

West Asia Watch

Trends & Analysis



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INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE
STUDIES & ANALYSES

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EDITORIAL

Political Changes and Unsettled Conflicts in the Region

The key political developments in the West Asian region were elections in Iraq and Turkey. In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was able to consolidate power and authority by winning the June 24 elections. While Muqtada al-Sadr's 'Sairoon' (Forward) Alliance emerged victorious in Iraq's parliamentary elections, the uncertainty continues about the formation of a stable government in Iraq that needs to focus on reconstruction and development. The big question here is – what will be the implications, both internal and external, of these political developments in Iraq and Turkey?

The other important issue dominating the West Asian theatre was the unfolding of the uneasy situation on the Iran nuclear deal and Iran's efforts to save the JCPOA by its leadership's enhanced campaign in Europe and Asia. However, strong statements emanated from the US State Department confirming that Iran's oil buyers should not expect any waivers to US sanctions this time after November 4. The Trump administration seems to be taking a hard line on enforcement of sanctions with an aim of putting pressure on the Iranian regime. The US hardline position on Iran was complemented by its regional ally Saudi Arabia, with the announcement to boost Saudi oil production by hundreds of thousands of barrels on June 22 after the OPEC meeting in Vienna, although precise figures have yet to be decided. While there is increasing pressure being built by the US on Iran, how this is going to play out given the support of China, Russia and the European Union, remains to be seen. In addition to the external pressures, Iran is also confronted with internal challenges because of the protests within the country. On June 27, Tehran's Grand Bazaar was shut down amidst protests by its businessmen against the falling Iranian currency. Economic difficulties for the people of Iran are increasing.

Despite heavy military assault by Saudi-led coalition forces since June 12 to defend the Yemeni Red Sea port city of Hodeida and finally the seizure of the airport on June 27, the conflict in Yemen continues with dire consequences for its people. The conflict has resulted in Yemen facing the world's most serious [humanitarian crisis](#) with at least 8 million people on the brink of famine and nearly 1 million suspected to be infected with cholera. According to the [United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres](#), approximately over 22 million Yemeni people are in dire need of assistance and protection. Out of these 22 million, 11.3 million are children. Some \$3 billion would be required to help the people of Yemen. The proxy war continues between Iran and the Saudi Arabia- led coalition without any immediate solution. Though Houthi officials have warily welcomed the draft UN peace plan for Yemen prepared by the UN special envoy

Mark Griffiths by asking for a ceasefire as the first step for any political process to begin, the UN's efforts to end the deadlock between the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition haven't yielded any result so far. The increasing involvement of Iran in Syria has pushed Israel to target Iranian military locations within Syria. The speculations of direct confrontation between Israel and Iran made headline news in the media but the situation was managed by assurances given by President Bashar al Assad that Syria is open to a settlement in the southwestern region where Iran-backed forces are deployed near the border with Israel without any compromise on the presence of Iran in Syria.

The other important development in the Gulf region was the June 6 announcement of the formation of the "Saudi-Emirati Coordination Council" (SECC) and 'the Strategy of Resolve' developed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, reflecting growing strategic cooperation between the two powerful countries of the region and opening up of new prospects for cooperation across a wide range of strategic economic projects. Explaining the SECC, Obaid bin Humaid Al Tayer, [Minister of State for Financial Affairs of the UAE stated](#) that the SECC "is a result of a long history and close bonds between the peoples of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The Strategy of Resolve also reflects the leaderships' determination in both countries to achieve the well-being, stability and development of the two fraternal peoples." Some in the US view this as the "death Knell" to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The formation of the SECC is definitely in many ways a signal of Saudi-UAE's common position and desire to take on the economic-security challenges collectively in future. How this is going to impact the existing regional cooperation mechanism remains to be seen.

For India, a significant development was the implementation of agreements signed to enhance energy cooperation between India and Gulf states. Saudi ARAMCO and Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) signed MoUs over investment in a [\\$44 billion](#) project in Ratnagiri (Maharashtra) to be implemented by Ratnagiri Refinery & Petrochemicals Ltd. (RRPCL). India's IOCL, OVL and BPRL have already invested in the Lower Zakhum offshore oilfield in February and first crude consignment reached Mangalore strategic petroleum reserves on June 8. These developments clearly indicate a growing strategic partnership between India and the Gulf states – UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Against the backdrop of these developments, the current edition of the newsletter examines various dimensions of complex problems, challenges and changing security and political changes and existing unsettled conflicts and their implications and carries an exclusive interview with Daniel Carmon, Ambassador of Israel to India as well as a column by Professor Girijesh Pant on the current narrative of energy geopolitics in the region.

Election Results Consolidate Erdogan's Power

Md. Muddassir Quamar

The election results for the parliamentary and presidential elections, held on June 24, 2018 have not thrown any surprises. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have emerged victorious with significant margins, even though Erdogan would have preferred a more thumping win. The elections that were due in November 2019 were preponed with the idea that Turkey needs a stable polity with a presidential system and that it cannot wait for another year and half to see the implementation of the shift from parliamentary to presidential system. Notably, the Turkish polity has been witness to significant polarization due to Erdogan's alleged authoritarian behaviour and this has intensified since the failed coup of July 2016. While the president, the AKP and their supporters and allies have been harping on the idea that a presidential system will give Turkey the much needed stability, the opposition and detractors see the rise of an autocratic leader.

In the presidential elections, the incumbent Erdogan was declared elected with 52.59 per cent votes. He was trailed by some distance by Republican People's Party (CHP) leader and the main

opposition candidate Muharrem Ince, who received 30.64 per cent of popular votes. Soon after the announcement of the unofficial results Ince conceded defeat and

issued a press statement that he accepts the people's verdict. The other important candidates Selahittin Demirtas of the People's Democratic Party (HDP) and Meral Aksener of the Good Party received 8.4 per cent and 7.29 per cent votes respectively. The parliamentary elections also did not throw any surprises. The AKP which had formed an alliance with the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) received 53.66 per cent of votes, thus gaining 344 seats in the 600-member parliament. The opposition alliance of CHP, the Good and the Felicity Party received a total of 33.94 per cent of votes and thus gained 189 seats in parliament. The remaining 67 seats went to the pro-Kurdish HDP, which received 11.7 per cent of the popular votes.

The elections were held in a highly polarized environment with continued crackdown on Kurdish dissenters and on media and civil society and in the wake of accusations of serious human rights violations by government and security forces. Nonetheless, with these elections Turkey has completed the transition from a parliamentary system of government to a presidential system. The transition itself had been bitterly contested by the opposition parties but was eventually passed by parliament and approved in a referendum held in April 2017. While Erdogan, being the leader of the AKP and a directly elected president, was already

taking decisions and acting like an executive president, with the formal transition, his hold on power is set to increase.

The president will now have significant control over the executive and judiciary, and can also exert control on the legislature as head of the ruling party. In the new system, the post of prime minister has been scrapped, the president will choose his own cabinet and will have complete control over appointment and dismissal of civil servants. He will be the head of the state as well as the leader of the government and will also have the power to issue decrees with effect of law, although it would be subject to parliamentary approvals. The president will also have the power to appoint and dismiss judges in the highest court of the country, which would mean that the judiciary would become subservient to the executive. More importantly, the practice of head of the state resigning from party positions to maintain neutrality and a bipartisan approach has been done away with according to the new system. This would mean that the president remains the leader of the political party, and in case of an absolute majority, can easily manipulate the legislature. Though Erdogan's AKP does not have a majority in the parliament as it fought elections in alliance with the MHP which has 49 seats while the AKP has 295 seats – well short of the simple majority of 318 – the sweeping powers allocated to the president under the new system undermines the legislature. On the other hand, the parliamentary control over the cabinet and the presidency has been

reduced. The law makers will have to write to the vice-president or the ministers in case of a parliamentary inquiry, and for referring an impeachment motion against the president to the judiciary, a two-thirds majority will be required. Above all, the president will also have the power to call for fresh elections. This will effectively mean that dissent within the party and from the parliament will be difficult.

Turkey is going through a critical phase in its history. Political polarization is at all-time high and the old elites have been effectively sidelined and replaced by new elites who adhere to a more orthodox form of Sunni Islam and are fiercely nationalist. This is also visible in the electoral politics whereby the ultra-nationalist MHP and moderate Islamist AKP have formed an alliance to secure power. Analysts have argued that the electoral victory will further embolden Erdogan to continue on the path towards consolidation of power into the hands of one person. This will mean that the Turkey's aggressive foreign policy approach towards the Middle East, especially in Syria and Iraq, will continue. Erdogan is expected to continue his hard-nosed approach towards neighbours and at the same time, continue to have a strongman approach towards domestic opposition.

Undoubtedly, the election victory underlines the support enjoyed by Erdogan and AKP among the Turkish electorate and shows that the opposition parties in Turkey are in a state of disarray.

(Dr Md. Muddassir Quamar is Associate Fellow at the IDSA)

Signs of Détente in Israel-Iran Proxy War in Syria

Lakshmi Priya

The civil war that broke out in Syria in 2011 has turned the country into an arena for proxy wars among regional and extra-regional players. Within months of protests against the government, initially led by 14-year-old Naief Aboud in Daraa, the crisis escalated and attracted outside powers to the region bent on pursuing their own vested interests. The United States used its might to ensure the fall of the Assad regime, while Russia ensured that Assad stays in power in Syria.

Similarly Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and Bahrain supported the anti-regime opposition forces and threw their weight behind anti-Assad rebels, while Iran supported the regime steadfastly. Iraq which hosts a large population of Kurds, along with Kuwait (that has a substantial Shia population) treaded cautiously.

Over last two years, Bashar al-Assad's hold on power strengthened in Syria and his reluctance to proceed with a political solution for Syria has become apparent. Russia's support for the Assad regime and the presence of Iran and even Turkey has given his regime a new lease of life, while offending other regional players.

Iran's inroads into Syria and its new-found confidence has irked Israel which has until now maintained a stand of non-

interference in the Syrian crisis. Towards the end of 2017, Iran established a permanent base in [El Kiswah](#) city, 14 km south of Damascus, and in response, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned Syrian President Bashar al-Assad of [military intervention](#) if it permits Iran to establish military bases within Syrian territory. Syria has virtually become an arena for Israel-Iran proxy war. Apart from giving an impetus to the Israel-Palestine issue, it deviates attention from the political solution to the Syrian crisis.

Iran-Israel Equation

Iran and Israel who are presently at loggerheads were US allies before the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran led by Ayatollah Khomeini and was then only the second Muslim majority country to recognize Israel as a sovereign state. However, after the revolution, Iran put on an Islamic cloak, re-aligned its priorities and its leaders went to the extent of not recognizing Israel as a state, calling it Little Satan, following the [Big Satan](#), i.e., the United States.

Although Israel is inimical to Arab countries, even Iran is unfriendly towards Sunni Arab states. However, Iran wants to carve a niche as an Islamic power and has

to make constant efforts to outdo Saudi Arabia which is a major theocratic rival, while Israel is suspicious of most regional players in its vicinity and is conscious of its identity and security threat. Israel does not share its boundary with Iran but is wary of Iranian material and other support to the Hezbollah that instigates border tensions. Although Iran is not in direct conflict with Israel, but in its quest to gain legitimacy in the Muslim world, it has emerged as the arch enemy of Israel.

