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Regional Security Perspective in West Asia Concerning Israel and Iran

In this digital era, both traditional and non-traditional security challenges are escalating day-by-day. Globally, the use of technologically advanced weapons with aggravating tensions between state and non-state actors endows nations with a sense of insecurity. The current security scenario in West Asia is thus menacing the stability of the region. The role of multiple stakeholders and awakening of dormant players is critical for the region. However, regional players have become more active and vocal on intra-regional issues.

Historically, there have been many conflicts in the Middle East (West Asia). The region is exposed to conflicts ranging from sectarian clashes to issues on the geographical periphery. The Arab-Israeli conflicts have been the most prominent ones in the region.¹ However, the protracted conflict between the Jews and Arabs, which was considered to be the root cause for many regional issues, is still in the fray but Iran related issues have been a common challenge for other players in the



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Key Points

1. Globally, the use of technologically advanced weapons with aggravating tensions between States and non-State actors endow nations with a sense of insecurity. The current security scenario in West Asia is thus menacing the stability of the Region.
2. Iran's actions in Syria are mainly to maintain the "axis of resistance"—the long-lasting relationship between the two states. For decades, both Damascus and Tehran had their reasons to collaborate but their main challenge has been Tel Aviv.
3. Syria has become a playground for battles between various countries in search of attaining the regional power status causing human and environmental insecurity.
4. The contention for regional power status is not just to be in terms of their military engagement but other factors involving the economy and development which are also vividly crucial.
5. As a result of India's non-interventionist policy in the Region, it is imperative for the South Asian giant to maintain its economic and strategic motives intact. It is crucial in India's part to meet its energy requirements as well as its policy options in the Region.

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region. Over the last 70 years, the conflicts in the Levant gave route to various wars including the establishment of Israel in 1948, the Suez Crisis in 1956, the Six-day War in 1967, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the First Lebanon War of 1982, and the Second Lebanon War of 2006.²

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was the main force of unification to form a Shiite front. Iraq's fear of the Shiite Republic led to a variety of events which eventually led to a sectarian war between Iraq and Iran (from 1980 to 1988); some historians relate it with the First World War due to the tactics used in it.^{3,4} Moreover, the causes were more political and proximate in nature but the catalyst was the Islamic Revolution. Following the Iraq-Iran War was the Gulf War I (1990-91) and Gulf War II (2003), and in both occasions the United States of America (US) interfered on the pretext of protecting the interest of its allies in the region.⁵

In the recent years, the most widespread revolution was the Arab Spring of 2011 whose affect spread from Maghreb to the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf.⁶ The uprising was regional in nature especially in Arabic-speaking nations; this brought unrest to the region whose decade's long leaders had to step down as the uprising caused internal strife leading to political and economic cataclysm in those states.⁷ In the backdrop of the Arab Spring, the uprisings in Syria (2011) and Yemen (2015) eventually turned into a battlefield for the state and non-state actors and their respective allies. Despite the security challenges in the region, the surprising withdrawal of the US troops from the region paves way for a regional power dilemma. Iran's increasing involvement in these crisis-affected nations is attributed to the proxy wars between Iran, Israel, and to an extent with Saudi Arabia.

A BRIEF ON REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX IN WEST ASIA

Interestingly in West Asia, the Gulf and the Levant are formed depending on the distribution of power, amity,

and enmity relations.⁸ According to Barry Buzan, a regional security complex consists of:

“a set of states whose major security perceptions and concerns are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another.”⁹

Historically, there have been debates over constitutive norms of Arabism and desired regional order which has led to hostility and conflicts amongst nations. Even though all leaders in the region identify themselves as Arab Nationalists, they have a difference of opinion in their political projections. Adding to it, the sectarian divide has been the crux of the conflicts in the region. Figure 1 depicts the factors that influence security dimensions in West Asia.

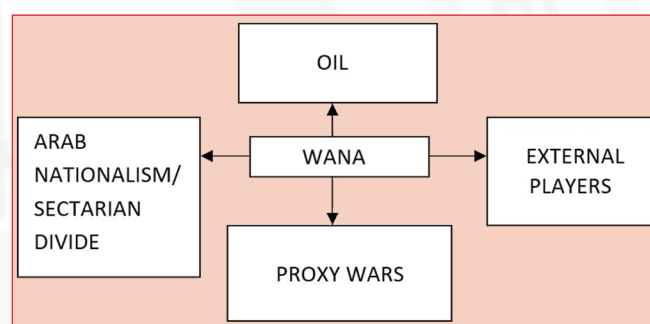


Figure 1. Factors Influencing Regional Security in West Asia and North Africa (WANA)

