

## **Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS)**

### **Syrian Quagmire and Future Challenges**

**27 Jun 2014**

#### **Seminar Report**

#### **Welcome Remarks: Maj Gen Dhruv C Katoch, SM, VSM (Retd), Director CLAWS**

Over history Syria has been fought over by many foreign empires—Egyptians, Hittites, Assyrians, Persians, Macedonian Greeks, Romans, Mongols, Turks and finally the British and French. It was during World War I that French diplomat François Georges-Picot and British diplomat Sir Mark Sykes secretly agreed to the post-war division of the Ottoman Empire into zones of respective zones of influence in the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916. In light of this agreement Syria became a League of Nations mandate under French control in 1920. Post World War 2, Syria became an independent country in 1946 with the withdrawal of the last of the French troops. Half a century after the colonial powers of British and French left the Levant region is once again embroiled in the great power game.

The relative peace of the country was threatened by the formidable Arab Spring which began from Tunisia when a street hawker Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire. Soon enough it engulfed the dictatorial regimes of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and forced a NATO-style intervention in Libya. In Syria the Arab Spring arrived in 2011 when few school students drew protests graffiti on the wall in the south western city of Daraa against the regime of President Bashar Al Assad. However, the uprising soon turned violent after the dissent was crushed by the army.

Iran's support to maintain Assad's Shia regime through military fighters and Hezbollah's support has fuelled a proxy war with Saudi Arabia that threatens to further destabilize the region. Saudi Arabia and other gulf countries are funding, providing arms to various Sunni rebel factions including hard-line jihadi's and the Syrian National Coalition to ensure Assad's downfall. It aims to limit Iran's regional ambitions to install Shia hegemony and protect the interests of Sunni Muslims. The frontal war between Shias and Sunnis has turned Syria into a playground for global Jihad. Jihadists groups and Al Qaeda off-shoots like ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham), Al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and Ghuraba al-Sham clamour to control power for implementing Sharia and turning Syria into a radical Islamic state. Shifting alliances and infighting among opposition factions has also fragmented Syria: government forces, rebels with the ethnic Kurdish minority, rebels with the extremist Islamist group ISIS, and the mainline rebel opposition.

The conflict has today turned into a protracted civil war with no end in sight. The alarming advance by ISIS, which includes crucial sections of eastern Syria and vast areas of northern Iraq, has made the borders between the two countries irrelevant. ISIS is fighting to destroy the post-Ottoman nation state borders and restore a caliphate

stretching from western Syria across Iraq to the eastern border with Iran that submits to fundamentalist Islamic law.

The fight to control Syria and the ensuing violence between the rebels and government forces has led to deaths of over 160,000. There has been staggering damage to the country's infrastructure, economy and cultural heritage. Cities like Aleppo, a major trading center on the Silk Road, have had centuries-old markets gutted in just a few hours. It has also resulted in one of the worst humanitarian crisis with over 5,000 civilians fleeing daily from the war-ravaged country to seek refuge in the neighboring Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and even in Europe.

In the region already divided by the Arab-Israeli conflict and further sub-divided by the Sunni-Shia hegemony, chaos in Syria will not only destabilize the country but also the politically fractured Lebanon, Israel, Turkey, Jordan and Iran, all of which are interminably connected with shared history of politics and religion.

It is in the light of these events that we have gathered here today to discuss and understand the future challenges brought upon by the current quagmire in Syria.

### **Session I: Special Address by Syrian Ambassador in India HE Dr. Riad Abbas: Situation in Syria**

*A video highlighting the war in Syria, violence and atrocities waged by several factions of extremist rebel groups ISIS, Jabhat Al Nusrah and others and the impending humanitarian crisis was screened at the start of the special address.*

The situation in my country, Syria and the global war that it faces which aims to undermine its integrity, sovereignty and its people, and after what you have noticed in the tape, which shows you what is going on in Syria, we have tried to explain from the beginning what is really going on the Syrian land that, it is not a matter of political or democratic reforms, but a war imposed on it, backed by 140,000 trained mercenaries from 83 countries supported with arms and munitions smuggled to Syria, as affirmed by most international organization and news agencies.