Secondly after Egypt, nuclear capable Iran has emerged as a worthy enemy of Israel and despite the presence of internal fissures, Arab countries look up to Iran in their fight against Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu mentioned that Iran is responsible for more than [eighty percent](#) of Israel's security concerns and Israel is determined to counter it. He pushed for the US or Israel to attack sites linked with the nuclear installations in Iran before the signing of the JCPOA. For its part, Iran has been demonizing Israel and is supporting the Hezbollah by providing training, weapons, money, intelligence inputs and ideological support.

Significance of Syria

Syria shares its boundary with Israel and Golan Heights is a major irritant in their relationship. There is lack of trust between the two countries but Israel does not have any incentive to interfere in Syria's internal matters.

In the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Israel maintained a policy of non-intervention and preferred a "[Known Devil](#)" i.e., Bashar

al Assad to the unknown Islamist rebel groups. Even though Syria and Israel have border disputes, the situation has been relatively calm and Israel has preferred status quo over instability in the neighbourhood. However, with the growing clout of Iran in Syrian affairs, Israel has come up with measures to counter Iran.

Syria is a natural ally of Iran and provides safe haven to the Iran-trained Hezbollah fighters. It is part of the Shia crescent extending from Iran to Iraq, Lebanon and Golan. Hafez al-Assad who brought stability to Syria for more than a decade, maintained a relationship with Iran based on equality. However, with uncertainty looming over Bashar al Assad's reign, Syria seems to have become Iran's client state. It depends on Russian and Iranian forces for its stability. However, Iranian deputy foreign minister [Hossein Amir Abdolhian](#) mentioned that Iran is not interested in keeping Bashar Al-Assad in power for life but it also does not support extremist groups and terrorist elements undermining Syrian security. With the balance tilting in favour of Assad, due to Russia's active intervention on the Syrian issue, Iran has formally come on board and became part of a troika advocating peace in Syria through the Astana talks.

Syria-Iran relations thrive despite basic differences between the two. Where Syria is the birthplace of Arab nationalism, promotes secularism and is majorly inhabited by the Sunni populace though headed by a Shiite-Alawi ruler, Iran propagates Islamism and has a majority Shia population. However, both the countries held a similar stand against

Saddam's Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war and both have been hostile towards Israel, have a pro-Russia foreign policy and have been antagonistic towards the United States.

Israel-Iran proxy war in Syria

Israel has been raising the alarm over growing presence of Iranian forces in Syria and at the beginning of this year when an Iranian drone entered Israeli air space, the latter shot it down by calling it a violation of Israel's sovereignty. Iran and Syria denied the allegations saying the drone was on a routine mission to gather information on the terror group ISIS. A senior Iranian military official, [Brigadier General Hossein Salami](#) (second in command, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) said that Iran has the capacity to "bring hell to the Zionist regime".

In February, Syrian air defence missiles opened anti-aircraft fire and brought down one of the eight dispatched Israeli F-16 jets, following which Israel carried out large-scale strikes in Syria targeting four Iranian sites along with Syrian air defence batteries.

Israel supported the US-led strike on Syria in April. Israeli Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) said that Assad's provision of a forward base for Iran and its proxies will endanger Syria. Two weeks later, an Iranian munition site in Aleppo was targeted by Israel with the help of GBU-39 small diameter bombs, which killed around a dozen Iranians and destroyed 200 missiles. It is [rumored](#) that Israel masked its attack by flying through Jordan and Iraq

and used US "identification friend or foe (IFF)" codes to conceal its identity.

After ten days, Israel launched "Operation House of Cards" and bombed more than 35 sites in Syria in response to 20 rockets launched by Iran from Syrian held side of Golan Heights, four of which were intercepted by the Iron Dome Missile Defense System. Israeli Defence forces claimed that they had struck all of Iran's military infrastructure in Syria. Israel's Air Force commander Maj. Gen. [Amikam Norkin](#) accepted that with this attack, Israel had become the first country to carry out an operational attack in the Middle East through the F-35 stealth fighter. The [Israeli Prime Minister](#) issued a statement claiming "Iran crossed a red line. We responded accordingly. Whoever hurts us — we will hurt them sevenfold".

It was the most extensive Israeli strike in Syria in last forty-five years. It fostered speculations of a direct spat between Iran and Israel. It is to be noted that the Israeli bombing took place two days after US President Donald Trump announced withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal.

The war of words continued between leaders of the two countries, as Israeli defence minister [Avigdor Lieberman](#) said, "...must remember that if it rains here [in Israel], it will pour there. I hope that we have finished this chapter and that everyone got the message." Iranian cleric Ayatollah [Ahmad Khatami](#) warned Israel that if it "dares" to attack Hezbollah, the cities of Tel Aviv and Haifa would be "razed to the ground".

Thereafter, the US came up with [twelve demands](#) and required Iran to withdraw from Syria. Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister [Faisal Mekdad](#) rejected the call for withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria and mentioned that, “Whether Iranian forces or Hezbollah withdraw or stay in Syria is not up for discussion because it's the (business) of the Syrian government”. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman [Bahram Qasimi](#) reiterated that Tehran will continue its cooperation with Damascus and Moscow till terrorism gets eliminated.

Conclusion

It was being speculated that the Iran-Israel shadow war in Syria will soon turn into direct confrontation. However, the situation seems to have improved as Syrian President Bashar al Assad announced that Syria is open to reach a settlement in the southwestern region where Iran-backed forces are deployed near the border with Israel. Nevertheless, Iran’s presence in Syria is non-negotiable.

Russia, which has recently emerged as an important and decisive player in the region,

is rooting for a deal on the southwestern region of Syria. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said that all foreign forces deployed in the south-western region bordering Israel shall withdraw as soon as possible. An agreement has been reached to hold a three-way meeting between the US, Russia and Jordan in southern Syria’s de-escalation zone.

Currently, Israel is content with the possibility of Iran withdrawing from its border and Iran appears content with having retained its presence in other regions of Syria. Syria is pleased to have brought the de-escalation talks back on track and to have dodged the question of a political solution. Russia is convinced about the security of the Syrian regime and the US is complacent about being back in the region. It appears that the Iran-Israel proxy war will continue. However, chances of direct confrontation are not as strong as they were in April. It is a possibility that Iran and Israel will focus on strategic restraint rather than going for full escalation.

(Lakshmi Priya is Research Assistant at the IDSA)

Iraq Post-Elections: Government Formation amid Vote Recount

Nagapushpa Devendra

Amidst low voter turnout, Muqtada al-Sadr's 'Sairoon' (Forward) Alliance emerged victorious in Iraq's parliamentary elections, which delivered a rude blow to the incumbent Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, who was widely expected to win but due to a particularly poor showing in Baghdad, ended up third in the race.

The elections were also marred with allegations of large-scale electoral fraud leading to the ordering of recounts that might arguably alter the final tally. There has also been much controversy over attempts by Al-Sadr's avowedly nationalist alliance seeking to forge a coalition with Hadi Al-Amiri's Iran-backed bloc for the purpose of forming a new government.

However, the big story of the elections was the major upset dealt to the ruling Abadi government, which has been attributed to the broad disillusionment among the Iraqi electorate over Abadi's leadership capabilities. The last four years of Abadi's premiership were [marked](#) by continuous political and sectarian conflict; the absence of far-reaching reforms; the failure to rebuild trust between the government and the country's Kurds after the latter's self-styled referendum; and most importantly, failure to secure much needed aid for the reconstruction of Iraq amid widespread corruption and inefficiency.

As a result, the growing support for a political alternative and Muqtada al-Sadr's campaign to reach out to elements of Iraqi popular opinion is what helped the Shia cleric to secure 54 seats for his alliance in the parliament. His anti-corruption message, repeated enunciation of non-partisan, non-sectarian technocratic government, and strict Iraqi nationalism opposed to the US and Iranian meddling, clearly resonated with the electorate.

Iran's consolation

Though Tehran may not be happy with this outcome, they may still be sanguine about the performance of their close associate, Hadi al-Amiri — leader of the Popular Mobilization Unit bloc — who managed to secure the second position for his alliance that garnered 47 seats in the elections.

Amiri's economic populism, based on calls for rebuilding Iraq's infrastructure and increasing aid to the poor, seems to have served him well in the polls. Finally, there was a tie at 25 seats between former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition and Nechervan Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party. It appears that Maliki government's corruption, mismanagement and hunger for power which had distracted it from addressing the emerging crisis, like the rise of ISIS during

its term back in 2014, deprived the coalition with political opportunities.

Meanwhile, the turnout of Kurds was extremely [low in Kirkuk](#) due to two major factors. Firstly, Kurds were utterly disappointed over the loss of their city last October to the government in Baghdad. Secondly, the Kurdistan Democratic Party had previously decided to boycott the elections and also urged other Kurdish parties to do the same. Although they later participated in the elections involuntarily, the turnout remained low. The low participation of Kurds has only put whatever control they retain in Kirkuk into jeopardy, as the representative from Kirkuk is likely to be an Arab. The number of Arabs turning out to vote in Kirkuk province was much higher than that of the Kurds.

Al-Sadr flips, approaches pro-Iran bloc

The Iraqi parliament, also known as the Council of Representatives, consists of 329 seats and includes quota for women and minorities.

The alliances and parties in the new parliament now need to conjure up a majority of 165 seats to form a government and appoint a new president and prime minister. Thus, the challenge for Al-Sadr, the leader of coalition with maximum seats, is to form alliances in order to form a government. To this end, Al-Sadr has already indicated the possible makeup of a broad coalition with multiple parties, which may include current Prime Minister

Abadi's Victory Alliance. In a witty remark, Sadr has [stated](#):

“We are Sayirun (Marching) with Hikma (Wisdom) and Wataniya (Patriotism) so that the Iradah (Will) of the people be our aim and to build Jilan Jadidan (a New Generation) and to witness Taghir (Gorran/Change) to the betterment and for the Al-Qarar (Decision) to be Iraqi. So we raise the Bayariq (Banners) of Al-Nasr (Victory) and let Baghdad, the capital, be Hawiyatuna (Baghdad Is Our Identity) and for our Hirkuna (Movement) Democratic (possibly KDP) towards the formation of a paternal government from technocratic Kawadur (Cadres) without partisanship.”

He has also toned down his nationalist rhetoric and sent [signals](#) to both Iran and the US that he is not opposed to either of them, so far as both external powers accept his electoral success.

However, Sadr has come under criticism for trying to build a controversial bloc to gain majority in parliament. His Sairoon alliance seems to be [building a coalition](#) with the Shia Islamist Hakima movement and the Wataniya Party, that have secured 19 and 21 seats respectively in the Council of Representatives.

While this could be the nucleus of the next Iraqi government, there was controversy when Sadr announced the [forming of a coalition](#) with Hadi al-Amiri's alliance supported by Iran. Given Al-Sadr's opposition to Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs, this seems to be an odd choice, but it does make a formidable nucleus for the next government, assuming that an election

recount (to be discussed ahead) does not change the election result to a great extent.

However, the leader of Wataniya Party, Ayad Allawi, has expressed his displeasure on Sadr's decision to align with Amiri. Fateh is the political arm of sectarian Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) and Wataniya with a non-sectarian agenda, opposes it. As Sadr had already agreed on a political alliance with Wataniya Party before uniting with Amiri, Allawi states that Sairoon's alliance with Fateh [is a violation and betrayal](#) of his agreement with them. It appears that Wataniya Party wants to bond with the Shia Islamist government and might break its alliance with Sadr, joining the opposition, which may not be a huge loss for Sairoon's party, considering the availability of other options. For instance: Victory Alliance, Kurdistan Democratic Party, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and Decision Alliance.

