action and even ‘join the reservoirs of vulnerable people who are easily recruited into militias, terror groups’ that in turn have implications for domestic harmony, regional security and even foreign policy approaches.²

The pandemic has brutally exposed the fragility of the Arab state order. As West Asian economies lie battered, observers suggest that, in addition to its ongoing confrontations and conflicts, the region could be entering ‘an even longer, darker tunnel’.³ During the pandemic, 50 million jobs were lost, while people living below the poverty line (outside the GCC) have gone from 66 million (22.8 per cent) to over 100 million (nearly 30 per cent). In countries described by the World Bank as ‘fragile and conflict-affected’ (for instance, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan and Libya) 56 per cent live below the poverty line. Poverty rates in countries with ongoing conflict are even more pervasive: 76 per cent in Syria and 73 per cent in Yemen.

In a recent study, the distinguished professor of West Asia's political economy, Steven Heydemann has pointed out that the traditional support systems which are 'localised, informal, solidarity-based institutions', based on personal and extended family and social ties – 'micro-foundations of a moral economy', as he calls them – have been hit hard by the pandemic.⁴ This has seriously diminished their ability to support those in acute need, thus accounting for increases in extreme poverty levels and the related 'fear, anger and anxiety' of millions of people in West Asia, who blame their governments – viewed as non-transparent and corrupt – for their situation.

Such dissatisfaction can translate into organized public dissent, as occurred across the region during the two phases of the Arab Spring uprisings. At the time of writing, the latest to join this cacophony of protest was Oman: from 23 May 2021, hundreds of young people began to demonstrate in Sohar to demand more job opportunities, which then expanded to demands to raise salaries, provide better conditions for pensioners and labour, and abolish the newly introduced VAT. They also criticized corruption and the poor housing situation. After an initial offer to quickly create 32,000 new jobs in the government and the announcement of subsidies for new workers, the state then used coercive measures, including attacks on demonstrators and arrests.⁵

As the last decade has shown, such short-term palliatives that are usually offered by governments under pressure are rarely effective: since no real changes are affected in the governing order, the grievances of the protesters continue to fester, and finally include a critique of the political order itself.

Nascent Democratic Efforts Upended

The second half of 2021 witnessed serious challenges to two attempts at shaping democratic systems in the region in the wake of the two Arab Spring uprisings – one in Tunisia, where the Arab Spring had started in 2011, and the other in Sudan, where popular demonstrations had made a major effort at ending military rule during the second wave of the Arab

Spring uprisings and, in 2019, had set up a joint military – civilian Sovereignty Council to share power till democratic elections took place in 2023. In both instances, the reversal of democratic systems was the result of the ideological divide in West Asia between the authoritarian monarchies of the Gulf – Saudi Arabia and the UAE – and their Islamist rivals, Turkey and Qatar.

For the monarchies, the continuing presence of Ennahda as an influential player in Tunisia was viewed as an ‘existential’ threat, even though, in 2016, the leader of Ennahda, Rachid Ghannouchi, had announced that his party was no longer Islamist and had no affiliation with the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite this, the two GCC partners, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have remained committed to subverting the democratic order in Tunisia that had brought Ennahda to prominence through popular support.

The ground to effect the change was prepared by widespread discontent with the country’s parlous economic and social conditions. Since January 2021, the tenth anniversary of the Arab Spring uprisings, there had been protests in the country’s cities in response to accusations of police violence and the devastation the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked on an already weak economy. In a dramatic intervention, on 26 July, President Kais Saied dismissed the government, suspended Parliament, withdrew the immunity of its members, and ordered the arrest of several officials as part of an anti-corruption drive.

He justified these actions by taking recourse to Article 80 of the Constitution that provides for such measures in exceptional circumstances, such as an imminent threat to national security and sovereignty. But this provision also requires the president to consult the prime minister and the speaker of the National Assembly, which did not occur in this case. Kais Saied had initially said that Parliament would only be suspended for a month; however, on 22 September 2021, he suspended Parliament indefinitely, abolished the constitutional court, and assumed full executive and legislative powers.

On 29 September, in face of criticisms that he had set up a one-man dictatorship, he appointed Najla Bouden Romdhan as the country's first woman prime minister. A former geology professor, she had earlier worked in the Ministry of Higher Education, supervising World Bank-funded projects.

According to media reports, this 'constitutional coup' had been under preparation for a few months earlier. The president had frequently expressed his unhappiness with the functioning of Tunisia's political class which he had described as an obstruction to achieving reform in the country.

Observers have noted that over the last few years, UAE-based activists had maligned Tunisia's political revolution and democratic system and had even sponsored politicians to subvert the functioning of the assembly. In this subversion of Tunisian democracy, commentators have recalled a parallel in the run-up to the overthrow of President Mohammed Morsi in Egypt in July 2013 and the installation of the authoritarian rule of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, which had also been funded by the two Gulf monarchies to rid West Asia of a democratically elected Islamist government.⁶

As noted by the *Washington Post* correspondent, Claire Parker, for Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, 'the events in Tunisia marked the death knell for political Islam in democracy'. She points out that several Saudi and UAE influencers have been promoting the narrative that 'Tunisia revolts against the Brotherhood'. She also quotes the well-known commentator on West Asian politics, HA Hellyer as saying that events such as those in Tunisia are a source of great joy for 'opponents to the struggle for accountable government' since they see it as wounding the Islamist movement.⁷ Thus, the doyen of Saudi journalists, Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed celebrated the 'fall' of the Brotherhood in Tunisia by pointing out that Ennahda had been associated with 'chaos, assassinations, and deliberate obstruction operations to thwart government action'.⁸

Though condemned by the Ennahda party and several human rights activists, these actions of the President initially obtained widespread popular support – largely due to the people's unhappiness with the

pervasive corruption in their country. However, as months passed, opposition to the presidential coup has increased – four opposition parties have formed a coalition to challenge the president’s actions; the Tunisian Labour Union, which had earlier backed the president, on 24 September, described his actions as a threat to democracy and called for ‘consultation, partnership and dialogue’ to address the current crisis, while fifteen NGOs issued a joint letter criticizing the president’s concentration of power as a ‘step towards despotism’.

Popular support for the president also seems to be eroding – on 26 September, several thousand demonstrators gathered in Tunis to protest the president’s moves towards authoritarian rule, far outnumbering the crowds that had gathered the previous day to back him.⁹

Observers of Tunisian affairs are not convinced that Kais Saied’s authoritarian approach will actually root out corruption; they point out that, despite several months of personal rule, he has not presented an economic plan to address national concerns. They fear instead that the actions of the president might fatally undermine Tunisia’s fragile democratic order.¹⁰

The collapse of the fragile democratic experiment in Sudan follows a more familiar pattern – that of a military coup. On 25 October 2021, the military head of the Sovereignty Council, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, took over political authority by overthrowing the Sovereignty Council – Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and his wife were placed under house arrest, while several of his ministerial colleagues and senior officials, as also political, human rights and civil society activists have been detained. This coup took place just a month before the general was to hand over power to his civilian counterpart who would then head the government till June 2023, when elections would be held.