The world has felt this danger after the supporting countries became afraid of the return of its nationals to these countries and threaten the internal security and their strategic interests in the region, that means what we are suffering from in Syria is terrorism and that could destabilize the region and the world, Syria is fighting terrorism on behalf of the world, especially Al-Qaeda, and this scheme to undermine Syria was addressed by Western European officials like Mr. Rolan Doma, the former Foreign Minister of France, and also the American Army General Mr. Winsely Clark regarding USA will occupy 7 Arab countries, while the visit by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the injured terrorists who were smuggled to the occupied Palestinian terrorists, presents a proof on their relationship to Israel. Some of you might wonder why Syria is targeted. I will mention for you some reasons:

- The importance of the geo-strategic location of Syria which connects East and West.
- The discovery of rich gas fields in the territorial waters of Syria.

- The West have tried to isolate Russia and decrease its role in the international arena, particularly the gas pipeline to be built from Qatar to Syria via the lands extended to Europe.
- Syria is not indebted to International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, or any other financial establishment and that is enough to foil the plots of the West's pressure on the Syrian economy.
- Syria is the heart of the Arab and Islamic resistance against the Israeli occupation of Arab territories, including the occupied Syrian Golan and Syrian policy of opposing American hegemony in the region.
- US Secretary of State Colin Powell's visit to Syria (2003).

### **Syria before the crises:**

- Syria has a secular constitution, which does not allow religious parties to be active.
- Free medical treatment, and the government offers the basic nutrients.
- Free education for all levels and compulsory till the 10th grade.
- Syria might not be a typical country but it achieved great success in attaining self-sufficiency at all levels, though it was slow in the political and economic reforms because of the internal developments and events that have ravaged the area for example, the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the accusations of Syria of killing Hariri, and the war on Lebanon and Gaza besides the global financial crisis.

As you know, the culture of terrorism is created by the U.S. and it began in Afghanistan to undermine the Soviet Union at that time, it took extremism and militancy as a weapon to achieve its interests in the region and it occupied Afghanistan, under the pretext of fighting Al-Qaeda, knowing that most of those who have been accused of the attacks on the two towers were the Saudi citizens, then terrorist organisations - Al-Qaeda – shifted from Afghanistan to Yemen and then Iraq and Syria, the matter which the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has affirmed when she stated that the United States has created Al-Qaeda, moreover Ayman Al-Zouahra declared that he founded Al-Nusra front to overthrow the Syrian government, where the leader of the National Coalition opposes listing Al-Nusra Front as a terrorist group, and he said it's a basic element in the Free Army, which means supporting terrorism in Syria, on top of that the Saudi Foreign Minister said that he will support the Syrian opposition by funds and weapons.

As you know that USA has destroyed Iraq and displaced its people under the pretext of spreading democracy in Iraq, then it send armed militias to go into internal fighting. The American invasion of Iraq had led to a big division among the Iraqi people because of the American policy in Iraq, that resulted in the establishment of ISIS and other similar

terrorist groups, the crisis in Syria and the external support to the armed groups in it enable the ISIS to cross border from Iraq to Syria and to launch the military operations against the Syrian people and government who fought the ISIS and could drive them out of most of Syria. Now the ISIS has returned to Iraq and they are continuing their terror act there, which requires regional and internal cooperation to defeat their terror.

In 2009, the United States agreed with Turkey and the World Union of Muslim Brotherhood to change regimes in the Arab world and hand over the power to them, while they protect its interests in the region besides signing a peace agreement with the Israel on the principle of peace for peace. USA started its intervention by what's called Arab Spring in Tunisia then Egypt and Libya till it reached Syria, under the pretext of democracy just to mislead the world public opinion, then the United States and its allies in the region, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel have tried to overthrow the legitimate government of Syria. Three years passed and still they did not achieve their goals, and the reason is simply that the Syrian people reject extremism and militancy, besides their steadfastness and support for their legitimate leader and this is the rationale for the steadfastness of Syria.

The phenomenon of terrorism does not know borders among states and it may happen to any of us, and no country can face or fight terrorism without the help of other countries. Cross-border terrorism is a State terrorism therefore we need concerted efforts to eliminate this phenomenon by the peace-loving and democracy countries in the world.

Syria has insisted since the beginning to find a peaceful solution to the crisis and for this reason it went to Geneva 2 with full confidence to prove its real desire about that, still United States and its allies attempted to discredit the Syrian position and refused to apply Geneva 2 terms.

The prevalence of the phenomenon of terrorism imposed priorities for solution in Syria, as stated in the Declaration of Geneva and these priorities are to fight terrorism and stop the material and moral support to militants and mercenaries, and the complete cease-fire, and creating a political atmosphere to conduct free and fair elections for the Syrian people to choose their representatives.