Here, the State of Law coalition has been purposely omitted, as Dhiaa Al Assadi, a close aide to Al-Sadr has already told [The National](#) that, "Maliki is not welcome to join the coalition." Perhaps, this could be the reason why Maliki was insisting that the Islamic Dawa Party reunite, as together, it will hold 67 seats, more than Al-Sadr's party. But, Abadi's awareness of the reality that Maliki would never let him lead the party once reconciled, has made him averse to reunification. Additionally, Abadi also knows that Al-Sadr despises Al-Maliki and aligning with him would mean crushing the open possibility of retaining his premiership.

Election 'fraud' and partial recount

However, all the post-election political machinations could be upset when the recounting of votes takes place to address major electoral violations that have reportedly taken place in these elections.

Since the disclosure of the election results, there has been growing unrest from members of the incumbent Iraqi government over alleged electoral violations and rising number of [fraud complaints](#) against the country's electoral commission, which has undermined the legitimacy of the tightly contested elections.

Even some members of the international community have urged Iraq's High Electoral Commission (IHEC) to "[immediately and fully](#)" investigate complaints by candidates and parties over the conduct of the legislative elections. This has brought about the [formation of a committee](#) of officials from the auditing and intelligence agency to look into the charges of fraud. After thorough scrutiny, the conclusion drawn by this committee was that Iraqi electronic [voting machines](#) (that the country had never used before) were not adequately tested against tampering before election day. This resulted in discrepancies between the actual ballots cast and the machine reading, indicating that some machines were pre-programmed to [yield deceitful votes](#).

Adding to this finding, the committee also pointed out that a number of Iraq's High Election Commission officials, who were supervising the elections, were bribed into

doctoring the results through ballot box stuffing.

A few polling stations even recorded 100 per cent participation, a feat that could have been possible only by illegally procuring voter IDs from abstaining voters and casting ballots in their name.

Consequently, the IHEC [announced](#) the cancellation of the results of 103 voting centres in the elections, after the verification of dozens of “red complaints,” which is considered as “extremely serious violation” that may affect the outcome of the competing list. Additionally, the Iraqi parliament has predominately [cancelled](#) the votes of some expatriates and internally displaced people. They have also issued a [decree](#) to carry out a recount of votes manually.

The Iraqi Supreme Court has also [ruled](#) in favour of the parliament. Yet, Salim al-Jabouri, speaker of Parliament says that he wants to [redo the entire](#) election over the allegation of fraud which he believes to have been substantiated by the [warehouse fire](#) that may have destroyed as many as

half of the paper ballots produced in the May 12 election.

On the other hand, Al-Sadr is urging everyone to stay calm, arguing that the situation could descend into civil war, if the situation persists. In an address to the nation, Al-Sadr [stressed](#) that “it is now time to stand as one for building and reconstruction instead of burning ballot boxes or repeating elections just for one seat or two?”

Amidst all this confusion, one thing appears to be clear that manual recount may not deliver any drastic change in the final results. Al-Sadr would remain the kingmaker and will decide who the next prime minister would be once a coalition is formed.

The only interesting thing to observe in the days to come is how efficiently Al-Sadr manages to co-ordinate with the pro-Iranian party in forming a government in Iraq smoothly and work towards its reconstruction.

(Nagapushpa Devendra is Research Assistant at IDSA)

Protests in Jordan and Fears of New Regional Unrest

Jatin Kumar

Jordan is in the eye of a geopolitical storm as it is currently surrounded by political unrest and instability in its immediate neighbourhood. The population of the country is itself made up of a large number of refugees, who have fled for shelter from the adjoining states of Iraq, Palestine, and Syria.

This huge influx has greatly destabilized and damaged the country's economy. Thus, the recent spate of protests over a barrage of socio-political and economic issues has raised the possibility of a mass unrest building and spilling over to other parts of the region and creating a new wave of popular discontent and instability across West Asia.

IMF-backed austerity measures 'unpopular'

The protests in Jordan started when 32 trade unions took to the streets on 31 May 2018. These demonstrations were reportedly led by labour unions, merchants, wholesalers, supermarket owners and employers.

The protests were against the new tax bill of the government, which was to be discussed in the House of Representatives and was approved by cabinet on 22 May

2018. The new draft bill proposed raising income tax on the employees by at least 5% and on companies by 20-40%. They [introduced indefinite carry forward of certain tax losses.](#)

This legislation is the latest in a series of austerity measures introduced since Amman secured a \$723-million loan from the IMF on 24 August 2016. The protests turned nationwide on 2 June 2018, when Jordanian Prime Minister Hani al-Mulki refused to roll back the IMF-backed reform bill.

For King Abdullah II, the mass protests served as a reminder of the 2011 'Arab Spring'. The fear of nationwide violence pushed King Abdullah II to replace Prime Minister Hani al-Mulki with Omar al-Razzaz. However, it did not please the demonstrators demanding the revocation of the new tax bill and restoration of subsidies on bread and oil prices, as well as strict action against corruption. Once the government was unable to suppress the protests, it finally decided to revoke the troublesome tax bill on 7 June 2018.

The way the Jordanian regime has dealt with the situation highlights the fact that it did not want protesters to turn violent and create a situation which was similar to events that took place in 2011 across West

Asia, such as in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria. The regime decided not to use force against the protesters and allowed trade unions to supervise the protests.

It is interesting to know that the demands of protesters were not limited to the tax bill but also covered the reintroduction of subsidies on bread and oil prices and strict action against corruption.

To end the chaotic situation the regime accepted only two major demands but the serious issue of oil prices, corruption and subsidies on bread remained unanswered. It left scope for protesters to return to the streets if government introduced any new economic change that directly affected the life of the ordinary citizen.

Economy in tailspin

Jordan is said to have a [‘semi-rentier’ economy, which is highly dependent on foreign funding and aid](#), which comes from international organizations such as the US, Japan and the Gulf countries.

Presently, its economy is in very bad shape due to a [rising balance of payment crisis](#) as a result of high foreign aid. The high rate of inflation, rise in unemployment and poverty, and low wages and salaries have worsened the life of civilians.

In a recent report, *The Economist’s* Intelligence Unit listed Amman [as the most expensive Arab city and 28th most expensive city worldwide](#). The aggregate debt incurred in the Jordanian economy has now touched \$40bn. Moreover, declining foreign aid, regional turmoil, and

rising oil prices pose a considerable challenge to the Jordanian economy.

Since the end of five-year aid package from Gulf States to Jordan in January 2017, no announcement has been made regarding financial aid from the GCC. The economy is further over-burdened by 3,70,000 Palestinian refugees and 6,55,624 Syrian refugees disproportionate to the reduction in UNRWA cash flows. In such a situation, King Abdullah’s acceptance of the difficult economic situation facing the Jordanian public, has made things more problematic.

Although the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have agreed to offer a \$2.5bn aid package for Jordan at an emergency Gulf summit that held on 10 June 2018, these countries can only help Jordan to a point. Therefore, Jordan’s economy will have to be self-sustaining.

Possibility of Regional fallout

Stability in Jordan is vital for regional stability in West Asia, as some of the major countries of the region, such as Syria, Iraq and Yemen, are experiencing civil war-like conditions.

Under such circumstances, the region cannot afford another country being wracked by social turmoil. Tumult in Jordan could also scuttle constructive changes slowly gaining pace in Iraq and Syria.

Thus, it is in the best interest of Israel and Saudi Arabia to maintain peace in Jordan. Peace in Jordan, could help Saudi Arabia focus more on the war in Yemen, as the kingdom shares a long border with that

country. On the other side, to deal with threats emerging from Syria, Gaza and Iran, Israel needs stability in Jordan.

Despite commitment of aid package from the Gulf States, a far-reaching economic

policy is needed to address the current problems facing the Hashemite kingdom.

(Jatin Kumar is Research Assistant at West Asia Centre in the IDSA)

Interview with Daniel Carmon, Ambassador of Israel to India

by Meena Singh Roy

1. What are Israel's key security concerns in the context of Iran's growing presence in Syria?

Since the establishment of the state of Israel, our country has faced two major challenges. First, the urgent need to build the country from scratch facing many 'developmental' challenges, as well as with the need to absorb many Jewish people coming back to their ancient homeland, many of them as refugees or displaced people. Second, to safeguard the people and the territory of newborn state, whose neighbours have challenged its very existence. Over the years, we have managed to meet these challenges and to build [not only] a vibrant democracy, a thriving economy and a dynamic society, but also [provided] them the required security.

In the last few years we – and the world – have seen the emergence of new global challenges that can be resolved only through global efforts. Terrorism is one of them. In our region, the Middle East, or West Asia, terrorism is very much impacted by the political architecture of the region. The extremism and disregard of basic human values, that stand at the root of terrorism are nurtured by states. Iran plays a leading role in this regard. It sponsors terror, it offers training to terrorists and it gives encouragement to terror and almost [legitimises] it! Iran comes at the top of the

list of countries that [have] been destabilizing the region by using, supporting and financing terrorism. This is not just terrorism against Israel but against many other countries in the region and beyond. Contrary to common opinion, the Israel-Palestinian conflict is not the key issue for instability in the West Asian region, but rather the activities of such local actors as the Iranian regime!

Now, this very same Iranian regime– which shows disregard to human lives, to human rights, which calls openly to the destruction of the State of Israel, which rejects and sabotages any attempt to bring stability to our part of the world – this very same Iranian regime maintains its efforts to build military and nuclear capabilities, contrary to its international commitment. Furthermore, in the last few years Iran is seeking to build a physical presence, on our borders, directly (in Syria) or by proxies, Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Iranian presence there comes with a belligerent message to Israel and a threat to the whole region.

Iran needs to act like a responsible member of the international community which they do not do now. We don't want to see Iran on our borders. Let me assure you that we openly share our views about Iran with our friends of the Indian Government.

Iran's presence in Syria is unacceptable to Israel! It's a direct threat. It also triggers more instability in Syria itself and has a negative influence on the region. Like any other country, Israel has to secure its people and interests. It cannot overlook such threats. This is why, despite the fact that Israel has not been involved in Syria and does not have any stake there, a red line has been set and when this line is crossed, Israel responds.

When it comes to Syria itself, and especially the Syrian people who are paying the ultimate price of the civil war and a shaky regime that is sponsored and supported by Iran, Israel's only active involvement is in giving medical treatment to hundreds of Syrians in its hospitals. It is really heart-warming to see so many manifestations of the medical and humanitarian work done in our hospitals for those in Syria who had this misfortune of getting wounded in the midst of hostilities. This is our contribution. The humanitarian crisis in Syria deserves a more vigorous international response.

2. What is Israel's view on United States Middle East peace process and the future of the Israel-Palestinian conflict?

The Israel-Palestinian conflict is a complex issue. In fact, just as we talk about peace process we can look at conflict as a process in itself. Expecting quick solution to such a complex issue is unrealistic and harmful. This not a matter of 'quick fix' but rather a real process that will have to start with managing the conflict, with Confidence Building Measures and these will

eventually pave way to co-existence that facilitates peace and [the] end of conflict. The two sides have to agree and to share [the] same level of commitment to embark on such a process, knowing – and preparing their respective people to the fact – that this will be [a] long way with many ups and downs.

To be [a] partner means, for example, that the Palestinian authority should revoke any link with terrorists and extremists and abide by the three conditions set by the international community itself. First, recognise Israel, second, abide by all past agreements and third, renounce terrorism.