Al-Burhan declared a state of emergency and suspended important articles of the Constitution. He denied that he had carried out a coup; he said he was only trying to weed out elements in the government who were inciting hostility towards the military and that he was ‘trying to correct the course of the revolution’.¹¹

The coup has led to massive demonstrations across the country – these are led by the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) and the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), which had been in the forefront of the democracy agitations in the second wave of the Arab Spring uprisings. Police have frequently fired on these demonstrators, killing a few of them, though the number of casualties is being disputed.

The demonstrations on 30 October brought several thousand protesters to the streets. They shouted, ‘No to military rule’, and carried placards backing Hamdok and saying, ‘The Emirates will not govern us, nor the administration of Sisi’, a reference to the Egyptian president. They were confronted with tear gas and live bullets – all told, nearly eighty persons are said to have been killed and a few hundred injured in the demonstrations so far.¹²

On 10 November, General al-Burhan announced a new Sovereignty Council headed by him, with General Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, head of the Rapid Support Forces, as his deputy, signalling the possible end of Sudan’s encounter with a democratic order. However, two days after the killing of fifteen protesters, al-Burhan released Hamdok from house arrest, on November 21, and, on state television, signed an agreement with him to head a new ‘technocratic’ government. The fourteen-point deal commits al-Burhan to the transition arrangements of 2019 and the release of all political prisoners. Hamdok said he had accepted the agreement to end ‘the bloodbath’ of recent weeks, while al-Burhan said it would pave the way towards ‘a transparent, democratic election [till] total civilian government and total democracy’ were realized.

Most of the country’s activists are not impressed. Given the low credibility of the armed forces, they are insisting on ‘no negotiation and no partnership, and no legitimacy’ for the armed forces. With al-Burhan and Dagalo still controlling the Sovereignty Council, these fears are well-founded.

Al-Burhan and his associates have carried out the coup to avoid giving supreme authority to the civilians in the Sovereignty Council. Prime Minister Hamdok had earlier made clear his commitment to pursuing the

case of the former president, Omar al-Bashir, before International Criminal Court, where Bashir would certainly expose the role of al-Burhan and Dagalo in the Darfur massacres, as also in the killing of demonstrators in Khartoum in June 2019 during the Arab Spring uprisings. The other issue of contention was Hamdok's insistence on ending the military's presence in the national economy – the armed forces are said to control 200 companies worth \$2 billion.

As in the case of the presidential coup in Tunisia, the military coup in Sudan enjoys the backing of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt.¹³ The kingdom benefited from the deployment of Sudanese troops in Yemen to back the Saudi-led coalition. Saudi leaders were also anxious to get rid of former president, Omar al-Bashir, who had Islamist affiliations. They had then worked closely with al-Burhan and Dagalo to depose him in 2019, and had pledged \$3 billion to support the economy. Al-Burhan was again useful to the kingdom later when he ordered that these troops remain in Yemen, even though Hamdok was keen to recall them.

The UAE used its special ties with al-Burhan to facilitate a secret meeting between him and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Uganda, in February 2020, that later that year led to Sudan agreeing to normalize relations with Israel, following the UAE lead in August 2020. With the civilians excluded from this important initiative, their authority was further diluted.¹⁴

The Gulf monarchies are also opposed to Hamdok's proposal to set up civilian oversight over the economic empire of the armed forces. James Dorsey argues that the UAE would like to continue the arrangement of funds of the military being diverted into accounts in its banks – he quotes a former Sudanese finance minister, Ibrahim al-Badawi, as saying that a Swiss-based company collected the revenues from the civil aviation department and transferred it to an account in the UAE.¹⁵

The coup in Khartoum had been criticized by the US which has suspended \$700 million in emergency assistance. It has also been condemned by the UN, the Africa Union and all of Sudan's Western donors. Al-Burhan has promised free elections in June 2023, but hardly any one

takes him seriously. With solid support from the region's authoritarian rulers, Sudan is likely to remain under military rule for some years to come.

The 'Nationalism' Projects

Even before the pandemic, governments across West Asia, while remaining authoritarian, had promised changes in the economic and social order. This was largely because, as Marina and David Ottaway have noted, they could 'no longer take the passivity and compliance of their citizens for granted'.¹⁶ Almost every GCC country came up with ambitious and wide-ranging 'Vision' documents which set out grandiose plans and projections to prepare the country for the post-oil order and offer their people, particularly the youth, unprecedented opportunities in the prospective El Dorado.

But not much has really changed. Oil and gas constitute over 40 per cent of the GDP of most GCC states, and account for over 70 per cent of total revenue (68 per cent for Saudi Arabia and 36 per cent for the UAE). Hydrocarbons and related products were 90 per cent of total exports in Kuwait and Qatar, 80 per cent in Saudi Arabia and Oman, and 50 per cent in the UAE and Bahrain.¹⁷

The reluctance of the region's authoritarian rulers to offer real change that would include political reform is perhaps linked to what political scientist Samuel Huntington in 1968 had called 'the king's dilemma' – the fact that modernization efforts create forces and generate movements that will eventually overthrow them. Huntington had then said that the monarch could either 'attempt to maintain his authority by continuing to modernize but intensify the repression necessary to keep control,' or transform his monarchy into a constitutional monarchy where 'the king reigns but does not rule'.¹⁸ Huntington had also noted that 'limited reforms introduced from the top often increase rather than decrease bottom-up demand for more radical change'. Given these stark choices before rulers, it is not surprising that their reform programmes have no place for political changes.

GCC rulers have responded to this dilemma with a fresh, innovative approach – nationalism. These states had earlier been satisfied with

including in their national rhetoric fervent references to their ‘Arab’ or ‘Islamic’ identities. They had also basked in their unique Khaleeji (‘Gulf’) persona, which set them apart from other Arab peoples in terms of their separate historical experience, their greater affinity with their tribal identity and closeness to local desert and oasis heritage, their late and slower urbanization, and their deeper ties with India, rather than other Arab states. Their oil wealth affirmed their distinctiveness, and promoted them to leadership positions within the Arab world in which they had, until then, been relegated to the bottom rungs in respect of intellectual, educational and ‘modern’ cultural attainment.

Saudi Arabia has, over the years, used different ‘identities’ to contend with regional competition. In the 1950s and 1960s, it asserted its Islamic identity as the guardian of the religion’s holy shrines against the challenge from republican Egypt. In its confrontation with Iran over the last two decades, it has mobilized support not through Islam or its Arabness, but on a sectarian appeal to the region’s Sunni Arabs, while framing its challenges to Iran in stark sectarian terms. This worked initially: a workshop organized in 2016 found that ‘Sunni Islamists are looking to leadership from the Saudi state’. Observers pointed out, ‘Today, concerns about Iranian expansionism, and the political outcome of the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, has garnered Saudi Arabia the genuine support of most Sunni Islamists.’¹⁹

However, the absence of victory on the battlefields of Syria and Yemen and the widespread destruction in the two Arab countries eroded the efficacy of the sectarian paradigm, and it compelled the Saudi leadership to seek a new base to garner popular support for the nation whose interests are of course conflated with those of the royal family. Such a project gained urgency since the persona of the crown prince and his impending elevation to the throne needed to be legitimized due to mounting setbacks in ongoing wars, the stigma he bears due to the barbarous murder of Jamal Khashoggi, and the persistent discontent at home in the face of limited economic opportunities and the pervasive absence of accountability.

