

## **CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES**

### **West Asia: Spring or Autumn**

#### **Report on Talk Delivered by Mr Saeed Naqvi** **8 April 2013**

##### **General**

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) hosted a talk by Mr Saeed Naqvi on “West Asia: Spring or Autumn” at the CLAWS Seminar Hall, Kurukshetra, on 8 April 2013. The talk delved on various aspects of the changing dynamics in West Asia in the context of the Arab Spring. Serving officers from the Armed Forces, veterans and members from the strategic community, media and other thinks attended the talk which was chaired by Col RSN Singh.

##### **Opening Remarks by the Chairperson: Col RSN Singh**

In West Asia, things are not that simple as those that triggered the events in Tunisia and unleashed a tumult that consumed many countries in its aftermath-Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan , Egypt, Libya, Oman, Yemen, Bahrain though not necessarily in that order. In some countries, it unleashed a regime change. Whenever the army adopted a neutral stand, there was a regime change. Whenever it joined the regime, the situation became a hard nut to crack as in Syria.

The US supported these so-called indigenous revolutions, but Bahrain was a test case. Because of American strategic interests in the region, the revolution was crushed. The test case is now Syria where the Americans are supporting Al Qaeda elements.

The whole region is going through uncertainty and strategic equations in the region are being redrawn. The entire Islamic region appears to be in a state of flux. India unfortunately receives its information about the region from Western sources. This lacunae needs to be addressed.

##### **West Asia: Spring or Autumn: Mr Saeed Naqvi**

The backdrop to the current situation in the Middle East must be seen in a series of historical events that have occurred over the years and have a bearing on the current situation. The 1970s were a difficult time for the Western alliance in the backdrop of the Cold War. Reagan took the counter-offensive and things began to change. South Asia was perceived as an area secure from things happening elsewhere, with pro-Western leaders at the helm like Morarji Desai in India, Zia in Pakistan and Jayawardene in Sri Lanka. Post-decolonisation, many incipient Communist movements wanted to take up power in those countries that had become free. The left came to power in Afghanistan after the Saur Revolution; actions taken to prevent their coming went awry and thus only hastened their triumph. In Iran, the transition of power was accomplished peacefully

when Ayatollah Khomeini was flown from France to Tehran and the Shah flown out. The Ayatollahs continue to remain in power. The other backdrop to the current scenario in the Middle East was the situation that emerged post the Revolution in Iran. The US was innocent of Muslim history, and was unaware of the existence of major groups like Shia and Sunni, leave alone their internecine conflict. Now, however, they are extremely knowledgeable of the subject. In Saudi Arabia, to maintain control over the holy shrines, the title 'Keeper of the Holy Shrines in Mecca and Medina' was added to the titles already borne by the King.

The break out of the Cold War saw India and Pakistan on opposing sides. India was on one side because of its being in NAM and Pakistan was with the Western bloc. Entire leadership of the Arab world that did not belong to the category of princes and kings looked upon Nehru as a leader; Nasser was very much with him and NAM was an actual movement. King Fahd supported NAM as did Havana. When it all ended in 1990, the Indian government made a huge lurch towards the West. When the coup took place in Moscow, between Gorbachev and the new regime, South Block remained divided down the middle in their support to the two opposing camps. India subsequently lost interest in the Middle East, as interest in the Muslim world had largely been part of an outreach of NAM.

The Gulf War became the first war to be shown on television. CNN stole the limelight from BBC, which then created its own TV channel. These two channels continue to shape minds due to their tremendous reach and coverage of events and all other channels are distant competitors.

The 'Arab Spring' began on 17 December 2010, with a movement taking shape in Tunisia and later in Egypt. Israel and the West became worried. Mubarak's ouster was blamed by Saudi Arabia on the US. Thereafter, King Abdullah rained 135 billion dollars on his people to douse any sparks of the movement from singeing his rule. The American occupation of Iraq had already taken place by this time. Shia power had emerged in Shia-majority areas, which were worrying for the US as 45 per cent of Kuwait, 80 per cent of Bahrain, and all of Hezbollah is Shia. Yemen turned out to be a strange country. The Ottoman Caliph had been deposed early on but the Imam was deposed only in 1972. The rising feeling of anti-Americanism was not due to US but because of Saudi Arabia, GCC countries, events that occurred in Afghanistan because of Zia's policy, and the actions of Prince Nayef and US. They were serving three interests. One was the removal of the USSR by employing the energies of fundamentalist Islam. Secondly, the Saudis wanted the development of Wahabist Islam in Afghanistan as a bulwark against Shia Iran. Zia was worried about the Pakistani identity, and wanted to feel secure as a nation. He wished to wrench Pakistani Islam away from Sufi 'mumbo-jumbo' and to instead follow a pure, Arabised version of Islam besides integrating Pakistan as a part of West, and not South Asia. The consequences of his actions are visible today in Pakistan.

The Arab Spring did not progress in Bahrain as the movement was suppressed by force using mercenaries provided by the Fauji Foundation of Pakistan. The troops used were

Sunnis, mostly recruited from those areas in Pakistan where Shia-Sunni tension existed. India needs to watch the GCC countries as most with whom India has close relations now have Fauji Foundation type linkages.