Unfortunately, the Palestinian recognized leadership is willingly taken hostage by extremist organisations such as Hamas, who have no wish, no interest, to bring the conflict to its end through mutual compromise. Instead of demonstrating leadership and putting the interest of its people above all, it gives in to internal threats. It allows these terror organizations to take control of the agenda and rather than bring the intensity of the conflict down, to intensify it and even attempt to change its nature from [a] political conflict to a religious war. This is extremely dangerous!

The Israel-Palestinian conflict is a political issue and needs [a] political solution which would take its own time. It is important to note is that despite everything, the reality on the ground is that Israelis and Palestinians are intertwined in many ways and are able to benefit from it. For example, there has been a boom in the economy of the West Bank due to its

proximity to Israel. The Israeli ecosystem of innovation creates many opportunities for Palestinians too and the combination of the spirit of creativity of the two people proves to be beneficial to both.

At the same time, looking at Gaza we see what happens when terror gains control. Gaza under Hamas has isolated itself effectively from this economic boom. Hamas, as a terror organization is not seeking to provide safety, prosperity and health to the people but rather to keep them constantly in a state of fear and anger. Without them it will lose its grip over Gaza.

Any peace initiative has to take all of the above into account. We need to make efforts towards peace, even though the peace is not around the corner.

3. How do you view Russia's role in the West Asia? Does it affect US-Israel Relations?

Israel has a long history with Russia that pre-dates our independence. At the time of the Cold War, Israel, a young democracy with an emerging statehood, has made the obvious choice to be part of the Western bloc. These days, we witness improved relations and more tactical co-operation. There is also intense engagement between the political leadership in Moscow and Jerusalem. Both President Putin and Prime Minister Netanyahu are keeping each other informed about their concerns and the areas of cooperation. I don't think that there is – nor should be – any effect on the US-Israel special relations as this is not a zero sum game.

4. What are the implications for Israel after the US withdrawal from JCPOA and continued support from countries like Russia China and EU?

The Israeli view on JCPOA has been articulated many times. Simply said, it is a bad agreement! Many elements in the agreement are faulty. For example, Iran's ballistic missile programme is not addressed. The lack of provisions for inspection is a big mistake, and the sunset clause is very problematic as it will allow Iran to restart developing nuclear military capabilities within a few years. We must make sure Iran does not go nuclear! The Gulf States and Israel have the same position on this issue and this needs to be addressed. It is unclear yet how the withdrawal of US from JCPOA will evolve in the future as the US sanctions gets rolling. One solution to JCPOA is to correct it, so that it will 'hold water' as a tool to prevent/deter Iran from developing nuclear capability in future as well as in the present. JCPOA has to address all the concerns, has to view Iran's nuclear programme in a holistic context and accordingly tackle all issues and introduce all the right mechanisms to secure Iran's compliance.

5. Given the growing commonalities between Israel and the Gulf States, how do you see the relations shaping up between Israel and Gulf States in the future?

Despite instability and dangerous situations evolving in the region, there are

opportunities for cooperation between Israel and the Arab World. The regional contestation is no more Arabs versus Israelis, its extremists versus moderates and moderates must understand the opportunities which Israel offers them. Israel can be [an] essential partner for social and economic development, a partner for innovative solution to water problems to agriculture, etc. These bring Israel as [a] constructive neighbour rather than [an] enemy. I believe many of our neighbours in the region also understand this.

6. How have India-Israel relations evolved over the years?

The ties between the two are rooted in a deep friendship, and are based on mutual values, mutual interests, mutual challenges, and mutual solutions. It is a bond between two ancient peoples, proud of their heritage and history, and two young vibrant democracies eager to grasp the future. It is a bond which can be felt, [is] almost palpable in every interaction between Indians and Israelis in India, in Israel and around the world. Besides our deep historical roots going back to antiquity, the connection between our two modern nations took in recent years a new vibrant turn that makes each essential to the other in many ways. Together, we marked 25 years of diplomatic relations with one high-level event after another.

During my tenure (2014-18) as Ambassador of Israel to India, I learnt how strong and diverse this bond between the two countries really is. These four years witnessed two historical first ever visits to

Israel by Indian leaders: of the Indian President, Pranab Mukherjee (2015) and Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi (2017). I was also privileged to welcome in India President Reuven Rivlin (2016) and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (2018) in reciprocal visits. These four visits in four years appear in the eyes of many to be a crescendo in our relations, but the truth is that they are only the peak on the tip of the iceberg.

7. What are the major challenges faced by India and Israel to make this relationship much more meaningful?

The political will and the infrastructure for taking the relations forward are in place. India is [a] huge place, we have converging interests but also differences. And we are finding ways to work together and collaborate. Despite these commonalities, we lack enough knowledge of each other. I feel that we are now better aware of each other and perhaps more attentive and sensitive to each other's needs and fears. We still have [a] long way to go to get to know each other better on all levels, not just in political circles but also on people-to-people level: academia, culture, industry and civil society. This is a major challenge and a major task. In this regard, we should all rejoice from this launching of a new direct Air India flight line between Tel Aviv and Delhi, a real breakthrough, which has practically brought both our countries closer, much closer. We will continue to strive more if we understand that this is an ongoing process. As an Ambassador for four years, I understand that this growing partnership is not just the domain of the

governments in New Delhi and Jerusalem, but is also made of cooperation with the states in India. Accordingly, and with the blessing of Delhi, we are working with states like Haryana, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Our work with Delhi as well as with these and other states in India is through reaching out to governments and to people alike. Let me also remind you that PM Netanyahu made a point of visiting [a] few states of India namely Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, talked to states' leaders, and we will implement a policy accordingly.

As we now speak, the CM of Gujarat is visiting our country for what is described as an "result-oriented visit" in various fields as Agriculture, Water, Innovation, Internal security.

Another crucial facet of these updated bilateral relations is their inclusiveness at all levels. Both in Israel and in India, the number of stakeholders grow and they come from all over the political and social spectrum.

I am proud to attest that by working together, we are able to implement all the grand promises of our leaders, step by step. One of the best tools that allow us to do so, is the special mechanism we have formed on the governmental level: creating a triangle between the Indian Federal Government, the state governments, and Israel. This has worked well on projects such as the MASHAV Centres of Excellence that are the core of the MASHAV Indo-Israeli Agricultural Project, and can work in many other fields as well. This project with 22 centres across India is the perfect

meeting point between India's agenda and Israeli technology. Another tool of the same spirit is the mechanism of joint working groups meant to further projects in each region. I have seen this with my own eyes on my many visits to various states in India, how well it works and how the visions of the partnership turns into reality.

India and Israel have a dream to take this relationship to a new height. However, the government cannot and does not work alone to make our dreams a reality. As technology becomes ever so crucial in our relations, the private sector developing it becomes an integral partner in our cooperation. Bringing the business communities and the peoples of our countries into the fold as partners and stakeholders in developing our relations and our countries is what makes our partnership sustainable. It ties us together in a shared vision for the future which we work together to make a reality, today.

8. What is the status of 'Namami Gange' project?

[A] few companies are already working in India. Agra and Chennai are some examples. There is a delegation of ten Israeli water experts going to visit India very soon. It will visit Lucknow and Bundelkhand, as a follow up to an agreement signed during high-level visits between the two countries and subsequent to my meeting with the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. Now, we will touch base with the Ganga cleaning programme as well.

When it comes to water technology and management, as it is all other areas, Israel

is willing to share its success story, to work together and create together. Given the obvious difference in size, our emphasis is on the quality not quantity when it comes to our cooperation with India. We offer technology that can be tailor made, but not building infrastructure.

This relationship in water (and agriculture) is not less strategic than defence as it touches the life of citizens of India and Israel. As defence relations have benefited both countries, cooperation in agriculture, water, innovation, and academia should benefit most basic national interests of each country, separately and collectively for both.

The other important feature of enhanced engagement can be seen in the areas of improved connectivity between New Delhi and Jerusalem. This becomes a wonderful journey of growing relations between India and Israel.

9. What is the future of India-Israel relations in IT, start-ups and innovation?

Both India and Israel have realized the central role innovation has to play in any field as we move towards the future. India has the most talented IT people. So does Israel. Even before innovation was highlighted during the visits, it had permeated every aspect of our relations throughout my tenure. As a diplomat on

the ground, I saw innovation in agricultural practices and technologies, innovation in water management and solutions, innovation in academia and in trade, innovation everywhere.

Through innovation, India and Israel have forged a special partnership which is not only technological but also strategic in nature. India's vast economy and varied experience in a range of development issues provides an opportunity for Israel and its companies to grow and expand their range of solutions, while Israeli technology and innovation is easily tailored and remodelled to address Indian challenges. In this exchange, each country is enriched in different ways.

Time after time, Israel has proven to be a reliable partner for India. The tiny little Israel and the giant incredible India have proven to be of value to one another in practice and at heart. With the bond and trust which has been formed between us, tested and proven and stronger than ever, the next step is an easy leap of faith. It is now time to think bigger, dream larger and work together to change the world for the better. From development of food and water security, to pushing the envelope of innovation, science and technology, to joint space programmes, even the sky is not the limit.

(Dr Meena Singh Roy is Research Fellow at the IDSA and heads its West Asia Centre.)

GUEST COLUMN

Who is Scripting the Narrative of Energy Geopolitics: Saudi Arabia, Russia or the USA!

Girijesh Pant

The decision to enhance oil production by one million barrels per day (mbd) in the fourth meeting of Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and non-OPEC countries held on June 23, 2018 in Vienna, reflects that a new narrative of energy geopolitics is being scripted. It all began in 2014, when oil prices started falling till 2016, making oil exporters miserable, signaling erosion of their market power. According to The World Bank's [assessment](#), "Between mid-2014 and early 2016, the global economy faced one of the largest oil price declines in modern history.

The 70 percent price drop during that period was one of the three biggest declines since World War II, and the longest lasting since the supply-driven market collapse of 1986." This was the pointer that the market dynamics have changed fundamentally hence OPEC alone would not be able to mediate. The non-OPEC countries under the leadership of Russia too shared the assessment, hence it was agreed to respond to new realities jointly. The twenty-four oil exporting countries met at Vienna in December 2016 and signed the Declaration of Cooperation which according to [OPEC's](#)

[press release](#) was "an unprecedented milestone in the history of the OPEC.

For the first time ever, the OPEC member countries coordinated with 11 non-OPEC oil producing countries in a concerted effort to accelerate the stabilization of the global oil market through voluntary production adjustments, which amounted to approximately 1.8 million barrels per day." The agreement was honoured through 2017 with periodic extensions, to be continued till the end of 2018. However, by the beginning of 2018 the market started heating up leading the prices to soar up to nearly \$80 per barrel. The market started speculating the possibility of \$100 per barrel creating a sense of unease making President Trump ask OPEC to produce more oil. Possibly a case of more production could be made because the adherence of compliance by 167% in April 2018 and the crisis in the Venezuelan oil industry impacted oil supply to the market, hurting oil consumers like China and India besides America. The price recovery certainly helped the oil exporters to meet their budgetary needs; it also opened possibilities of American shell oil to be back to take away their market share. In November 2017, America reportedly drilled

an all-time high yield of 10.057 million barrels a day.

The big-time players Saudi Arabia and Russia did not want to be at the receiving end hence they mutually agreed on expanding production. Thus, at the June 23 meeting Saudi Arabia prevailed upon fellow members – including Iran – to agree for a marginal increase to send the relevant signal.