Thus, focus on Islamic and Arab identities is being jettisoned in favour of prioritizing the citizens’ ‘Saudi’ identity. Assuming correctly that the

older generations are likely to be sceptics in regard to this new project and/or likely to prioritize other identities (Islamic, Arab, sectarian, tribal, etc.), the crown prince's effort is principally directed at the country's young people and is accompanied by 'reforms' that are likely to appeal to them. These include dismantling the more extreme aspects of the country's unique 'Wahhabi' order: letting women drive, doing away with gender segregation in public places, permitting music and dance events for mixed audiences, and, above all, doing away with the intrusive presence and authority of the religious police.

The prince has also sought to address the problem of corruption through his high-profile incarceration of prominent royal and business personalities, and the declaration that about \$100 billion of ill-gotten gains has been recovered from them. The core of his messaging is contained in the Vision 2030 document that gives a prominent place to youth education, training, employment in the private sector and support for entrepreneurship. Thus, Saudi youth are expected to be partners in the prince's vision. This is expected to engender loyalty not towards the royal family in general, but to him personally.²⁰

This focus on positive achievement is accompanied by strong messages that demonize Iran as a pernicious 'existential' threat primarily through its backing for the Houthis, who attack the kingdom regularly with missiles and drones. These are accompanied by the attendant assertion that those objecting to this 'national' narrative are traitors to the nation. This was used to justify the arrests of intellectuals and clerics in September 2017, and the later incarceration of feminist and human rights activists in May and June 2018.

The UAE is also engaged in a similar 'nationalism' project. It has anchored its new persona in espousing modern and moderate Islam, and as the emerging bastion of high-technology in the post-pandemic era. UAE's messaging, which is directed at Emirati youth, is similar to that of Saudi Arabia, with perhaps greater emphasis on the active involvement of young people in economic, civic and cultural projects. The youth are expected to become contributors to national development – not through government

employment, but by seeking private-sector careers, by becoming entrepreneurial and setting up their own businesses.

Towards this end, the government has revamped public education by encouraging the study of English, marketing skills and critical thinking. The regime's clear message to its youth is: 'Work is a true criterion of citizenship. It is evidence of sincerity and loyalty. We share the responsibility of building this country, protecting its sovereignty, and safeguarding its gains.'²¹

Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia have also used the concept of 'militarized nationalism' to promote their nationalism projects by celebrating their soldiers' achievements in the Yemen war: in 2016, the Saudi National Day celebrations used the slogan 'Our heroes are in our hearts' to extol the fighters in Yemen.

So far, these first forays into social engineering have produced mixed results. While the new educational approach has shown some success in inculcating nationalism and love for the country, it has also revealed two other claims from youth – their right to government employment and their insistence on greater political participation and economic transparency.²² In fact, even in the early days of such efforts to make young people partners in economic and social change, there had been calls for the nationalism projects to evolve towards political participation.²³

Again, the state's efforts to foster a cohesive national identity have regularly been challenged by critics who note the entrenched discrimination in Gulf states emerging from officially established hierarchies among citizens based on national origin, which provide different levels of citizenship, and even expose naturalized citizens to being deprived of their citizenship for activities viewed as hostile to royal family or government interest. Another challenge has come from women who have questioned discriminatory personal status and citizenship laws that severely restrict their choice of marriage partners and deny citizenship rights to their children if they marry non-nationals. Above all, critics have noted that the modern political order has remained tribal in terms of mode of governance

in which ‘political roles and resources are distributed, in part, on the basis of kinship’.²⁴

This discussion affirms that these ‘nationalism’ projects are one more effort of the entrenched authoritarian order to win support from citizens by alluring them with promises of lucrative partnerships in the so-called El Dorado that their ‘vision’ documents are expected to produce. But this is in return for personal loyalty and obedience towards the new generation of rulers that the royal order is throwing up.

Such blandishments have become necessary because, fifty years after the Gulf populations have enjoyed the benefits of the oil revenues, they no longer have the same level of gratitude and loyalty to their rulers as their parents and grandparents felt. They want a revamped order in which they live with the rights and obligations of citizens who participate in national decision-making processes in a system that is genuinely transparent and accountable. As of now, regimes in the region are not showing any signs of accommodating such aspirations – despite the fresh outburst of Arab Spring agitations in. However, the Lebanese-American journalist and authority on West Asia, Kim Ghattas has warned the new agitators:

... are getting organised, learning about politics and electoral laws, and planning for the state they want to build – one that serves citizens, not rulers. Most important, they have learned from the setbacks of 2011 that what lies ahead is a long slog, not a quick victory in one election.²⁵

The impact of the domestic order – socio-economic and political – on regional security is discussed in the next section.

The Political Malaise

The two principal regional contentions are the Saudi–Iran divide and Israel’s hostile ties with its Arab neighbours, particularly the Palestinians. The root causes for these hostilities and the subsequent aggression are to be

found in the socio-economic malaise that afflicts the domestic order. West Asia's Arab polities have generally conflated national interest with regime survival, and, hence, persist with authoritarian systems whose resources and institutions are primarily aimed at sustaining the regime.

This is achieved by the use of state resources to maintain support bases, and the security apparatus is roped in to coerce the populace into submission and obedience. Popular resentment is also diverted towards regional enemies who are painted as 'evil' and demonized as 'existential' threats to the nation. As noted earlier in this book, Saudi Arabia sharpened the sectarian threat from Iran and focused on its 'hegemonic' intentions largely as a means to divert popular attention away from the wide-ranging reforms that were being demanded across the region during the Arab Spring uprisings.

In order to protect the regime and sustain the political status quo, the kingdom created the bogey of a sectarian assault on the kingdom and its values. It then mobilized national and regional support based on a 'Sunni' alliance, and challenged Iran in Syria and Yemen on the basis that Shia threats – emanating from Iran's machinations – lurked in those territories. In this mobilization, Saudi Arabia also obtained the full backing of both the US and Israel, who, as noted above, have a long tradition of animosity for Iran, largely founded on emotional rather than on objective security considerations. Not only have Syria and Yemen paid a heavy price for these conflicts – brought upon them only to avoid domestic reform – but the entire region has faced the prospect of a major conflagration over the last decade.

Israel, while not burdened by the same socio-economic malaise that plagues most of its Arab neighbours, has its politics and foreign policy defined by the ethno-religious conception of its state and nationhood, i.e., the idea of Israel as a Jewish nation. This has favoured the right-wing Likud party that has ruled the country for long periods with the support of extremist religious parties. This political combination led, in 2018, to the passing of the 'Jewish nation-state law' as the country's basic law, which privileges the Jewish community and relegates the 20 per cent Arab

minority to second-class status. This ethno-religious idea of Israel as a Jewish state has considerable popular support, with indications that many Israelis favour a Jewish state over a democratic one.