Today, the fight against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan has spread to Pakistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Darfur and the Sahel Region. The last is where the French also have an interest. The Chinese dimension is also present. All the countries including India are fighting Al Qaeda. India is fortunate to remain insulated from the violence afflicting other parts of the globe but there is no guarantee that this situation would continue. There appears to be a lack of focus in some of India's actions. For example, India announced aid for Mali in a situation where there is no government to receive it! The situation today is not conducive in the neighbourhood, and could become explosive.

### **Q&A**

- Comment on The Syrian situation and the role of Russia as viewed by King Abdullah.
- Comment on reemergence of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist powers. Can the spillover of the rising sectarian conflict in Syria affect India? Is there any Shia community existing in Egypt?
- The happenings in the Middle East were orchestrated by the Americans. The ruling oligarchies were also US-backed, so what went wrong?
- What are the consequences if Western efforts come apart? Is there a role for India and the Indian military in this region? Should India use military diplomacy to create stability in the region?
- Sectarianism is not limited to Shias and Sunnis as seen by Israeli attempts to exploit fissures within the Muslim world as also the Alawite question in Syria.
- Will US self-sufficiency in energy impact on the Saudi kingdom?
- Despite oligarchies working for people, the latter still rose in revolt. Wherever the military has replaced oligarchies its behaviour is equally atrocious. People will not be satisfied. How will this impact on Saudi Arabia?

### **Response by Mr Naqvi**

The encouragement to the current Syrian situation came from the Western notions when they thought that they had successfully managed Libya. The murder of the US Ambassador and his team, and the spreading out of the Tuaregs into the Sahel region however belie any claims of success. The presumption that only democracies can be efficient is not valid. In truth, secular dictatorships were extremely efficient regimes. In the 1970s for instance, Gaddafi opened the only two military academies in the world for women. His personal bodyguards were also women. There were no mullahs in the society and the most educated person could lead the Friday prayers. Voodoo was regarded as a criminal offence as the reference to it played on the cultural backwardness of the people. Basic amenities were available.

The Syrian army is primarily Alawite, and has tensions with Sunnis. The 10-year occupation of Iraq following the killing of Saddam and the breakdown of the Ba'athist

structure only led to a mess. Qatar and Saudi Arabia cannot bring democracy to Syria. India's silence on the issue should be criticised. India need not worry about the sectarian problem in Syria. We need to be more concerned about the spillover of sectarian conflict from Pakistan. The existence of sectarian violence in India has its roots in Indian Muslims being a stratified society operating on class distinctions. In Lucknow, the aristocracy including Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was Shia. Riots there were an outcome of class conflict and the feudal nature of society. There are changes visible today but such pretensions remain.

Historically speaking, the Fatimids in Tunisia, Sicily and Egypt were not Wahabists. There was therefore been an echo of sympathy, compassion and identity with the Shias in Egypt from a long time. The creation of Islamism has largely been due to Saudi interference. Within Egypt, institutions created for curbing Islamism only ended up in promoting it. Muslim Brotherhood was their brand of nationalism in the absence of political ventilators and mosques became the conduits for such purposes.

OIC resolutions and impact are exaggerated. India is worried about the reaction of West Asian countries, but we must remember that they are very hospitable and respectful to India. A troubling aspect is that the West does not talk of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. In addition, the Pakistan military's role in the Middle East finds expression in Fauji Foundation kind of roles. India is frittering away the respect and prestige it is held in by West Asian countries, and should harness that energy in its own favour. The Indian establishment does not accord importance to the roles peacekeepers play or to those who have served as peacekeepers and this needs to change.

Shale gas issue is important in US and Canada and strategic security for that is still required. However, that incentive for oil and gas is no longer there.

In Bahrain, possibility of the occurrence of the Arab Spring is high. The Saudis will not be able to put a cap on such aspirations forever. All of Saudi oil is headquartered in an area which is Shia. The Saudis are extremely worried about the problems in the Eastern provinces. Three Crown Princes have gone, King Abdullah can barely stand up and the succession issues are kept very secret. A huge war of succession is going on behind the scenes. Sooner or later the monarchy has to end, as according to geological time, the continuation of a monarchy is illogical.

The present US-Iran standoff does not present a holistic picture. As an example, when Reagan was President, the US decided to battle the Sandinistas in Nicaragua using the Contras. To put this policy into effect, US arms sold to Israel were funnelled to the Contras using Iran as a conduit and Hashmi Rafsenjani himself negotiated the process. There has thus been a history of US Iran cooperation as exemplified in the above incident in which even the Iranian President, Imam Khomeini was in knowledge of. Therefore, what is seen is not what is. India will end up snapping ties with Iran only to realise one day that US-Iran relations have always been this way. During the Afghan Wars, India, CIA, Iran etc were all together, backing the same faction of the Northern Alliance. Rather than placing and trusting one's own eyes and ears, India continues to be misled by CNN and BBC. We need to have our own reporters on the ground to get a correct perspective of events.

To understand the Shia mind, one must read and be familiar with the personality of Ali and the Battle of Karbala. It is not always that a defeat is celebrated as a cherished symbol and remembered till date. It is also not possible to prevent anyone from resorting to a peaceful use of nuclear energy.

### **Remarks by the Chairperson**

The oil economy in the Gulf has not suffered in the recent political flux. The US garnered 77 per cent of global arms, bulk from it coming from the Gulf.

### **Concluding Remarks by the Director**

The discourse has been fascinating, and another seminar will be organised later to elicit views and facilitate discourse on this vital subject.