Apparently in the new turf of the oil game, besides Saudi Arabia and Russia, America is the emerging player with its newly discovered strength. The numbers explain the logic of new narrative. Russia is the largest producer of oil, but the International Energy Agency's (IEA) estimates are that by the end of 2018 or in 2019, America will surpass it. Saudi Arabia is the largest exporter, but here again, America is making inroads and is likely to be the fourth largest exporter after Saudi Arabia, Russia and Iraq. What essentially changes the power dynamics is that Saudi Arabia and Russia need oil prices to meet their budgetary needs and hence are vulnerable to volatility, as America looks at oil as a source of domination. President Trump does not mince words when he says that he intends to use oil to promote his foreign policy goals. He was backed by the oil lobby in his election and his first overseas visit was to Saudi Arabia. He is looking not for 'oil independence' but dominance in the oil market. It is significant that today 37 countries buy oil from America and China is one of them. According to the EIA, China today is the second largest export market for US oil after Canada. The US would like to push its

oil to the Chinese market to improve the trade balance. It is reported that the China Petrochemical Corporation is going to enhance its oil imports from the US by 80% to 'help address Washington's complaints of a widening trade deficit in favour of China.' It is expected that oil could turn out to be the strategic factor in correcting the asymmetry in Sino-US trade relations.

China is the largest importer of oil and is a vital market for oil exporting countries like Saudi Arabia and Russia. Both have been competing for a larger share in the market. Russia, Angola and Saudi Arabia are the three major oil suppliers to China. It is reported that in the first eight months of 2017 while the Chinese imports from Russia went up by 13.2% to 1.16 mbd, imports from Saudi Arabia dropped 1.7% at 1.03 mbd during the same period. Both Russia and Saudi Arabia have been leveraging their strategic salience to consolidate their position in the oil sector. It is estimated that Russian crude to China will grow by 11% in 2018. It is observed that "China's Russian imports were likely to increase as a new pipeline comes onstream, making it easier to bring in the barrels, while independent refiners deepen their relations with Russian crude suppliers." Impacted by Russia's growing presence in the market, Saudi Arabia too is changing the parameters of its global energy engagement by investing in refineries to process 8-10 mbd oil to have a dedicated market for Saudi crude. China's refinery in Yunnan is one of them. American entry in Chinese market will have a bearing on the Russian and Saudi Arabian marketshare. It is significant that the American share in the Chinese market went up by a big margin

from 0.2% in 2016 to 2% in 2017 making it the 14th largest supplier. The intensity of competition is going to further increase with the prospect of oil demand peaking in China.

The mutual positioning of the three in the global oil market is going to be determined by the dynamics of the metal frame, the dominance of oil in the energy sector. The forecast made by BP in its 2018 report shows that oil will account for a quarter of the global energy mix. The countdown has begun not because oil is evaporating but it is purposely driven out by changes in the global energy mix triggered by commitment to the Paris Agreement which remains irreversible despite the American President's obstinacy to withdraw from it. Availability of renewables at grid parity and the possibility of moving to a distributed energy system leading to revolutionary changes in the organizing principle of business model – prosumer – has definitely put a question mark on the future of oil domination. Further, the efficiency quotient created by technological changes is demonstrating the decoupling of growth with energy consumption. It is not the peaking of oil supply but of oil demand that is on the radar. Thus oil producers are in the buyers' market.

The mutual positioning of the trio is also determined by their differential stakes in the regional security dynamics. Saudi Arabia, whose oil interest converges with Russia, shares a regional security assessment with America on Iran and to a greater extent on Syria. But the ambiguity in President Trump's policy on the region has forced Saudi Arabia to cultivate

President Putin for its defence needs. Saudi Arabia is repositioning itself as an assertive regional power trying to reconfigure the regional balance of power on its 'own strength'. This hegemonic aspiration to a greater extent is reflecting in its policy towards Yemen and Qatar. The domestic imperative of new power dynamics in Saudi Arabia has its own bearing in sharpening or blunting its oil weapon. This is evident by the fact that it listened to President's discomfort with the oil price rise and responded to it though in its own way.

The prospect of moderation in oil prices by the margin that oil exporters have decided on 23 June is likely to get jeopardized by the American President's message that there would be no buying of Iranian oil by November. It is not a phasing out over time. Apparently, the prospect of removing 2 mbd oil, the Iranian exports, from the market is bound to lead to a price hike. Reports are that Saudi Arabia has given an assurance to America to fill the gap. Though doubts are being raised about its capacity to fill the gap, a more fundamental issue raised is about its very credibility as a responsible leader of the OPEC. Further, the proposed meeting between the American President and President Putin is going to have its own ramifications because Iran is more than merely an oil producer for both of them. Whether there will be any tradeoff on Iran between the two is a matter of speculation. Interestingly, though Russia and Saudi Arabia met on June 23 on the basis of a shared perception on the oil market, the latter has seemingly given consent to deploy its oil strength on the basis of a shared strategic perception with America.

Such are the twists and turns of geopolitics, that are likely to script the new narrative.

(Dr Girijesh Pant is a Professor in the School of International Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and former Vice Chancellor of Doon University)

WEST ASIA NEWS SURVEY

POLITICAL

1. Qatar takes UAE to International Court of Justice

DOHA (12 June): One year after Qatar was isolated by the quartet of Arab countries — Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE — it has taken the UAE to the UN's International Court of Justice (ICJ) over violation of human rights of Qatari nationals. It has accused the UAE of leading the blockade and of violating the rights of Qatari nationals. Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulahman Al Thani has said, "The unlawful measures imposed by UAE have torn apart families, with parents being separated from children and husbands from wives. The families deserve to be reunited".

Qatar has accused the UAE of discriminating against Qataris by banning them from entry into the UAE and ordering them to leave for Qatar. Doha has requested the ICJ to make UAE comply with its obligations under the Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination. — *Al Jazeera*

2. Egypt foreign minister meets Jordan, PA officials in Cairo

CAIRO (31 May): Foreign ministers and top security officials from Jordan, Egypt and The Palestinian Authority met in

Cairo to discuss violent clashes between Israelis and Palestinians.

The meeting was called after a cease-fire between the two parties was reached a day earlier. The meeting focused at reaching an agreement to end the Israeli and Egyptian blockade of Gaza. — HJnews and Associated Press

3. US threatens EU against maintaining Iran nuclear deal

WASHINGTON (May 8) — After President Donald Trump announced America's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal (or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action — JCPOA), it also re-imposed economic sanctions on Iran that had been waived in exchange for restraints on its nuclear programme. The five countries that negotiated the deal — Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China — have signalled that they would try to maintain the deal without the US.

The three European countries who worked rigorously to forge a compromise expressed deep regret. On the other hand, President Hassan Rouhani stated that Iran will adhere to the deal as long as EU believes they can still benefit from it. To make the message clear, Iranian Foreign Minister visited Beijing, Moscow and Brussels.

Meanwhile, US national security adviser John Bolton has threatened to punish European companies that try to do business with Iran.

In addition, the US has also blacklisted Valiollah Seif, the governor of Iran's central bank and Iraq's Bilad Bank, on charges of funnelling money from IRGC to Hezbollah and other proxies in the region. — *Al-Monitor, Iran Daily, Middle East Eye, Agence France Presse, Al-Monitor*

4. Iran complying with nuclear deal: IAEA

GENEVA (24 May): The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has released another report certifying Iran's compliance with the terms of the nuclear deal. But, the group did complain about Tehran being slow to act when it comes to the surprise facility inspections that are mandated under the agreement.

However, the report is not likely to influence US decision to impose sanctions on nine individuals and entities, mostly from Turkey for continuing their businesses with Iranian airlines. In response, the Turkish Foreign Ministry has said that it will do everything in its powers to protect Turkish firms from US sanctions.

To further incense Turkey, the US is considering to impose restrictions on the sale of its weapons, including F-35 due to Ankara's growing relationship with Russia and imprisonment of an American citizen, Andrew Brunson.

Source: The Daily Star, The National, Daily Sabah, Al-Monitor

5. Iran seeks package from EU to abide by nuclear deal

VIENNA (26 May): Senior Iranian officials met their counterparts from Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia in Vienna, where Iranians laid out their own set of conditions for sticking with the nuclear deal. Iran's deputy foreign minister Abbas Araqchi said he was more confident than before that the deal could survive.

“For the time being, we are negotiating ... to see if they can provide us with a package which can actually give Iran the benefits of sanctions-lifting and then the next step is to find guarantees for that package and we need both legal and political commitments by the remaining participants in the JCPOA [deal],” he said.

Iranians have given Europe until 31 May to put together a package of economic benefits appealing enough to keep Iran in the deal even without US involvement. — *The Iran Project*

6. List of Khamenei's demands for Europe

TEHRAN (24 May): Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei set out his terms for preserving the deal to Europe, which include: protecting Iran's oil sales, preserving Iran's access to financial markets for trade purposes and no pressure from Europe to negotiate on Iran's missile programme or its activities in the Middle East. He has also made it

clear that Iran will not do business with the US again.

It appears that Khamenei's hardline approach is going to make it difficult for Iranian leaders who may be inclined to negotiate a new agreement. Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo presented a list of sweeping demands for Iran to meet or else face "the strongest sanctions in history" — including abandoning nuclear enrichment, the ballistic missile programme and the role in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

Source: The Middle East Monitor and Reuters

7. Turkey changing demography in Afrin region

DAMASCUS (1 May): Turkey and its Free Syrian Army proxies are reportedly working to fundamentally change the demographic balance in the Afrin region, which its forces have occupied inside Syria. Turkish-led forces are apparently handing over vacant houses which were abandoned by fleeing Kurds to Syrian Arabs from East Ghouta.

According to various reports these houses are being provided free of cost to displaced Arab populace. As Paul Iddon says, "With no hope of returning and rebuilding their old lives in East Ghouta for at least a few years, these displaced Syrians are likely being used as pawns by Ankara to create a new demographic reality on the ground." Although many of the displaced have accepted the free houses to avoid their dangerous and destitute existence, some have refused to accept the offer because they feel it is not

ethical to enter houses without the permission of the displaced Kurdish house owners.

In addition, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that FSA forces are using spray paint to declare which properties are now owned by them.

Source: Rudaw, Middle East Eye and Kurdistan24.net

8. Russia to host Syria peace talks in July

ASTANA (15 May): In July, Russia-Turkey-Iran will host the next round of Syrian peace talks in Sochi. Though the reason for the venue change is still unclear, Syrian rebel groups are already planning to boycott it. On the other hand, French President Emmanuel Macron has visited Moscow to discuss coordinating international efforts to bring the Syrian civil war to an end.

French and Russian leaders apparently agreed that the international community must focus on a constitution and electoral process for post-war Syria. — *Arab News, Al-Monitor*

9. Hezbollah makes gains in parliamentary elections

BEIRUT (6 May): Lebanese parliamentary elections held in May 2018 drew a far lower turnout (47%) as compared to the 2009 elections.

However, Hezbollah's allies have managed to secure 67 seats out of 128 seats. The anti-Hezbollah Lebanese force, a Christian party also did quite well by almost doubling its number from

8 to 15. Saad al-Hariri's Future Movement lost seats but President Michael Aoun allowed him to keep his position as Prime Minister for this term.

Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri got re-elected to the same office he held since 1992. But his deputy will now be Elie Ferzli, an ally of Hezbollah, replacing Farid Makari, a member of Hariri's party. —*Asharq Al-Awat, Shia News Association, PressTV, and Middle East Monitor*

10. US calls on Qatar to cut funding to Iranian militia

LONDON (13 May): The Trump administration has asked Qatar to cut funding to pro-Iranian militia. The move comes after it became apparent through disclosed emails that Qatar has been supporting pro-Iranian militia. The emails are from senior Qatari government officials to Hezbollah leaders, including Hasan Nasrallah and senior commanders of Iran's Revolutionary Guard including head of Iranian Quds force Qasem Soleimani. These communications show that Doha paid hundreds of millions of dollars in ransom to ensure the release of hostages held by Shia militia in Iraq. — *Arab News, The Telegraph*

11. Bahrain supports Israel's actions against Iran

LONDON (10 May): The Foreign Minister of Bahrain, Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa has supported Israel's right to respond to Iran in a twitter message. He has written that so long as Iran uses its forces and missiles to try and destabilize

the region, "it is the right of any country in the region, including Israel to defend itself by destroying sources of danger".

Bahrain is a US ally and considers Iran to be a regional threat. It has supported US move to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal. Khalifa's statement shows the dilution of anti-Israeli stance among Gulf countries and it makes it clear that they see Iran as a bigger threat than Israel. The statement was issued after Israel carried out operation against Iranian targets in Syria. — *Times of Israel*

12. Non-Gulf mediation will not solve Qatar crisis: UAE

UAE (2 May): UAE minister of state for foreign affairs Anwar Gargash advised Qatar to resolve its problem on its own and not depend on outsiders.

He asked Qatar to engage with neighbours instead of conducting media campaigns and garner outside support. He tweeted "A sincere advice aimed at Qatar to exit from its crisis: There will be no non-Gulf mediation, no pressure will work and no media will change your situation. Your crisis is continuing and you have to come to terms with wisdom and negotiate in the context of your neighbors' demands which reflect real concerns." UAE is part of the quartet that imposed sanctions on Qatar last year. —*Al Arabia*

13. Saudi Arabia condemns Israeli aggression against Palestinians

RIYADH (15 May): The Saudi government has opposed the US move to shift its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and has condemned Israeli aggression against Palestinians. In turn, Palestinian ambassador to Saudi Arabia has expressed its gratitude to Saudi Arabia for its position. Basem Abdullah Al-Agha has said that “All the Saudi kings supported the Palestinian position with full support to the Palestinian cause in the United Nations, even at the cost of their own interests with some nations or organizations.” Saudi Arabia also renamed the Arab League summit in Dhahran as Jerusalem summit. –*Arab News*

14. Saudi payload launched with Chinese satellite

JEDDAH (21 May): The Lunar optical imaging detector payload developed by Saudi Arabia was launched as part of Chang’e 4 mission designed to put a land rover on the far side of the moon. Two micro satellites Longjiang 1 and Longjiang 2 that were launched together would perform radio experiments.

The collaboration is the result of an MoU signed between King Abdulaziz City of Science and Technology (KACST) Saudi Arabia and the China National Space Administration (CNSA). The agreement was signed as part of an effort to broaden Saudi economic and strategic partnerships and to diversify the Saudi economy under its programme of Vision 2030. - *Israel Defense*

15. Draft resolution circulated by Kuwait rejected by UNSC

UNITED NATIONS (1 June): As a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Kuwait circulated a draft resolution among the members calling for an international force to protect Palestinian civilians. The draft got 10 votes in favour whereas four members abstained.

However, United States vetoed it and it got rejected at the UN Security Council. US vetoed it accusing it for being one-sided and not mentioning the incitement to violence by Hamas. Kuwait circulated the draft after UNSC couldn’t agree on a statement after the confrontation at Gaza in which around 60 Palestinians died. - *Haaretz*

16. Saudi Arabia arrests key human rights activists

RIYADH (20 June): Saudi Arabia has arrested a number of human rights activists and imposed travel ban on others.

It arrested seven prominent women’s rights activists including Mayaa al-Zahrani, Nouf Abdelaziz al-Jerawi and founding member of banned Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, Mohammed al-Bajadi.

The arrests came immediately before Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced lifting of decades-old ban on women driving.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have expressed concern about the human rights situation in the Kingdom. The government said that the arrested activists were held for having

suspicious contacts with ‘foreign entities’. Eight of the 17 detained activists were released temporarily. – *Al Jazeera, The Guardian*

17. Saudi Arabia women get driving licenses

JEDDAH (4 June): The first batch of ten Saudi women got driving licenses from the General Directorate of Traffic, months after the royal decree was announced lifting a ban on women’s driving. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman allowed women driving ten months ago and in three weeks Saudi Arabia would have its women driving on roads.

The first batch of female driving license holders already held international driving licenses. They had to undergo a driving test and an eye exam to get the license. Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University in Riyadh, King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, Tabuk University, Taif University and Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University opened driving schools for women.

The Saudi driving school at Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University was opened in partnership with the Emirates Driving Institute in Dubai. – *Arab News*

18. NATO shatters Qatari Defense Minister’s hope for membership

BRUSSELS (6 June): NATO has rejected Qatar’s desire to be part of the 29-member alliance. An official at NATO’s headquarters in Brussels said that the

alliance’s membership is reserved only for European members. However, he admired Qatar’s valuable role in International Security Assistance Force mission in Afghanistan.

Earlier, Qatari Defense Minister Khalid bin Mohammed Al-Attiyah’s hoped for gaining membership, said in an interview to the government’s official magazine *Altalaya* that Qatar is a strong ally of NATO and is intent on getting full membership if the partnership develops further. Al-Attiyah also suggested that Qatar could host one of the NATO units or its specialized centres. – *Arab News*

19. Knesset allows Netanyahu to authorize war

TEL AVIV (1 May): The Israeli Knesset voted in favour of a request by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to grant him authority to declare war or order a major military operation without the backing of a security cabinet in the “extreme” situation. The law was passed with support sixty-two Knesset members while 41 MP’s opposed it. The new law allowed the Israeli prime minister to go for military operation against the enemy with the backing of the defence minister.

Israel’s Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee and the Constitution, Law and Justice Committee initially voted against the proposal, but it was later approved by the Knesset during a second and third reading, Haaretz reported. – *Alaraby.com and Haaretz*

20. Jerusalem residency revoked for Palestinian MPs

TEL AVIV (1 May): Israeli authorities decided to revoke the residency of four MPs from Jerusalem, for not being loyal to Israel. These four MPs include, Mohammed Abu Tir, Ahmad Attoun, Mohammed Toutah and Khaled abu-Arafa. The decision came after a new bill passed by the Knesset that allows the interior minister to revoke “any Jerusalemite of their residency rights if they are involved in ‘terrorism’ or ‘anti-Israel acts’”.

Responding to the incident, Palestinian people described it as an “unfair” and “illegal,” bill and said that it was applied retroactively. The bill and decision of revoking the residency of four MPs has potential to spark a domestic issue as it discriminates the citizenship rights of Palestinians and Druze population of Golan. - *IMEMC News*

21. Guatemala shifts embassy to Jerusalem

JERUSALEM (28 May): Guatemala has shifted its embassy from Tel Aviv to the Malha neighbourhood of Jerusalem. The embassy became functional on 16 May 2018, after an official ceremony in Jerusalem.

The decision of shifting embassy came two days after the opening of the US Embassy in Jerusalem. The Foreign Minister of Guatemala, Sandra Jovel, said that it was a “sovereign decision” by the government. She further noted that “we are doing the right thing in accordance with the foreign policy that Guatemala has had toward Israel over the past 70 years”- *Middle East Monitor*

22. Iran denies ‘indirect talks’ with Israel in Jordan

Tehran (29 May): Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Bahram Qassemi has firmly discarded media reports on having engaged in indirect negotiations with Israel over Syria.

In an interview with IRNA on 28 May 2018, Qassemi noted that “The Islamic Republic of Iran does not at all recognize the fabricated, terrorist and occupying regime of Israel [to sit for talks with it”.

Some news portals and dailies had cited *Elaph* news in Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia that the Islamic Republic and Israel held indirect talks over Syria in Jordan.

Elaph sources claimed that “talks with the Israelis were related to fighting in Syria and the nearing campaign in southern Syria, particularly in Dera’a and Quneitra.” — *Tehran Times*

23. Netanyahu meets King of Jordan in surprise Amman trip

TEL AVIV (18 June): In a surprise move Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met Jordanian King Abdullah II during a surprise visit to Amman.

During the meeting both the leader discussed regional developments, advancing the Middle East peace process and issues related to bilateral relations.

The meeting comes ahead of visit by the US President Donald Trump's envoys Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt, the president’s special envoy to the

Middle East peace process, expected to arrive in the region later. The unfolding developments are hinting that the US, Israel and Jordan working towards a renewed effort to install peace in the region. – Press TV

24. Syria wants its refugees to return from Lebanon

DAMASCUS (4 June): Syria has informed Lebanon that it wants refugees to be returned to the country for help in the rebuilding of the country.

Syrian envoy to Lebanon made this statement after Beirut expressed concern that a new land redevelopment law could discourage Syrian refugees from returning home. Lebanon currently hosts about a million registered refugees from Syria.

Lebanon wrote to Syrian government last month about “Law 10”, which aid and rights groups fear could result in Syrian refugees losing their property in the country. – Reuters

25. Sara Netanyahu charged with fraud

TEL AVIV (21 June): Israeli Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit filed an indictment against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s wife Sara Netanyahu “for fraud with aggravated circumstances and breach of public trust in the “Prepared Food Affair””. Commenting on the issue, PM Netanyahu, himself involved in a series of other corruption investigations, said that allegation against his wife were absurd and baseless. However, the event

has raised the possibility of a political reshuffle in Israel. It may be a repeat of similar events that happened in 1977, when the then-prime minister Yitzhak Rabin resigned from office due to his wife’s corruption case. – *The Jerusalem Post* and *Reuters*

26. Hamas working with Hezbollah to train ‘thousands’ in Lebanon

TEL AVIV (9 June): Israel has requested the United Nations to intervene in southern Lebanon by claiming that Hamas is collaborating with Hezbollah to set up missile factories and camps for the training of thousands of fighters there.

The issue was first reported by a Lebanese daily, quoting UN sources. It was later confirmed by Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem that the issue was raised regularly at the UN.

According to *Al Joumhouria* report, Israel sent a letter to the UNSC and UNGA containing intelligence on the terror groups’ efforts to set up missile factories in Lebanon for Hamas, as well as for training facilities overseen by senior Hezbollah members for “thousands of Palestinian fighters.”– *The Times of Israel*

SECURITY

27. Houthi rebels fire missile into Saudi Arabia

RIYADH (10 May): Amid escalating tension near the port city of Hodeidah,

Houthi rebels fired a series of missiles targeting Saudi Arabia.

On 9 May, Saudi official claimed to have intercepted one Houthi missile, while another missed their target. However, there have been no reports of casualties or major damage. Within a week, the Houthis again fired missiles targeting Aramco facility in Jizan province in Saudi Arabia. Thereafter, another missile was fired toward King Faisal military base in Jizan. There has been no confirmation from Saudis and no reports of a missile strike. It appears that Houthis will continue targeting Saudi Arabia and possibly the UAE until the two countries continue their military intervention in Yemen. — *Yemen Akhbar, Oilprice.com and Daily Star*

28. Israel launches multiple strikes against Iranian positions in Syria

TEL AVIV (11 May): Israel has launched massive strikes against dozens of Iranian targets in Syria. The Israeli strikes were in retaliation of 20 Iranian rockets that landed in Israeli territories and were fired from Syria at Israeli military outposts.