But, beyond the vagaries of domestic opinion, it is important to note that the notion of Israel's Jewish identity has had important implications for the country's domestic and foreign policies. Israelis are constantly reminded by their leaders that their country faces existential threats from its neighbours, who have never reconciled themselves to its presence and wish its destruction. This sense of being besieged has come to define for most Israelis 'the regional reality of a struggle between the Arab/Muslim world ... and the Jewish people'.²⁶ To support this perception, Israelis have been told that the Palestinians do not want peace with their country, and 'there is no partner for peace' among the Palestinians. Hamas and Hezbollah are described as planning a 'second Holocaust', while Iran is viewed as inherently evil.

In terms of its foreign policy, Iran, too, is animated by a large degree of xenophobia born out of insecurity and victimhood – the persistent conviction that the West and its regional allies – Israel and Saudi Arabia – are seeking to overturn its Islamic Revolution by effecting regime change through crippling sanctions, fomenting popular anger, and periodic attacks on its leaders and assets. Hence, the country maintains powerful constitutionally mandated institutions to safeguard the revolution and projects its regional influence through militants generally mobilized on a sectarian basis. The Italian scholar of West Asian politics, Raffaella Del Sarto has astutely pointed out that, while leaders in West Asia may feel threatened or insecure, they also have 'every reason to cultivate a deep sense of insecurity' at home, which imparts legitimacy and domestic support for the authoritarianism and/or confrontations they promote to retain power.²⁷

It is interesting to observe that the demonization of their enemies by the three nations have actually become self-fulfilling prophecies. Israel can point to several instances of threats and violence it has been subjected to over the last two decades, and, in turn, it has used these to justify the

extreme measures it has enforced to deal with these attacks. The country has not needed to explain to its people that the violence they experience could be a reaction to its own violent conduct and aggressiveness, and its sustained failure to engage with the Palestinians in a serious peace process. Of course, in persisting with these positions, Israel enjoys the full backing of its powerful lobby in the US.

Similarly, the confrontations against Iran that Saudi Arabia initiated in Syria and Yemen have in fact served to *enhance* Iran's links with the Bashar al Assad regime and the Houthis in Yemen. Thus, despite robust Saudi efforts, there is now no prospect of the fall of the Assad government, while the Houthis are sufficiently equipped to threaten Saudi Arabia's own security and well-being. On its part, Iran, in the face of sustained pressure from the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia, has become even more belligerent and non-accommodative, while Saudi Arabia has sought to promote its own interests by enhancing its security ties with Israel.

The perception that the US is disengaging from the affairs of the region also has important implications for regional politics.

US Disengagement from West Asia

Even though the US retains unmatched material power – economic and military – the pervasive view globally, particularly in West Asia, is that it is a power in decline, or it is, in any case, disengaging from the affairs of the region. Several disparate events, both domestic and foreign, have solidified this view and have encouraged states in West Asia to develop policy approaches premised on this.

While foreign affairs scholars trace this view of US decline variously to its failure to achieve its objectives in the war against Iraq in 2003 or the global economic crisis of 2008, the consensus is that it was the Donald Trump presidency that firmly and irrevocably planted this view in popular perception. As the distinguished American journalist and academic, Howard French has written, under Trump, 'once-unimaginable shocks, outrages, and demolitions of norms and decorum were routinely eclipsed by

even greater ones just a day or two later, and sometimes sooner’, so that what the world saw was ‘the flagrant self-destruction of a superpower’ at its own hands.²⁸

Besides Trump’s controversial foreign policy decisions, what damaged US standing the most was the president’s failure to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. He was personally responsible for some of the bad, and even ridiculous, decisions relating to the pandemic and the poor leadership he showed through most of the crisis – all of which were on full public display on global media – while the US led the world in the number of infections and deaths.

In West Asia, US shortcomings and debacles have been apparent from much earlier. Chief among them have been the failures to tame the insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq, despite the deployment of hundreds of thousands of troops and use of extraordinary firepower. These interventions cost the lives of 400,000 Iraqis, while the two wars together cost the US exchequer \$4 trillion. Then, there was the abrupt withdrawal from the JCPOA and the unilateral imposition of onerous sanctions on Iran which ‘upended years of multilateral diplomacy and cast profound doubt on the reliability of any American commitments’.²⁹

There were also specific confusions relating to US policy that were serious sources of concern for allies in the region – Obama’s decision not to enter the war in Syria, despite the apparent use of chemical weapons by Bashar al Assad; Trump’s initial support for the Qatar blockade, and the US’s failure to retaliate when its \$200 million drone was shot down by Iran in June 2019 and, later, after the massive attack on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019. Taken together, this US disengagement from West Asian affairs, as perceived by major regional states, ‘... has led to major uncertainties and changes in their [regional states’] behaviour... The change in the US role has led to a perceived vacuum in the region ... which influenced regional actors’ role conceptions and behaviour’.³⁰

Echoing this view, Howard French has noted that ‘scores of countries around the world now have options they never had before to selectively ignore American preferences or even to opt out of the US-led order

altogether'.³¹ Such players in West Asia are Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel and Iran, while the extra-regional players – Russia and China – have also entered the arena to shape the region's 'post-American geopolitics'.

Russia and China, working in tandem, pose a serious challenge to the US-led world order. US hostility directed at both of them by Trump and then Biden has strengthened their mutual bonds and encouraged them to cooperate with each other to shape a new global order that would have Eurasia at its centre. Having successfully coordinated their respective projects for regional cooperation – the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU, Russia) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, China) – they have embarked on a vigorous effort to bring other countries in West Asia into the Eurasian ambit being promoted by them. The broad division of responsibility between them is for Russia to focus on political, defence and energy ties, while China looks after infrastructure development and investments. As a result of their efforts, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and Afghanistan have been co-opted into the Eurasian initiative.³²

At the receiving end of endless visceral US hostility, Iran is a natural partner with Russia and China in the Eurasia project. It has a central place in the BRI, both on land and sea, and has recently buttressed its ties with China with a twenty-five-year comprehensive strategic partnership agreement. With Russia, it has close political and defence ties, with the two working together, alongside Turkey, to promote peace in Syria. Turkey has retained its NATO membership, while building close defence links with Russia; it has also become an important partner in the BRI. Both Russia and China had developed close relations with the Taliban in Afghanistan, and could reap the benefits of these ties by promoting peace and moderation in the country, all the while pursuing their political and economic interests.

China is, of course, Pakistan's strategic partner of long standing, with the two countries jointly pursuing several infrastructure and energy projects under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) framework. China is also seeking to link its projects in Pakistan with those in Iran, including the

port of Gwadar in Pakistan with Chabahar in Iran, 72 km away. Meanwhile, Iran is already providing electricity to Gwadar.