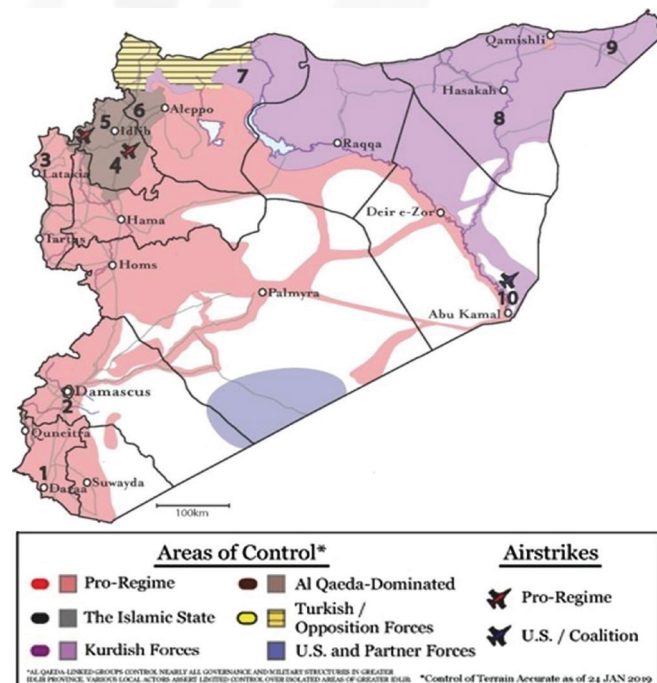
Source: Author's Own

EMERGING ALIGNMENT IN MAKING

The axis of power realignment in the region is interesting. Shia dominated Iran is aligned with a Sunni nation, Syria, forming an alignment to counter its common hindrances, due to a Shiite leader being at the helm. Iran's expansion of its strategic influence is largely credited to the shared religious ties and loyalties of its allies. The amity in the relationship between Syria and Iran in recent years is commendable. Iran's actions in

Syria are mainly to maintain the “axis of resistance”, i.e. the long-lasting relationship between the two states.¹⁰ Syria’s domestic crisis since the Arab uprising and the rise of non-state actors, including that of the Islamic State, threw the country into an unending turmoil.¹¹

The country has been vulnerable to security challenges and refusal of the four-decade-long ruler President of Syria, Bashar-Al Assad to step down led to country-wide protests and armed conflict.¹² The countless attacks, destruction of civilian infrastructure, loss of civilisational monuments, and displacement in demography are all spurring of a fragmented-disturbed state.¹³ Even though the Syrian regime got support from Russia since 2015 to suppress the internal conflict but the regional “friend” has been more important for the Syrian regime.¹⁴ The proximity between Syria and Iran has been an enduring one.¹⁵ In the midst of the civil strife in Syria, the presence of Iranian Quds forces and Hezbollah in Damascus is

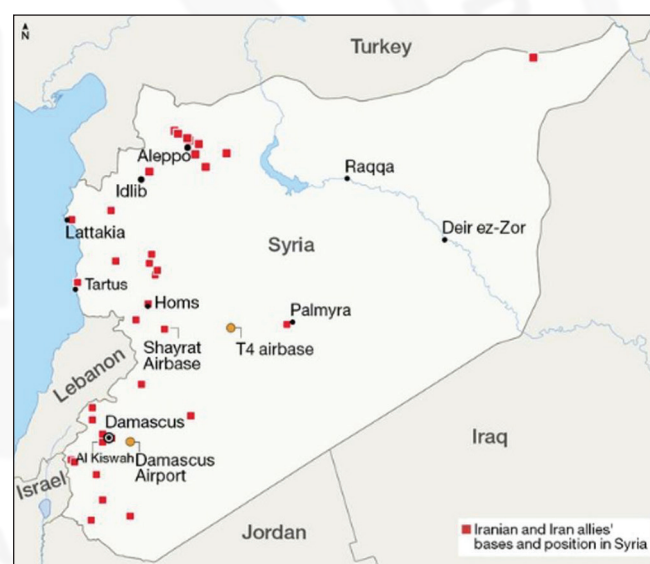


Map 1. Control of Terrain in Syria as on January 21, 2019 by Various Forces

Source: Institute for the Study of War, 2019; available at <https://twitter.com/thestudyofwar/status/1090275366139297792>, accessed on May 21, 2019.

not surprising (Map 1).¹⁶ Thus, while there was support from Russia, Iran provided logistical assistance to the regime. But this leverage given to Iran by the Assad regime has turned Damascus as an Iranian base since the last two years (Map 2).

Syria over the years has become a battlefield involving both internal and external players. The presence of US troops and their backed forces in the south-eastern part and the Syrian Kurd Forces in the north-eastern part of the country is a concern but priority has been on Israel lately (Map 1).¹⁷ However, the decision of Trump’s administration to withdraw troops from Syria paves way for a volatile regional power conflict amongst the stakeholders.