Our country has witnessed a successful presidential elections where H.E Dr. Bashar Al Assad wins the election with a 88.6 percentage and proved to America and her alliances that we are a country where its president come to power by the desire of its people not appointed by the USA.

We have proved to the whole world that we are a strong country, our relations still good with our friendly countries economically, socially, academically, especially with India. As you know we have cordial relations with India, we have some going on projects, and a businessmen delegation has visited Syria two months ago and met our ministers and discussed the cooperation and business opportunities, and many of our students are studying here. I take this occasion to convey my greetings through you to the Indian leadership and people and to the new government, we have always appreciated the

vital role of Indian position which is against the outside military intervention in the Syrian internal affairs and this is what was adopted by BRICS group. If all states did the same we would never be in such a situation.

---

## **Session II: Key Issues and Views emerging from discussions by the Panelists and Interactive Sessions during the Seminar**

### **The Role of Muslim Brotherhood**

The problem in Syria started from the borders in Turkey. Muslim Brotherhood Party (MBP) hasn't reached power for 100 years, except in Egypt, that too with the support of America. It rules Turkey now under the name of Justice and Development party. In 2009, Mr Jeffery Feltman US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs and Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader Riad al-Shaqfeh, who is based in Istanbul, signed an agreement under the eyes of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to support them to be in power in Middle East in Arab countries. It aims to revive the Ottoman Empire and take power in Syria. Erdoğan met President Assad and asked him to include the MBP in its government, which was rejected by a secular Syria. It was contended that the MBP puts on the face of a secular party but in reality they have military troops which are extremists, support Salafists and want to change the Syrian regime. The leader of MBP in Syria Yusuf al-Qaradawi has now found shelter in Qatar.

### **The Situation in Syria**

The current spate of conflict in the region can be traced back to the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the US. The introduction of 'democracy' by way of a Shia led government by America was not accepted by the neighbouring countries, which have Sunni majority. This was first articulated by King Abdullah of Jordan who said it will clash with the local culture which is Sunni which was later endorsed by others in the region. This is further augmented with the emergence of ISIS in Syria whose stated goal is establishing a Caliphate. If they succeed as their name suggests ISIS or ISIL they will incorporate the whole Levant region which includes Syria, Lebanon as well as Palestine. If that is achieved Shias will be in minority. ISIS has also declared that Shias are not Muslims and they will not be governed by non-Muslims which include the Alawaites in Syria. The Caliphate will be governed by Sharia law and have pure Sunni Islam with no place for Shia or other minorities like Christians. They have to convert and accept Islam or leave or get killed. ISIS has taken over the Syrian provinces of Raqqah and Der ez Zor which are contiguous to the Iraqi provinces of Diala, Mosul and Anah and form the Sunni heartland in that part of the world.

The unleashing of the sectarian divisions, after the US invasion, has also unleashed a religious cold war lead by Saudi Arabia on one side and Iran on other side. The events in Syria from the last three years and most recently with ISIS's rapid military advance are septic focus of this cold war. The international community is unable to somehow first stop any foreign interference (through foreign fighters and funding of weapons). There is large number of unregulated militias, majority of them Sunnis, who are well-armed,

well-covered, well-protected, well-in communications who are beyond anyone's control. It therefore becomes difficult to understand who is fighting where and with whom. The situation in Syria is slowly approximating to the end of the Lebanese civil war, where everyone was fighting everyone.

ISIS is supported and funded by Saudi Arabia, who wants to put pressure on Iran and Syria, which have Shia majority. This plan was devised after the victory of Hezbollah in Lebanon against Israelis in 2006, which will cut across the Shia axis of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Hezbollah (Lebanon). The problem in Syria came from those people who went to the Gulf countries to work. They came back home with money and extremist ideas and tried to revive people on ground to make trouble.

Syria is a secular country, President Assad is Shia, his wife is Sunni, Vice President is Sunni, Prime Minister is Sunni and all the minorities are also a part of the government in Syria. While the society is predominantly Muslim, many follow the moderate Hanafi and Shafi'i branch of Islam. The leaders of Islam in al-Sham (extremist rebel groups) want to destroy this secular fabric and introduce the extremist Wahhabism.