The Changing Geopolitical Landscape

As the US has begun giving developments in West Asia lower priority as compared to addressing domestic issues and the challenge from rising China, the question arises: in these new circumstances, can the vicious circle of mutually reinforcing intimidation and violence between the three principal players – Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel – be broken? What is apparent so far is that, in the absence of America, several regional states are already pursuing fresh political initiatives of their own:

- In January 2021, Saudi Arabia led other GCC states to end the siege of Qatar, without insisting that the latter fulfil any of the onerous conditions that had been previously insisted on by the kingdom and its partners when the blockade was enforced in June 2017.
- Several rounds of dialogue have taken place between Saudi and Iranian officials at meetings organized in Iraq and Oman; while no significant breakthrough has been announced so far, these meetings could lead to the restoration of diplomatic ties and even an understanding to bring about a ceasefire in Yemen.
- After a prolonged period of overt competition with Saudi Arabia and hostility towards Egypt since the overthrow of the Morsi government in 2013, Turkey has now opened discussions on improving ties with both antagonists, and has even hinted at a more accommodative role in Libya.
- In August 2020, the UAE dramatically announced the normalization of diplomatic ties with Israel, followed by three other Arab states – Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco.
- In a dramatic turnaround in the national political order, Israel, in June 2021, got rid of its Likud government, and now has an administration whose coalition partners include right-wing, centrist and left-wing elements and an Arab party that has an Islamist

background. For the first time in twelve years, the Israeli government does not have religious parties in its coalition.

- After several years in the wilderness, Egypt has emerged as an influential presence in West Asia once again: it played a central role in ending the Israel– Hamas conflict in Gaza in May 2021 and, given its ongoing dispute with Ethiopia on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), has pursued robust diplomatic efforts to build defence and economic ties with its African neighbours.³³ Following this, in June 2021, a new Arab coalition was announced: Egypt, Iraq and Jordan said in Baghdad that a new tripartite grouping of these West Asian states had been set up, proclaiming the advent of al-Sham al-Jadid, the ‘New Levant’.

The coalition mentioned in the last point is an attempt by the partners to broaden their regional engagements: Iraq would like to free itself from the Iranian grip and expand ties with its Arab neighbours. Jordan is unhappy with the recent Saudi role in trying to topple King Abdullah and replace him with a disgruntled half-brother, Prince Hamza.³⁴

Egypt views the partnership as an opportunity to move beyond its traditional dependence on Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and assert its own leadership in the region. Together, the partners constitute a near-contiguous land mass, with a total population of 150 million and considerable domestic agricultural and industrial capacity. They are looking at extensive cooperation in energy connectivity and reconstruction areas. Membership is open and, later, Syria and Lebanon could also join this group.

These developments, albeit still at a nascent stage, have significant implications for regional geopolitics: the countries concerned are addressing ongoing contentions that have divided the region into armed camps. Moreover, these engagements are taking place without the US being a party to the interactions or directing the content and direction of the dialogue.

These initiatives could truly transform the regional security landscape. In Saudi Arabia, the sectarian binary used to mobilize support against Iran

has now lost its credibility and, given the kingdom's focus on promoting its 'nationalism' project, needs to be abandoned if the kingdom is to bring its 2 million Shia into the national mainstream. This would facilitate a constructive approach to regional security concerns that has been missing so far amidst the rancour and bitterness encouraged by sectarian divisions and the wars in Syria and Yemen.

Israel no longer needs to believe that it is under threat in West Asia. Following the links that it has already established with several major Arab nations, its security situation is far more stable than ever before. Again, unlike Netanyahu, its current government does not need the bogey of a regional threat to obtain political advantage at home. In fact, as the distinguished American diplomat and political commentator Chas Freeman has noted, Israel now perhaps no longer needs to be driven by Zionism, which he describes as 'an overtly racist ideology whose unconscionable injustices offend rather than affirm the values of Jewish tradition'. Noting the discrimination and violence that Israel has meted out to Arabs who are Israeli citizens and those in the occupied territories, Freeman says, 'This Israeli system is often compared to apartheid. It is in many ways crueller.' Given the US's continued disengagement from the region, he advises that Israel's 'long-term survival depends on taking risks for peace'.³⁵

These remarks encourage two thoughts: with Israel's increasingly benign and extensive interactions with different Arab states and peoples over coming years, could its visceral animosity for Palestinians get diluted over time – particularly when Israelis see Arabs who are well-educated, urbane, professionally qualified, affluent, and living in cities that have better infrastructure than most Western cities? Since the normalization agreement was signed, about 200,000 Israelis are reported to have visited the UAE, both for business and tourism. Such a change in attitude could, over time, dilute the ethno-religious urge to keep Israel exclusively Jewish, and it could instead become a home for Jews, Muslims and Christians, as it had been for several centuries before the Zionist project perniciously privileged one resident community over others.

The other thought relates to Israel–Iran relations. Their ties nosedived after the Islamic Revolution when Iran placed itself in the ‘rejectionist’ camp, opposed US interventions in West Asia and rejected the Zionist project that had deprived the Palestinians of their rights. This position was adopted in the early days of the revolution, when the Islamic Republic declared ‘jihad’ against Israel and committed itself to struggle for the ‘oppressed’ Palestinian people.

The Russian commentator on West Asian affairs, Nikolay Kozhanov has pointed out that even then there was much posturing on the Iranian side: such statements enhanced its credentials as a supporter of Muslim interests, without requiring it to do anything concrete.³⁶ Forty years after the revolution, while Iranian rhetoric remains robust, its words of confrontation ring hollow – the country is neither interested in nor capable of initiating any hostile actions against Israel or pose a real threat to its interests.

Israel’s animosity for the Islamic Republic is in line with its hostility towards all West Asian nations that are not part of the alliance with the West. As shown in the case of Iraq under Saddam Hussein earlier, its entire effort then has been to obtain the destruction or emasculation of such an entity – generally through US military intervention. For the last two decades, Israel has made every effort to subvert Iran’s interests and, with the help of its influential lobby, even goad the US into taking military action. During the Trump administration, these attempts nearly came to fruition, and were averted only through the restraint exercised on the president by his military officers.

While Israel’s traditional position has been to reject as inadequate any nuclear agreement with Iran, with a less xenophobic government in place, this view could change. This could perhaps prepare grounds for an interaction between the officials of the two countries to discuss the security concerns that each has with the other. Even if dialogue does not take place immediately, we could still have the ‘cold peace’ in the region that Obama had referred to in his *Atlantic Monthly* interview in 2016.

West Asia: A Tradition of Resistance

As we contemplate the events in West Asia over the last century, we can see a broad pattern of external intervention in the region's political and economic life – either directly through military force or indirectly through the aid of local rulers – and regular resistance to such interference from local populations. Colonial wars and occupations were robustly resisted by local forces that made up in valour what they lacked in weaponry. The last war against settler-colonial occupation took place in 1948, when poorly armed, trained and led Arab forces attempted to reverse the creation in their midst of the Jewish state of Israel.