IDF charged Al Quds force of Iran and its commander, Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani with targeting Israeli posts in the Golan Heights. The attacks raised the possibility of direct confrontation between Israel and Iran forces in Syria. According to IDF, only four rockets were intercepted by the Iron Dome while others exploded in the Syrian territories. — *Haaretz*

29. Iran ‘willing’ to push Houthis for ceasefire in Yemen

TEHRAN (May 29) — Iran and three major European countries (Britain, France, and Germany) say that it is essential to have a political breakthrough over the civil war in Yemen. Iran has stated that they are ready to push the Houthis towards accepting a humanitarian ceasefire and to make them engage in peace talks. This will put Iran on trial to exhibit its influence over Houthis.

In the past, Saudi-led coalition claimed that they are ready for a peace talk and it is the Houthis who are unwilling to come to the peace table. For their part, Iranians claim that it’s the Saudis who do not intend to talk. This verbal duel might be put to the test in days to come— *Arab News*

30. Iranian general denies country’s forces leaving Syria

TEL AVIV (4 June) Adviser to Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Brig.-Gen. Massoud Jazayeri, has denied reports that Iranian forces were planning to withdraw from Syria. He said Iranian forces were requested to come to Syria on the request of President Bashar al-Assad, unlike the US. “Unlike the American military forces and the regional reactionaries, Iranian advisers are present in Syria at the request of the Syrian government and people,” Brig.-Gen. Massoud Jazayeri, was quoted saying by Iran’s Tasnim news agency.

The statement comes at a time when news portal in Israel and Jordan were reporting about a covert meeting between Iranian and Israeli officials regarding Iran's possible withdrawal of its forces from southern-most parts of Syria. – *The Jerusalem Post*

31. Iran revives missile and uranium enrichment capacities

TEHRAN – According to Western news outlets, intelligence from satellite shows that Iran is using a newly-discovered facility outside of the city of Shahrud to develop long-range, possibly solid fueled, ballistic missiles.

It is claimed that the overt purpose of the facility is to develop rockets for Iran's space program even though the technologies used for a space launch vehicle is not much different from building inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). However, Iran has stated that its missiles are medium range, although it claims it *could* increase their missile range if it felt the need to do so.

Additionally, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has said that Iran will not agree to limit its missile program at Europe's instance and has already given orders to quickly increase its uranium enrichment capacity.

In fact, a spokesman for the Iranian nuclear agency, Behrouz Kamalvandi, has stated in a letter sent to the International Atomic Energy Agency that Tehran would increase its capacity to produce uranium hexafluoride, a feedstock for centrifuges, within the

JCPOA nuclear deal framework of 2015. – *Kurddaily, Al-Masdar News, Financial Web, Iran Daily*

32. Germany issues arrest warrant against top Assad officer

BERLIN (8 June): German authorities have issued an "international arrest warrant" against the head of Syrian Air Force Intelligence, Jamil Hassan for war crimes charges.

According to Clemence Bectarte, lawyer and coordinator for the FIDH Worldwide Movement for Human Rights said it was "the first time in the world that an independent judiciary has determined individual responsibility "for the large-scale crimes perpetrated" by Damascus.

However, the charge against Hassan is reportedly based on witness reports and photographic evidence smuggled out of the country by a photographer named 'Caesar' who worked for the Syrian military police.

The photographer apparently fled his homeland in 2013, carrying 55,000 photographs showing the bodies of people who had been tortured. Although the alleged abuses did not happen in Germany, the case has been filed under the legal principle of universal jurisdiction, meaning that any country can pursue perpetrators regardless of where the crime was committed. – *The Daily Star*

33. Jihadist groups start leaving Damascus pocket, release hostages

DAMASCUS: In early May, Syrian jihadist groups like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in the Yarmouk area started evacuating after negotiating a transactional deal with the Syrian and Russian governments. They agreed to release civilians they held three years ago, when they had captured Idlib province in return for safe passage to some of their fighters.

However, a small number of ISIS fighters in another enclave near Homs rejected the deal and began shelling nearby government-controlled areas. Additionally, ISIS is still holding out in Yarmouk and seems to be fighting to the end. — *Daily Star and Arab News*

34. SDF launches the final phase of anti-ISIS operation in Deiz Ezzor

DAMASCUS (15 May): The Syrian Government has announced to start their “final phase” of anti-ISIS operation in Deiz Ezzor province. At present, ISIS controls two enclaves named Hajin town in the north of al-Boukamal and al-Dashisha in the eastern part of the province which borders with Iraq. However, the US is warning the Syrian government not to violate the ceasefire in Daraa province. The southwestern province is under a de-escalation agreement secured by the US, Russia, and Jordan.

Moving the war into Daraa would take it right up to the Israeli border, substantially increasing the risks of escalation. It’s not clear what action the US would be prepared to take should the

Syrian military begin a campaign in the province.

In response, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has stated that Syrian military personnel must invade Daraa. It appears that Russia is attempting to pacify, US and Israeli fears about Iranians establishing a military base in southwestern Syria. Ali Shamkhani, head of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, said that Iran as well supports a Russian idea to have only regular Syrian military forces involved in any southwest operation.

Meanwhile, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem has made it clear that his government wants to retake rebel-held parts of Quneitra and Daraa provinces in southwestern Syria, though it will attempt to do so through reconciliation/evacuation agreements with the rebels before it begins a military operation.

He also said that the United States must withdraw its forces from Tanf, the area in the south-central part of Syria that’s home to a major Syria-Iraq border crossing as well as a US-allied rebel base and a number of US forces embedded with those rebels. — *Rudaw, Arab News, The Daily Star, The Iran Project and Qatar Tribune*

35. Drought drives ISIS’ recruitment in Iraq

BAGHDAD (7 June): Iraq is suffering from drought and the water flow on both the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers is expected to be impacted by several dam-

building projects, which are currently underway in Iran, Syria and Turkey.

The resulting water scarcity is raising fears of renewed instability akin to the issues that gave rise to the ISIS. With Iraq's water security threats, tribal disputes in southern part have spread in recent times.

In the province of Dhi Qar alone, there have been nearly 20 clashes over water scarcity in recent months, according to Mayor Hussein Ali Raddad of the Isah district.

The effect of drought has not only affected Iraqis in the south but has also provided a pretext for ISIS to exploit the grievances of farmers and recruiting them. According to an interview conducted by National Geographic, ISIS has built a narrative that “the lack of rain wasn't due to climate change” at all, but rather due to a Shiite government plot to force Sunnis out of productive lands. — *Al Jazeera, Middle East Institute, National Geographic*

36. UAE forces in Yemeni Socotra Island amid rift with Saudi Arabia

RIYADH (3 May): Despite Saudi efforts at mediation, tension remains high between the Yemeni government and the UAE over its decision to send its forces to the Yemeni island of Socotra, also known as the jewel of Arabia.

Many ancient texts state that Socotra is the original location of the Garden of Eden and has also enchanted adventurers from Alexandria the Great to

Marco Polo to the legendary Sinbad with its dragon's blood trees, rare species of frankincense, aloe, pink desert roses, all cradled by the broken teeth of the Hajhir mountains above and waters packed with bright coral below.

Once the heart of ancient silk and spice trading routes between the Arab world, Africa and Asia, the island is today situated in the middle of one of the world's most important oil trading channels.

Hadi loyalists accuse the UAE of abandoning its initial cause of fighting against Houthis. In addition, the Socotran people do not seem to appreciate the UAE's presence on their island. They have reportedly been protesting against these forces since last year.

In fact, Yemeni Prime Minister Ahmed Obeid bin Daghr posted on his Facebook page that the crisis over Socotra Island is “over.” Apparently, the Saudis were able to broker an agreement between the Yemenis and the Emiratis to return the island to Yemeni control. — *Lebanese Republic Ministry of Information, Press TV, Al Jazeera and Middle East Monitor*

37. US builds military base in Manbij

DAMASCUS (5 June) — The Syrian Democratic Forces reported that the US has set up a new military base for its personnel in Manbij several months ago, when Turkey began threatening to attack the town.

The presence of the base is intended to act as a deterrent to any Turkish attack.

However, within a couple of weeks, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu reportedly reached agreement on a “roadmap” for the Kurdish-occupied Syrian town of Manbij.

Shortly, the YPG announced that it is withdrawing its military advisers from Manbij. The YPG says its active forces left Manbij back in 2016 and it has only had advisers in the town since to work with the Manbij Military Council. Though it is still unclear as to what exactly the roadmap entails, YPG withdrawal seems to be a positive step for improving US-Turkey relations which has been strained over their stand on the YPG. — *Farsnews*, *Kirdistan24*, *Ahvalnews* and *Middle East Eye*

38. UN urges Saudi Arabia not to deport Yemeni migrants

UNITED NATIONS (9 May): The International Organization for Migration claims that Saudi Arabia has deported 17,000 Yemeni refugees back to Yemen, and is planning to deport more by end of this year.

Additionally, the kingdom is also allegedly imposing fines, imprisoning and torturing the migrants caught without valid identity documents in a push to reduce its abundant black market labour, the UN body claims. Though the UN has urged Saudi Arabia not to deport migrants back to war-zone as it is illegal and immoral under international law, Saudi Arabia does not seem to respond as it is not a member of

any international treaty for governing the treatment of refugees.— *Kayhan.ir.en* and *refworld.org*

39. New clues bolster belief that ISIS leader is still alive

DAMASCUS (20 May) — An official named Abu Zaid al-Iraqi captured as part of a joint Iraq-Turkey operation earlier this year revealed in an interrogation that Abu Bakr-al Baghdadi is still alive and is actively involved in a new mission to restore the ISIS caliphate.

The mission presumably is to turn ISIS into a more resilient organization that can survive Baghdadi’s death and remain viable even without controlling any territory. — *Jihadwatch.org* and *Arab News*

40. Assad threatens to take on US forces in bid to reclaim Syria

DAMASCUS (31 May): Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, in an interview with Russia Today, threatened to attack northeastern region of Syria under control of Kurdish rebels, if the Kurds do not agree to return it to the government. He said Syrian military would not be deterred by the presence of US forces in support of the Kurds. For his part, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) responded to Assad’s threats with defiance. The SDF spokesperson Kino Gabriel told Reuters News Agency that military intervention is “not a solution that can lead to results”, instead it will lead to more losses and destruction for the Syrian people. — *The*

Hurriyet Daily, Reuters, Jerusalem Post, Russia Today and Reuters

41. Raqqa in ruins after US-led ‘war of annihilation’

DAMASCUS (1 June) — According to Amnesty International The United States-led coalition’s airstrikes in Raqqa last year violated international law as it indiscriminately bombed population zones.

Amnesty researchers spent two weeks in Raqqa in February 2018, visiting 42 sites and interviewed a total of 112 survivors and witnesses.

Amnesty has highlighted the cases of four families who lost dozens of members, illustrating the terrible ordeal Raqqais faced as a result of ISIS’s criminal behaviour – and the disproportionate and at times seemingly indiscriminate nature of coalition strikes meant to vanquish the militants.