### **Shia-Sunni Power Play in Syria and its Regional Implications**

Syria is the only West Asian country that has a majority Sunni population but is ruled by a Shiite Alawites, a sub-sect of Shia Islam that broke away in the 9th century. Together with orthodox Shiites, Alawites make up just 13 percent of the population, yet they have dominated the government, business, and the country's aristocracy.

Most Syrians pride themselves on their tradition of religious tolerance, but many Sunnis still resent the fact that so much power is monopolized by a handful of Alawi families. While not a driving force of the Syrian uprising, the combination of a majority Sunni protest movement and an Alawi-dominated military has added to the tension in religiously mixed areas, such as the city of Homs.

Historically, the Ba'ath regime has ruled Syria since 1963 and been dominated by Assad family from 1970 to present with little tolerance to opposition. Militant opponents, like the Muslim Brotherhood (in Syria), were violently crushed and membership outlawed, while rival political parties were banned or co-opted by the regime. Civil society is extremely weak, with trade unions and many religious organisations hollowed out and packed with loyalists.

- The Arab Baath socialist party, in Syria the party has about 3 million members across the country which has not split.
- The trade guilds/unions there have a membership of 3.25 million and they have not split.
- The army has over 4,00,000; there have been defections but by and large the army is with the government.

Therefore, with a direct control of over 6 million people out of the population of over 22 million, it is not easy to remove President Assad from power or wage a war to get him out. Syrians have been actively depoliticised by government institutions for nearly fifty years, making the uprising against President Assad that finally broke out in March 2011 all the more unexpected. Security forces responded with firing and focussed on crushing the dissent, while the president offered only piecemeal reforms. The regime fashioned a narrative that protests were led by criminal armed gangs led by Sunni arm militant Muslim Brotherhood, intent on stirring up sectarian divisions within Syria's heterogeneous population. In response to this the Shabiha militia from Assad's own Alawite sect jumped into the power play and led the violence into a sectarian one between Shia-Sunni.

### **Reasons behind the Shia-Sunni Power Play in Syria**

**Political Repression:** President Bashar Al Asad assumed power in 2000 after the death of his father Hafez who had ruled Syria since 1970. Assad quickly dashed hopes of reform, as power remained concentrated in the ruling family, and the one-party system left few channels for political dissent. With no peaceful transfer of power since the 1950s, change can seemingly happen only through a military coup or a popular uprising.

**Discredited ideology:** Syrian Baath party is regarded as the founder of "Arab socialism", an ideological current that merged state-led economy with Pan-Arab nationalism. However, by 2000 the Baathist ideology was reduced to an empty shell, discredited by lost wars with Israel and a crippled economy. Upon taking power, Assad tried to modernize the regime invoking the Chinese model of economic reform, but time was running against him.

**Uneven economy:** Cautious reform of the remnants of socialism opened the door to private investment, triggering an explosion of consumerism among the urban upper-middle classes. However, privatization has favoured families with personal links to Assad, leaving provincial Syria, later the hotbed of the uprising, seething with anger as living costs soared and jobs remained scarce.

**Drought:** To make matters worse, a persistent drought has devastated farming communities in north-eastern Syria, affecting more than a million people since 2008. Tens of thousands of impoverished farmer families flocked into rapidly expanding urban slums, their anger at the lack of government help fuelled by the new ostentatious wealth of the nouveau riche.

**Population Growth:** Syria's rapidly growing young population is a demographic time bomb waiting to explode. How can the bloated, unproductive public sector and struggling private firms absorb a quarter of a million new arrivals to the job market every year ?

**New Media:** Although the state media is tightly controlled, the proliferation of satellite TV, mobile phones and the internet after 2000 meant that any government attempt to

insulate the youth from the outside world was doomed to fail. The use of the new media is critical to the activist networks that underpin the uprising in Syria.

**Corruption:** Whether it's a license to open a small shop or a car registration, well-placed payments make wonders in Syria. For those without the money and good contacts, it's a powerful grievance against the state. Ironically, the system is corrupt to the extent that anti-Assad rebels buy weapons from the government forces, and families bribe the authorities to release relatives that have been detained during the uprising.

**State violence:** Syria's vast intelligence services, the infamous *mukhabarat*, penetrate all spheres of society. The fear of the state is one of the reasons why so many Syrians simply take the regime as a fact of life. But the outrage over the brutal response of security forces to the outbreak of peaceful protest in Spring 2011, documented on social media, helped generate the snowball effect as thousands across Syria joined the uprising. More funerals, more protest.