Nearer to our times, popular resistance to the West-mandated order took on different shapes. After the Second World War, we see the systematic overthrow of puppet regimes planted or sustained by the region's colonial masters, starting with Egypt and then going on to include Iraq, Yemen, Syria and Libya. These were led by middle-level officers in the armed forces; most of them were animated by nationalist and socialist zeal, who sought control over valuable assets, such as the national oil resources in Iran or the Suez Canal in Egypt. Since these upheavals took place during the Cold War, the Western powers viewed these emerging republics, singing the song of Arab nationalism, with concern and even animosity, and made every effort to curb their appeal with military interventions or economic pressure.

Of course, these nationalists – socialist and secular – also faced opposition from within their region: the traditional monarchies tied their interests and destiny with Western powers and, led by Saudi Arabia, combatted nationalist appeal with an older, deeper, grander allure – that of Islam. But it was not Islam that vanquished republican enthusiasm, but the West-sponsored entity in the region – Israel. In 1967, it forcefully switched off the light of the republics, so that the appeal of secular order and the idea of an all-encompassing Arab nationhood vanished from the region.

It was replaced by two trends: one, the claim of state-based nationalism, fostered by authoritarian leaders to command legitimacy and obtain uncritical obedience; two, the transnational appeal of Islam, a political enterprise shaped by Saudi Arabia to obtain political support for its political

interests. These two trends set the pattern for Arab regimes to conflate regime-survival with national interest. The traditional monarchies obtained security guarantees for this from Western powers, who, in turn, ensured that these rulers prioritized Western interests over those of their people and nation.

Fortified by unprecedented wealth from its oil revenues, Saudi Arabia's affiliation with Islam had no connection with genuine doctrinal reform or the amelioration of the deprived within the community, or even to set the global Muslim community on the path of modern education, free thinking, and innovative and creative enterprise. It propagated instead, at home and across the Muslim realm, the doctrines of the most narrow, rigid and hidebound expression of the faith – Wahhabiyya.

Both the republics and the monarchies now faced a challenge from an unusual quarter: Islam was shaped into an ideology of resistance by scholars such as Sayyid Qutb, who had no training in the hoary traditions of their faith. They still drew from the faith's vast oeuvre of ideas articulated several centuries ago, and reshaped them as weapons to resist Western intrusions in the political, economic and cultural domains of their native lands, as also to resist the tyranny of their rulers at home. Most of these early votaries of 'political Islam', as their ideology came to be called some years later, were quickly executed by the tyrants they were protesting against, while others were imprisoned or exiled.

But their literature remained – to be used by state authorities and their Western mentors, who understood its power to inspire and mobilize resistance. The enemy this power of Islam was directed at was godless communism that had assaulted a Muslim land in Afghanistan. Here, in 1979, 'Islam' was placed at the service of traditional state order that served the Western ally. The communist enemy was defeated by this unassailable power, affirming to its adherents that Allah was now once again with His people as they had discovered the true path of their faith – jihad.

Not surprisingly, Islam was also instrumentalized *against* state order – the monarch in Iran was brought down by an Islamic revolution and was replaced by an Islamic Republic in 1979. In that same year, a few months

later, some zealots from within Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi fold attacked their royal masters from the pulpit of the Haram Sharif in Mecca, and were defeated and silenced only with the help of state and foreign forces, who suffered heavy casualties.

The extraordinary year, 1979, placed Islam at the heart of regional affairs. And from being an instrument to promote state power that served the West, it now became a lethal weapon *against* the West and its allies in West Asia. On 11 September 2001, extremists from the Al Qaeda took their war to the heart of the Western empire, the US. The US was shocked and humiliated and, like a tormented wild beast, it turned its wrath on the sources of the crime and then looked for other targets that were not connected at all with the attacks, but were otherwise Arab and Muslim.

Both Afghanistan and Iraq were attacked and received shattering blows. But both fought back relentlessly. Both used the ideology of Islam to shape their resistance to the aggression, both took very heavy hits and experienced an enormous number of casualties, but both ensured that the aggressor was not successful in subjugating the land that was theirs.

The last decade has seen the interplay of several diverse trends. Central to this period has, once again, been resistance – the Arab Spring uprisings – that were directed at entrenched tyrants who had allied themselves with the West, and abused and robbed their people with impunity over decades of one-man rule. Though four tyrants fell from their pedestals, the counter-attacks from the Gulf monarchies – their own power threatened – were lethal and effective, and the authoritarian order remained in place.

Regime-survival needed a new armoury: the weapon of choice for the beleaguered monarchies was now to scratch at the fault line of sectarian identity. Regional conflicts were carefully engineered on a sectarian basis that demonized Iran. Hundreds of thousands of Arabs were killed in Syria and Yemen, and fruitless battles are still underway so that tyrants can survive and retain their thrones.

There was an unintended consequence as well. These conflicts created the space for a new extremist transnational organization, the Islamic State, that blurred the Sykes–Picot lines, and straddled Iraq and Syria. It ruthlessly

targeted the US occupation forces in Iraq, but also included in its web its sectarian foes – the Shia – whom it annihilated with the same ferocity as it did the Americans.

The Islamic State has been destroyed through military action, but its stragglers have taken refuge in the desert and initiate strikes periodically, while some of its adherents obtain fresh recruits to carry out what are called ‘lone-wolf’ attacks. These are limited as of now, but are lethal in their impact and deeply demoralizing for the communities affected.

Western populations have responded to these assaults with deep animosity for all adherents of Islam, and have installed in their own governments new leaders who would heed their fears and protect them from these ‘monsters from the East’, who, after several centuries, now once again threaten them in their homes. Several Western countries have abandoned the values of the Enlightenment with alacrity and elected rulers who give practical meaning to Islamophobia. The ‘clash of civilizations’ is being shaped as a living reality in several Western capitals.

What then does West Asia look like now? After a hundred years, not a single Arab state provides for any modicum of popular participation in state decision-making. National financial accounts remain non-transparent and without accountability. Though oil wealth is depleting, its revenues are still used to back state efforts at co-optation and coercion – the latter now becoming more open, more crude, more vicious ... and more frequent.

Iran is still viewed as the ‘existential’ threat by some Gulf monarchies, who have sought comfort through a deeper association with Israel – and expanded their coercive capabilities through acquisition of its state-of-the-art surveillance technology. As this chapter has noted, over 61 per cent of the Arab people – about 250 million – live below the poverty line or are very vulnerable, and large sections of youth face a bleak future of poor education, unemployment, and living conditions. Often, they have taken to the streets to protest their squalid lives. Occasionally, they have joined the ranks of the extremists and wreaked vengeance with lethal assault on state order, but have been cowed down by the batons and bullets of riot police or by the fire-power of national or foreign armies.

Can this change? Every parameter of state order analysed by experts suggests that this system is not sustainable. But there is no indication of who or what will be the catalyst for change. State powers have offered no evidence that they can lead reform from the top and carry their people to the life they deserve by right as citizens. Their Western allies, as they speak of freedom and recall the Enlightenment as their gift to humankind, sit on the sidelines and await their next weapons' contract.