In each case, “Coalition forces launched air strikes on buildings full of civilians using precision munitions with a wide-area effect, which could be expected to destroy them entirely,” wrote investigators. “The civilians killed and injured in the attacks, many of whom were women and children, had been staying in buildings for long periods prior to the strikes. Coalition forces would have been aware of their presence had they conducted rigorous surveillance prior to the strikes.” — *Amnesty International and Airwars*

42. Israel Concerned About F-35 Sale to Turkey

TEL AVIV (27 May): The Israeli security officials have raised their concerns regarding the sale of an F-35 stealth fighter jet to Turkey. The issue was discussed by Israel with the US. The upgradation of Turkish army with F-35 would challenge Israel’s technological supremacy in the region. Turkey would likely be the only country in the Middle East with the F-35 in order to keep its military qualitative edge. The sources told ‘Haaretz’ that talks between the US and Israel were not limited to sale of F-35 to Turkey but also covered the issue of software which is developed by the US upgrade F-35 capabilities. However, Turkey received the two F-35 fighter jets on 21 June 2018, despite the U.S. Senate opposition. —*Haaretz and Daily Sabah*

ECONOMIC

43. Qatar blocks goods from Quartet market

DOHA (26 May): Qatar has decided to ban goods coming from the four countries including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE and Bahrain, that imposed sanctions on Qatar in June 2017.

An order from Qatar’s Ministry of Economy and Commerce was circulated among the retail outlets to remove products coming from the Quartet countries.

It was mentioned that Inspectors would make rounds to ensure proper

implementation of the order. The government stated that this measure will ensure safety of Qatari citizens. It will block the products originating from these countries including dairy products from Saudi Arabia that was entering Qatar through a third country.

In March, Qatar had announced second national development strategy focusing on development of infrastructure and private sector enterprise- *Gulf News*

44. Blow to nuclear deal forces OPEC output reappraisal

VIENNA (11 May): The withdrawal of the US from the Iranian nuclear deal has major ramifications for the OPEC+ production agreement. Until recently, OPEC's dominant narrative was that despite progress, the market remained unbalanced, raising the prospect of an extension beyond end-2018. But with the possibility of Iranian output falling as buyers cut back this narrative is swiftly changing.

On the other hand, Saudi Oil Minister Khalid al-Falih took to Twitter "to confirm our commitment to oil market stability," pledging to "work closely with major Opec, non-Opec producers & with key consumers to mitigate the effects of any supply shortages."

That certainly doesn't mean an easing of production limitations is guaranteed, but it paves the way for such an outcome. — *Weekly Middle East Oil and Gas News*

45. China's Anton Oil Expands Iraq Presence as Shell Exits

BAGHDAD (14 May): Iraqi Basra Oil Company awarded the contract to Houston-based KBR and Chinese firm Anton Oilfield Service Group to provide technical expertise at 220,000 b/d Majnoon field. The contracts are for two years, with the potential for a one-year extension.

Shell still operates the field, but the Anglo-Dutch major announced last September it would walk away from its 45% stake citing dissatisfaction with Iraq's cumbersome technical service contract (TSC) effective from 30 June.

Malaysian state firm Petronas is also relinquishing its 30% stake end-June, leaving Iraqi state Misan Oil Company as the sole remaining legacy stakeholder with 25%.

This gives China a great opportunity to expand its market in Iraq. Anton says "the group is actively pursuing market share from first-tier IOCs" in Iraq, utilizing its "cultivation in this market and competitive edge as a Chinese service company." Iraq alone brought the firm RMB 855mn (\$134.3mn) in 2017, which comprised a whopping 39% of its total revenues. Iraqi revenues jumped more than 36% in 2017 from RMB 628mn (\$94mn) the previous year.

Source: Oil and Gas Journal, Weekly Middle East Oil and Gas News and Iraqi Business News

46. Iraq Gas Consumption Soars to Record High

BAGHDAD (15 May): Iraqi crude burn volumes fell to a 10-year low of 43,000

b/d as in 1Q (First Quarter) 2018 it stepped up fuel oil and gas consumption in power plants.

First quarter crude burn volumes were down from 71,000 b/d in 4Q 2017, which was itself one of the lowest figures in recent years. March's 28,000 b/d was down more than 100,000 b/d year-on-year; crude burn volumes for 2018 as a whole could fall fourfold to around 30,000 b/d based on Q1 data and normal seasonal trends.

As the fall in crude burn has coincided with a surge in fuel oil consumption. The past four months are now the four highest on record, with Q1 averaging 287,000 b/d. — *Weekly Middle East Oil and Gas News*

47. 107th meeting of GCC financial committee held in Kuwait

KUWAIT (14 May): The 107th Meeting of the GCC Financial and Economic Committee was held in Kuwait and was attended by Ministers of Finance and Economics of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and the Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Abdul Latif bin Rashid Al-Zayani.

The meeting was chaired by Kuwaiti Minister of Finance Dr Nayef Falah Al – Hajraf who said that GCC countries should keep abreast with world economic development through uniform economic visions.

He added this meeting is considered a means for attaining Gulf economic cooperation and translating GCC

directives into action programs and turning ambitions into tangible reality.

The agenda for the meeting included amendments proposed by the Industrial Cooperation Committee on the control of tariff exemptions on imports of reinforcing steel and iron sheets and Saudi Arabia's proposal to expand the scope of goods covered by the GCC excise tax. — *Kuwait Times, KUNA*

48. IMF executive Jihad Azour warns Arab states over debt

DUBAI (2 May): The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has warned Arab states against being complacent over looming debt crisis. It has advised them to continue with the reforms despite rise in crude oil prices.

IMF executive Jihad Azour said ““We should not be complacent ... Oil prices are going up. That definitely does not mean that we should not introduce reforms. On the contrary, the current environment offers the opportunity to accelerate some of these reforms.”

The IMF regional economic outlook specified that reforms regarding full elimination of energy subsidies, changes to pension and social security systems and revisions to retirement age and benefits should be implemented. — *Hurriyet Daily*

49. Kuwait launches biometric MasterCard project

KUWAIT (17 May): The National Bank of Kuwait has launched the first biometric card trial in GCC in cooperation with Mastercard. Earlier in

the week IDEX, fingerprint biometrics specialist announced trial of its own biometric card technology in the Middle East. National Bank of Kuwait announced that it is a contact-based solution with no requirement of PIN which makes it more convenient and safer than EMV based transactions.

It is the first platform in MENA region to provide Identity Check, Mastercard's biometric authentication platform. Google Play or Apple's App store will provide the app which will allow National Bank customers to use their fingerprint or facial biometrics through their smartphones to confirm online purchases. –*findbiometrics*

50. 44 projects announced at Saudi-Emirati Coordination Council

JEDDAH (7 June): The first meeting of Saudi-Emirati Coordination Council took place in Jeddah where 20 MoUs were signed and 44 joint projects were announced as part of "The Strategy of Resolve". The strategy has three major focus areas including economy, human and knowledge, and political, security and military sphere.

The countries would cooperate on security and military institutions, unified food security strategy, foreign investments, renewable energy, oil and gas in petrochemical sector, small and medium enterprises, infrastructure projects, electric linkage project and education policy. These projects have a window of 60 months for

implementation. –*The National, Khaleej Times*

51. Kuwait Airways denies banning Qataris

KUWAIT (10 June): Kuwait Airways denies banning Qataris from travelling for 'umrah' (pilgrimage to Mecca). Kuwait was accused of getting directions from Saudi Arabia to ban Qatari nationals from traveling for umrah. Kuwait Airway's chairman Yousuf Al-Jassim denied the allegations saying "Kuwait Air received instructions to allow Qatari nationals to travel on company flights to perform umrah without prior permission".

The chairman added that King Abdul Aziz Airport in Jeddah and Prince Mohammed bin Abdul Aziz Airport in Madinah have been identified by the Saudi authorities to receive Qatari nationals coming for 'umrah'. –*Arab News*

52. Qatar-Oman signed MoUs

DOHA (12 May): Qatar and Oman signed MoUs to enhance cooperation in science, higher education and technology. During the Omani Qatari joint committee meeting in Doha, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (Qatar), Dr. Ibrahim bin Saleh Al Nuaimi signed the MoU with Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to Doha, Najeeb bin Yahya Al Balushi.

The MoUs dealt with training of researchers, holding seminars,

exhibitions, consumer protection, exchange of information etc.

The Ambassador said that the MoUs will open grounds for cooperation in other areas. –*The Peninsular Qatar*

53. Egypt's central bank says foreign debt mounts to \$82.9bn

CAIRO (31 May): A report of the Central Bank of Egypt revealed that the foreign debt of Egypt reached around \$82.9 billion, for the period ending December 2017, rising by 4.9 percent compared to six months earlier.

However, the report also noted that the foreign debt to gross domestic product was "still within the safe limits according to international standards", standing at 36.1 percent. The CBE was positive about its rising foreign reserves.

Since 2016, its foreign reserves have continued to increase, currently exceeding \$44 billion by end of April. This stable progress seems useful for Egyptian economy, which is currently recovering from the situation created by the popular uprising in 2011. - Associated Press

54. Unemployed in Palestine total 364,000 in 2017

RAMALLAH (1 May): The Palestinian Center for Bureau Statics reported that the number of unemployed Palestinians stood at 364,000 for the year 2017. According to the report, 146,000 Palestinians were unemployed in the West Bank, while 218,000 in the Gaza Strip. The total unemployment rate among Palestinian population during

2017 stood at 27.7%, with "43.9% in Gaza and 17.9% in the West Bank".

The report highlighted a drastic rise in unemployment rates for women over men, with an increase in the gap over recent years. The rate of male unemployment ranked 22.5% in 2017, while the unemployment rate among females stood at 47.8%, in the same year. – IMEMC News

INDIA AND THE REGION

55. External Affairs Minister meets Iranian Foreign Minister

NEW DELHI (28 May): The Minister of External Affairs of India Sushma Swaraj met the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran Javad Zarif on 28 May 2018. During the meeting the two sides assessed the implementation of decisions taken during the visit of President Rouhani to India.

These included bilateral cooperation in the areas of connectivity, energy, trade and promotion of people-to-people contacts. Mr. Zarif also briefed Mrs. Swaraj about the discussions that Iran has undertaken with parties to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action following the US decision to withdraw from the Agreement.

The meeting highlighted India's concerns for the stability of the West Asian region. –*Ministry of External Affairs, India*.

56. GCC countries take measures against Nipah virus outbreak

DUBAI (5 June): The UAE Ministry of Health and Prevention issued travel advisory for its residents visiting Kerala urging them to restrain from unnecessary travel to the Indian province in view of the outbreak of Nipah epidemic. The UAE Ministry of Climate Change and Environment (MoCCAE) has banned fresh fruit and vegetable imports coming from Kerala to ensure healthy and safe food for its consumers.

Fruits that will be affected are mangoes, custard apple, jackfruit and bananas. Qatar and Saudi Arabia advised its citizen to avoid visiting Kerala till the epidemic is not controlled and have banned fresh and frozen vegetables and fruits coming from Kerala. Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait too issued a travel advisory and asked their citizens to avoid travelling to Kerala. Around 1.6 million inhabitants from Kerala live in UAE, Qatar and Bahrain. –*Khaleej Times, Al Jazeera*

57. Sale of Indian rice to Egypt takes quantum leap

NEW DELHI (15 May): The sale of Indian rice has increased from \$21 million to \$55 million in the period 2016-2017. India is now exploring possibilities for the supply of other products, including tea, to Egypt, says India's former Ambassador to Egypt Mr Sanjay Bhattacharyya. India sent a small consignment of 20,000 tons of rice in 2016 to help Egypt cope up with the

shortage in rice just before Ramadan, “promoted the preference for Indian rice”, the diplomat told UNI on the sidelines of 'Economic Climate and Business Opportunities in the Republic of Turkey and The Arab Republic of Egypt', a special session organized by Bharat Chambers of Commerce in Kolkata. – *United News India*

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