**Tunisia effect:** Last but not least, the wall of fear in Syria would not have been broken at this particular time had it not been for Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street-vendor whose self-immolation in December 2010 triggered a wave of anti-government uprisings across the Middle East.

### **External Players in the Syrian conflict**

The Arab-Israeli conflict has been replaced by the Shia Muslim conflict as the West Asia's featured battle which involves multiple fronts and serious bloodshed in the region. Shia Muslims are a majority in Iran and Bahrain, the largest single group in Lebanon, and significant minorities in Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

- **Iran:** An ally of Syria since 1979, Iran is a major supporter of the Syrian regime to ensure Shia dominance at the helm of affairs and prevent any Sunni control. It has provided all out support to Syria to curb the rebels and even dispatched its elite Quods force, to assist the Syrian army against the Free Syrian Army and Sunni Islamist group. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar are the major opponents of Assad's regime and even the US and Europe are on the same line.
- **Saudi Arabia:** A Sunni majority country with considerable Shia minority is against Syria's secular regime. The continuous crackdown of the mostly Sunni political opposition and rebel groups by the Alawite-dominated regime has made Riyadh very uncomfortable. The conflict in Syria which can result in the decline of Assad regime has provided Saudi Arabia with a golden opportunity to weaken Iran, their bigger regional competitor. These sectarian and political rationales has made Saudi Arabia one of the most vocal regional actors demanding Assad to step out of power, as well as in advocating recognition, support and arming of the anti-Assad opposition forces.
- **USA:** The US has no interest in Shia-Sunni issues and sees it as a conflict between two devils: if the Shia militant and Sunni militant fight and weaken each other they will be happy. It does not want this conflict, however to spread to countries like Saudi



Arabia, Kuwait or Jordan where political instability can disrupt its oil supply. The US is protecting sea links, taking care of Iran and have invested heavily in Basra. They will see to it that peace remains there and not want Sunni militants to come in Basra and other regions and disrupt their oil supplies. They want greater control over oil resources in this region as well as Central Asia. They are developing plans for that. They are working on alternate energy supplies, routes, and new pipelines. They want oil prices to be controlled by the market and not by governments. They want to have greater control over production and distribution. Iran is disrupting this with Shia power that has emerged in Iraq and Syria. Iran is talking of giving more emphasis on OPEC, on quota production which the US doesn't like and wants market regulation. The US doesn't like OPEC either and wants market economy introduced.

- **United Nations:** The UN failure to even get the basic agreements, because of the inability of countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey who have been extremely active in promoting the cause of Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and elsewhere. Then Western and European powers particularly France and Britain also. The US has been taking an ambivalent position. It is important to be able to stop violence and stop foreign funding and the inflow of foreign weapons. In Syria itself, there is already a UN disengagement force (UNDOF), with a binding mandate at the Golan to separate the Israeli and Syrian areas. Instead of finding new forces, its mandate should be increased to curb violence and control inflow of weaponry and then move to the major problem of humanitarian crisis which faces Syria today. There are over 4 million refugees and 2 million displaced within the country.

### **Regional implications of the Syrian crisis:**

- Pan Kurdish unification: The Assad regime alliance with Kurdish movement, and autonomous Kurdistan in Iraq, may lead to the formation of a quasi-Kurdish entity in the region of south Turkey, Syria and Iraq.
- Exacerbation of the sectarian conflict: Rise in sectarian killings in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Iran, Iraq & Egypt. Even in GCC, Bahrain and the eastern part of Saudi Arabia have become vulnerable.
- Religious extremism has become vastly more pronounced (AQ, ISIS, Salafists). 100,000 jihadi fighters fighting in Syria from around the world. Syria and Iraq (given the recent ISIS activity) are likely to shift from being a 'destination' for Islamic extremists, to becoming the newest breeding ground for extremism. The easy mobility of foreign jihadis has enhanced fears of the spread of extremism through the return of foreign jihadis to their home countries. The ISIS surge in Iraq has exacerbated extremism along sectarian lines, fuelling the possibility of a civil war.
- Saudi Arabia and Iran rivalry and quest for pre-eminence in the region: competing through a proxy war in Syria. Saudi Arabia (SA) assertiveness in the face of US policy on Syria, Palestine, Bahrain and Iran. Possible US-Iran cooperation on Iraq,

not welcomed by SA, SA may reportedly release AQ prisoners to fight for Sunni militias.