But popular resistance remains vibrant as demonstrations across the region voice popular discontent with their plight and deeper unhappiness with their sense of being excluded from the march of history towards participation in governance as free citizens. This spirit is best exemplified by the resistance of the Palestinians – though frequently violated, abused, betrayed and killed in large numbers – it has never been stilled. Not for a day. They still raise their hands to throw rocks at their occupiers and take bullets on their chests in the hundreds, looking for that day when Jews and Arabs will live side by side ... in peace.

Such opposition is always met with coercion, with brute force. As regional tyrants, abetted by their foreign accomplices continue to accumulate the capabilities to combat resistance, the prospect of successful change across West Asia and North Africa remains very remote.

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48. Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Oil in the Middle East: Its Discovery and Development*, London, Oxford University Press, 1955, p. 19; a racy account of this discovery is in: Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power*, New York, Free Press, 1992, pp.
49. Daniel Yergin, *The Prize*, 1992, p.
50. For a lucid account of the navy-related debates in Britain leading up to the government's investment in APOC, see: Yergin, *The Prize*, pp.

2: Five Decades of Upheaval (1900–50)

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4. Ibid., p.
5. For military and political details of the Palestine and Syria campaigns, see David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, New York, Henry Holt & Co, 1989, pp. 305–47; see also: Rogan, *Ottomans*, pp. 342-83
6. For details of the discussions, see: Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, pp.
7. For details of what was offered to Turkey just after the war (at San Remo in April 1920) and what it finally achieved at the Lausanne Conference in October 1923, see Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, pp.

8. Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, p. 192; Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, p. 286
9. Fromkin, *A Peace to End all Peace*, p. 297; Rogan, *The Arabs*, p.
10. Rogan, *The Arabs*, p.
11. Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, pp.
12. Ibid., pp.
13. Ibid., pp.
14. Ibid., p.
15. Rogan, *The Arabs*, p.
16. McHugo, *A Concise History of the Arabs*, p.
17. Ibid.
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19. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, p.
20. Ibid., p.
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22. Frederick F. Anscombe, *State, Faith, and Nation in the Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Lands*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p.
23. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, p.
24. Ibid., p.
25. Rogan, *The Arabs*, p.
26. Yergin, *The Prize*, p.
27. Rogan, *The Arabs*, p.
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30. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, p.
31. Ibid., p.
32. Ayubi, *Overstating the Arab State*, pp. 138-39; see also: Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, pp.
33. Ayubi, *Overstating the Arab State*, p.
34. For details, see Yergin, *The Prize*, pp.
35. Longrigg, *Oil in the Middle East*, p.
36. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State*, p.
37. Rogan, *The Arabs*, p.
38. Ibid., p.
39. Ibid., p.
40. Ibid., p.
41. Ibid., p.
42. Vasiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, pp.
43. Ibid., p.
44. Ibid., p.

45. Ibid., p.
46. IPC was not really interested in more oil in the markets; its principal concern was to prevent other companies from producing more oil. (Yergin, *The Prize*, p. 291)
47. For details of the negotiations, see Yergin, *The Prize*, pp.
48. Vasiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, p.
49. Longrigg, *Oil in the Middle East*, p.
50. He refers to 'severe climates, roadless terrain, waterless sites, resourceless countrysides, and untrained labour forces'. (Longrigg, *Oil in the Middle East*, p. 49)
51. Longrigg, *Oil in the Middle East*, pp. 50-51
52. Rogan, *The Arabs*, p.
53. McHugo, *A Concise History of the Arabs*, p.
54. Ibid., pp.
55. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State*, p.
56. Ibid., p.
57. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, p.
58. Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, p.
59. As Fromkin says, 'It was no wonder that in the years to come British officials were to govern the Middle East with no great sense of direction or conviction.' (*A Peace to End All Peace*, p. 562)
60. Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, p.
61. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, p.
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3: Arab Nationalism (1950–79)

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5. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, p.
6. Ibid., p.
7. Ibid., p.
8. Ibid., p.
9. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State*, p.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p.
12. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, p.
13. Ibid., p.
14. Ibid., p.

15. Rogan, *The Arabs*, p. 320-21
16. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, p.
17. *Ibid.*, p.
18. *Ibid.*, p.
19. Quoted in Rogan, *The Arabs*, p.
20. Rogan, *The Arabs*, p.
21. *Ibid.*, pp.
22. *Ibid.*, p.
23. *Ibid.*, p.
24. Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971, p.
25. Nasser's speech on 22 February 1962, quoted in Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*, p.
26. This is the term that Malcolm Kerr uses to describe the ideological divide in the Arab world at that time.
27. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*, p.
28. *Ibid.*
29. McHugo, *A Concise History of the Arabs*, p.
30. Rogan, *The Arabs*, p.
31. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, p.
32. *Ibid.*, p.
33. McHugo, *A Concise History of the Arabs*, p.
34. Rogan, *The Arabs*, p.
35. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, p.
36. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*, p.
37. Vasiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, p.
38. *Ibid.*, p.
39. Stephane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2011, pp.
40. US Ambassador R.R. Sullivan, quoted in Vasiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, p.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, p.
43. *Ibid.*, pp.
44. David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, London, IB Tauris, 2009, pp.
45. Vasiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, p.
46. *Ibid.*, p.
47. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, p.
48. Rogan, *The Arabs*, p.
49. In 1974, Imam Musa al Sadr, a prominent Twelver Shia theologian in Lebanon, declared that the Alawis belonged to the Shia sect of Islam.

50. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*, p.
51. Ibid., p.
52. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, p.
53. Rogan, *The Arabs*, p.
54. Ibid., p.
55. Yergin, *The Prize*, p.
56. Ali M. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Roots of Mistrust*, New Delhi, Foundation Books, 2006, p.
57. Rogan, *The Arabs*, p.
58. Anscombe, *State, Faith and Nation in the Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Lands*, p. 271
59. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State*, p. xi
60. Anscombe, *State, Faith and Nation in the Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Lands*, p. 271
61. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, p.
62. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, p.
63. Ibid., pp.
64. Ibid., p.

4: The Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979–90)

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2. Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic*, London, Penguin Random House, 2019, p.
3. Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, p.
4. Ibid., p.
5. Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, p.
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8. Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, p.
9. Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, p.
10. In 1960, about half the Iranian population, i.e., about 20 million people, worked in agriculture, but 56 per cent of the land was owned by 1 per cent of the population. (Yann Richard, *Iran: A Social and Political History since the Qajars*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 243)
11. Richard, *Iran*, p.
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13. Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, p.
14. 'Message to the Pilgrims' (Message sent to Iranian pilgrims on Hajj in Saudi Arabia from Khomeini in exile in Najaf), 6 February 1971, in Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*:

- Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, Tehran, Mizan Press, 1981, p.
15. Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, p. 66.
 16. Mohammad Nafissi, 'Shiism and Politics', in Jeffrey Haynes (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*, Oxford, UK, Routledge, 2016, p.
 17. Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, pp.
 18. *Ibid.*, p.
 19. *Ibid.*, p.
 20. Richard, *Iran*, p.
 21. Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, p.
 22. Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, p.
 23. *Ibid.*, p.
 24. *Ibid.*, p.
 25. *Ibid.*, p.
 26. *Ibid.*, p.
 27. *Ibid.*, p.
 28. Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, p.
 29. *Ibid.*, p.
 30. Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, p.
 31. Ansari, p.
 32. The Shatt al-Arab river is 250 km long from the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and over the last 100 km it constitutes the border between Iran and Iraq. The Algiers Accord placed the border in the middle of the river rather than on the bank on the Iranian side. Iraq accepted this arrangement due to its relative weakness vis-à-vis Iran; Saddam Hussein regarded this as his political failure.
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 34. J. Matthew McInnis, 'Iran's Strategic Thinking', American Enterprise Institute, 12 May 2015, p. 1, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/irans-strategic-thinking-origins-and-evolution/>, accessed on 2 April
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 37. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, Oxford, Routledge, 2009, pp.
 38. Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, p.
 39. Adib-Moghaddam, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, p.
 40. Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, p.
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 42. *Ibid.*, pp.
 43. Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, p.
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46. Hiro, *Cold War*, p.
47. Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, p.
48. Hiro, *Cold War*, p.
49. Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, p.
50. Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, pp.; see also: Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, pp.
51. Hiro, *Cold War*, pp.
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54. Ansari, p.
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5: Islam at the Heart of West Asian Politics (1979–2001)

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2. Hiro, *Cold War*, p.
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5. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords*, London, Pan Macmillan, 2001, pp. 132; Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs*, pp. 425-427; Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, p. 469; Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars*, p. 87; Jason Burke, *Al Qaeda*, pp. 60-61; Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban/ Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970-2010*, London: Hurst and Co, 2012, p.
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10. Ibid., pp.
11. Ibid., p.
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14. Bernard Haykel, 'On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action', in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, London, Hurst & Co, 2009), pp.; with small differences in terminology, the categorization of contemporary Salafism into these three expressions is also reflected in: Wiktorowicz, 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement' pp.
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41. Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, pp.
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6: Post-Cold War in West Asia: The First Gulf War to 9/11 (1990–2001)

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About the Book

Events in West Asia constantly demand global attention due to regional conflicts, faith-based divisions, sectarian violence and wars that are often ignited by external powers. Popular agitations for political, economic and social reform frequently make the scenario even more fragile, turbulent and uncertain.

West Asia is at the heart of global energy, trade and financial dynamics, the centre of logistical connectivity projects, and an emerging hub of technological research and development. It is also a destination for millions of pilgrims annually, who visit sites in the region venerated by the three Abrahamic faiths - Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

As a new world order asserts its claims across Eurasia and the Indian Ocean, West Asia is witnessing new diplomatic initiatives to reshape regional alignments that will define global power equations in times to come. Developments here are of abiding concern for India — in terms of energy, trade, investment, logistical connectivity and the interests of its eight-million-strong resident community.

West Asia at War, written by veteran Indian diplomat Talmiz Ahmad, combines an understanding of the diverse forces shaping the politics and economics of this region, and paints a portrait that is at once grim, painful, colourful and exciting.

About the Author



Talmiz Ahmad joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1974 and was posted to Kuwait, Iraq and Yemen, and then as consul general in Jeddah, in 1987–90. After appointments in New York, London and Pretoria, he became the head of the Gulf and Hajj Division in the Ministry of External Affairs during 1998–2000. He did two stints as ambassador to Saudi Arabia, besides being ambassador to Oman and the UAE, additional secretary in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, and director general of the Indian Council of World Affairs.

After retirement from foreign service in 2011, he was in the corporate sector in Dubai and then, from 2016, has been a full-time academic. He holds the Ram Sathe Chair for International Studies, Symbiosis

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Praise for *West Asia at War*

‘Ambassador Talmiz Ahmad has given a pen picture of the happenings in recent decades in a strategically critical region in our neighbourhood. Of great relevance is the chapter on India’s relations with countries in the Persian Gulf littoral, beginning with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s visit to Saudi Arabia in 1982 and, more specifically, the recent initiatives with the GCC states and with Iran, each of which is mutually relevant in strategic and economic terms. No less important is the studious manner in which ties with Israel have been cultivated to mutual benefit.’

– **M. Hamid Ansari, former vice president of India, and ambassador to Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia**

‘Talmiz Ahmad’s new book should be required reading for all those engaging with Middle Eastern issues today, both insiders and outsiders. Its scope and depth of analysis, with a perspective that stretches from the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt to the most recent developments, is without parallel. It is a truly exceptional work.’

– **Tim Niblock, emeritus professor of Middle East Politics, University of Exeter, and visiting professor, Tsinghua University**

‘In his beautifully lucid and original account of West Asia’s recent history, Talmiz Ahmad shows us how to think differently about the region’s politics. By assessing them not in terms of Western interventions but internal movements of resistance, he proposes a new way of understanding the past and the future of a part of the world crucial for India’s economy, energy and security. It is one of the very rare studies of West Asia that is not written from a Western perspective, and which offers an illuminating analysis of India’s relations with the region.’

– **Faisal Devji, professor of Indian History, University of Oxford**

‘Talmiz Ahmad combines the acumen of an astute analyst with the brilliance of a distinguished career diplomat delivering a deep dive into the international politics of West Asia. Readable and of admirable breadth, the book must qualify as Ambassador Ahmad’s magnum opus. Highly recommended to the general reader, diplomats and academics – indeed anyone interested in this most pivotal area of the world.’

– **Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, professor in global thought and comparative philosophies, School of Oriental and African Studies, London**

‘The author, Ambassador Talmiz Ahmad, is an academic and a diplomat, a historian and an analyst, who has spent decades of his life in the region. His manifold experiences shine through the book all along: with precise definitions and timelines, besides the historical overlook of the Middle East/West Asia from the Napoleonic Wars to the present, Ambassador Ahmad also introduces the reader to India’s relations with West Asia, reflecting both India’s stance on the main conflicts of the region and India’s relations to the main regional actors. The final chapter draws up the outlook for the region on the basis of the analysis of the most relevant developments in the region: the socio-economic and political malaise, the rupture of nascent democratic efforts, the new nationalism projects, the tradition of resistance, US disengagement and the changing political landscape.’

– **Erzsébet N. Rózsa, professor at the University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary**

‘This is a very vivid, fascinating and thought-provoking book. The current researches on Middle Eastern history and rivalries are dominated by the Western discourse, and even the “Middle East” itself is a Western terminology. Ambassador Talmiz Ahmad transcends the Western narratives and demonstrates an Asian perspective on the West Asian rivalries in the past two centuries. He takes a critical look at Western colonialism, imperialism and military interventionism, as also Zionism, West Asian authoritarianism and Islamic radicalism. The book brings West Asia back to

the Asian community and offers readers a new discourse and fresh picture of the West Asian conflicts and wars.'

– **Professor Degang Sun, director, Center for Middle Eastern Studies,
Fudan University, Shanghai, China**



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