- Syrian regime's claims of need to fight terrorism bolstered: events in Iraq may cause the West to be on the side of President Assad, as issues of the removal of President Assad, the legitimacy of the Syrian election and the failure of Geneva II are now on the backburner.
- ISIS surge in Iraq: extension of extremism and instability into Iraq. ISIS control over large areas in northern Iraq (Anbar province) - territorial contiguity with ISIS controlled areas in north-east Syria (Raqqa & suburbs of Aleppo).
- Trends: US to send 275 special forces to Iraq (protect US interests); possible US-Iran cooperation on Iraq; may benefit in finding solutions to the Syrian crisis; new humanitarian crisis in the offing; GCC concern over ISIS influence reaching the Gulf; oil prices may be affected.

### **Lessons and Challenges for India**

The Arab uprisings have challenged the traditional actors and alliances in the region. It is clear that in the new emerging order, there will be greater devolution of powers to the regional actors, although it is unclear how much space there will be for outside players, which will, however, continue to have leverages. Within this framework, India can play a more strategic role because of its important core stakes in the region. In Syria itself before the conflict started, India had investments of about \$ 370 million, important projects and a peacekeeping force commanded by an Indian General. In the wider Gulf there are even more substantial stakes: India imports 60 percent oil and gas imports from Gulf States, conducted trade of about \$173 billion (2013) and has 7 million labour force in the region which send high remittances back home every year. It also has a direct connectivity with UAE and security cooperation with many states in money laundering and piracy.

### **Broad Strategic Positioning for India**

- Unprecedented changes in the Middle East have compelled India to question its traditional assumptions and role.
- Given its democratic background, principled position and non-prescriptive foreign policy, India can if required, act as a united political influence on issues deemed of common interest in the Middle East. It can put forward alternative solutions facilitating regional take-away for regional problems, endurance of societal and institutional mechanisms and offer of capacity building assistance - that are seen as less partial than the perceived methods of the West or even Russia and China in the region.

- India is not in the business of exporting democracy. Although India is a robust practitioner of democratic pluralism and religious moderation, it doesn't believe in intrusive prescriptive diktats.
- At the same time, India needs to be realistic of its leverages as well as limitations. Vice President has stated: "India has limited leverages but unlimited interests" in the region. Can it influence a resolution in Syria?

### **Specific Policy Options for India**

- India has maintained its policy of pursuing a peaceful and non-military solution to the Syrian conflict. In view of this non-prescriptive stance on the resolution of the conflict, India participated in the Geneva 2 conference, and was led by the EAM at the conference held in Montreux on 22 January 2014. Its support for the elimination of chemical weapons, technical as well as US\$1 million financial pledge, serves to show the influencing power in the region. India has offered assistance in implementation of any agreement between government and opposition.
- While strengthening high-level govt to govt contacts, it would be useful to have discreet contacts with key members of the Opposition. This will ensure that its strategic interests in Syria & the region are not affected irrespective of the government in place.
- Important fall out of the Syrian conflict has been the intensification of Shia-Sunni fault lines across the region (proxy war between Saudi and Iran) with potential implications for India. India should try and stay out of sectarian alliances, while remaining prepared for any fundamentalist backlash coming from the region.
- The threat of the spread of extremism to the region, and the possibility that Syria and now Iraq could supplant Pakistan as the centre or base for Al Qaeda and affiliates is a heavy blow to the Western backed Syrian Opposition, and of serious concern to India, the wider region and international community. The Shia community has already held protests at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi and in Lucknow and volunteered to send people in Karbala and Najaf in Iraq to protect holy religious sites.
- Defence and security cooperation on counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing, piracy, money laundering, small arms smuggling and financing terror activities etc is emerging as increasingly important element in India's ties with regional countries, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Libya, Algeria, Jordan, Israel, Sudan, and Egypt. Despite the Pakistan factor, considerable space has emerged for India to protect its interests and point of view. This needs to be leveraged to its advantage. Special intelligence services of various Western countries have initiated discreet ties with the Syrian regime in respect of extremist fighters from their countries.

- So far, despite challenges of the regional flux and sectarian divide stemming from the Syrian conflict, India's bilateral relations with virtually all countries of the region have been progressing structurally. India has managed to insulate its core interests from the negative fall-out of regional developments. For instance, Syria & Iraq versus Saudi Arabia & Qatar.
- Ties with GCC countries in particular, given India's core energy and security interests, are valuable and need to be solidified on multiple fronts, happening with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq. At same time, it needs to consolidate ties with Iran and Israel, at different levels.
- In parallel, India should maintain engagement with the US. Despite a wane in influence, it still remains important, bilaterally as well as for regional stability and alliances. The reluctance of the US to intervene in Syria has possibly created a space for Russian and Chinese influence, which should be watched by India for its own positioning.
- Given India's large Muslim population, there is a need to take a principled position on the on-going developments in Syria and Iraq. The one which is calibrated according to its Constitution, cultural, political and secular values and based on time-tested practices of peace and non-violence, respect for all peoples and communities. India's approach towards countries experiencing Muslim insurgencies should not be misconstrued as being partisan or sectarian.
- Similarly, Islam as a religious, socio-cultural and political influence will remain a major factor across the WANA polities and needs to be observed closely. This would encompass evaluating roles of Muslim groupings such as the Jabhat al Nusra, ISIS, Al Qaida in Syria and the Muslim Brotherhood and Taliban in the wider region.
- India can offset political unpredictability in the region through greater economic engagement. While the regional trade volumes have increased, considerable untapped potential remains and more thorough and integrated business approach is needed. Considerable potential exists for use of regional Diaspora to lobby for India's political and economic interests.
- India should continue to remain engaged in the international humanitarian relief effort, which has given us good political mileage. It has delivered US\$ 2 million in assistance to Syria. The worsening humanitarian crisis has a strong potential of spilling into the larger region, the ISIS surge in Iraq is a potential humanitarian crisis in the making, where its interests will be affected.
- There was a strong convergence at the Delhi Heads of Ministries conference of the view that its primary national interest in the WANA/Gulf region should be the welfare of the Indian diaspora, rather than the aggressive promotion of democratic

values and ideals. In turn, there is considerable potential for use of regional diaspora caucus to lobby for India's political and economic interests.

- It needs to be communicated appropriately that “old order neutrality” in a changing and unpredictable environment does not mean absence of decision-making, lack of leadership or political passivity.

## **Challenges**

- There are about 10,000 Indian nationals in Iraq. The first issue is of 39 people kidnapped and different tracks will have to be used to see they are not affected, killed and they are released. The glaring example of what happened to the Indian airlines flight hijacked to Kandahar in 1999 and how one passenger was killed and the government had to release three terrorists who came back to haunt later, is still fresh. To avoid such fiascos, India needs to open or develop channels in the region to deal with security concerns. Indian nationals who want to leave, because they are scared or for whatever reasons, should be enabled to leave. This is a herculean task and similar to the one which emerged in Iraq between 1979 and 82, at the start of Iran-Iraq war. There were 22,000 Indians then and 10,000 had to be removed over the land because civil aviation space was closed and there were check posts.
- Iraq is the second largest supplier of oil globally; however the current conflict has disrupted the production. Until 1980 before Iraq got embroiled in wars and conflict situations, it used to provide India with 50 per cent of oil requirements. Oil prices are now bound to increase and if they do it will affect India's inflation control policies.
- And the last is sectarianism. Those who are opposing the current regime in Syria are Sunnis and are funded by very strong Sunni countries like Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The sectarian violence is not unique to the Middle East and has wreaked havoc in other Muslim majority countries like Nigeria, in Mali and of course next door in Pakistan. There is not a single day when there is no attack on the Shia community and other minorities. India so far has been saved by this problem; but it is going to be more exacerbated as Kashmir after the American army leaves from Afghanistan.

In all, this is what we need to prevent so that the Indian Muslim community does not get sucked into intra-Muslim struggle which will inevitably draw those who are not Muslims.

## **Concluding Remarks : Chair – Ambassador Rajeev Abhyankar**

The real struggle in the Middle East is over Syria. It is not covert anymore but overt and people are getting killed. This will further spread terrorism. For India there might be support for and from Kashmir based terrorist groups. Much depends on the state of Pakistan. It is necessary to ensure that that terrorism doesn't descend into the Indian borders as our economic strength will get affected. Finally to conclude there has been lot of criticism on Baath Party but Iraq under Saddam and Syria have been Baathist and their principles has always been Arab unity, liberty and socialism. This has resulted in a very clear difference between authority of state and authority of religion. This continues in Syria even today. Also this is one country in the Gulf which always had women's emancipation and believed in women freedom. They believed that women should work and still continues to be so.