Map 2. Iranian and Allies bases and Positions in Syria
Source: Haaretz, available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-launches-extensive-syria-strike-after-iranian-rocket-barrage-1.6073938>, accessed on May 21, 2019.

Interestingly, Tehran has consolidated its strife-torn client state by dispatching their senior armed forces officials and pressurising Lebanon’s Hezbollah for its more assertive presence in Syria; Iran has been providing the required petroleum products and providing financial assistance to its client state heftily.¹⁸ This is not

the first time Damascus asked for Iranian assistance; in 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon was also another instance.¹⁹ For decades, both Damascus and Tehran had their own reasons to collaborate but their main challenge has been Tel Aviv. However, in recent years, the transition of the proxy war between Israel and Iran has moved into a serious exchange of missile attacks step-by-step.

REGIONAL SECURITY QUANDARY IN THE REGION

The internal schism has proliferated with multiple stakeholders in Syria. The deployment of Iranian Quds Force or the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) displays tactical involvement of Iran; Hezbollah naturally dispensed their backing to Syria.²⁰ Their natural and geographical adversary has been Israel in the region ever since its independence in 1948. Israel's hostility with its neighbours explains its relations in the region. Being the only non-Arab state in the whole region, the Jewish state has survived through various adversaries and struggles from 1948; this has motivated it to have a strong defence industrial base and a requirement for innovation in various fields. Moreover, Iran sees Israel as an antagonist and the latter is determined to resist any force that tries to disturb them.

The current situation, especially, adds flavour to the existing rivalry with proxy attacks against each other but the loss is for Syria as it has become a playground for battles between various countries in search of attaining the regional power status causing human and environmental insecurity. Apart from these, the region has been affected by the displacement of population, water scarcity, low agricultural output, and destruction of natural resources. Interestingly, the Syrian Kurd forces backed by the US have declared that they have uprooted Islamic State from Syria, although its presence is scattered in and around the region according to multiple media sources.²¹ However, the loosening of the US role in Syria and adjoining areas is detrimental to a non-polar situation which would naturally allow the

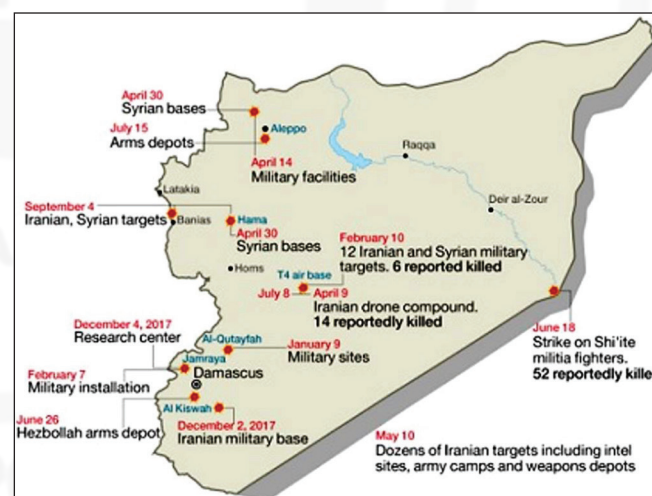
regional players which include Israel and Iran to attain the status of regional power.



Figure 2. Israeli Attacks on Iranian bases and IDF Tweets (January 20-21, 2019)

Source: IDF Official Twitter handle.

Israel is alarmed with the increasing influence of IRGC in Damascus and the announcement on withdrawal of the US forces from Syria has created a zone of security quandary for the Jewish state.²² Since 2013, there has been an influx of counter-strikes between Israel and Iranian Quds Forces based in Damascus (Map 3).²³



Map 3. Possible Israeli Strikes in Syria (2018)

Source: Haaretz; available at <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/explosions-reported-in-assad-army-base-north-of-homs-syria-1.6035801>, accessed on May 21, 2019.

But earlier on January 21, 2019, the IRGC launched a missile attack on Golan Heights which was intercepted by an Israeli anti-missile system;²⁴ later that night Israel attacked the Iranian Quds Forces bases near Damascus (Figure 2) and posted updates on Israeli Defence Force's (IDF) official handle.²⁵ After three weeks, there was a Middle East conference coordinated by the US on February 13-14, 2019 at Warsaw, Poland.²⁶ The conference was first called as 'anti-Iran' but later was changed due to protest from some European countries. Quoting Dr. Manjari Singh, Associate Fellow, Centre for Land Warfare Studies:

*"Growing Israeli role in the region against Iran can be traced to the 21 January tweets by the IDF wherein for the first time the organisation owned its actions in Syria when it conducted several airstrikes on the Iranian Quds forces in retaliation and posted the developments on the same. Hence, one could draw a correlation between the acknowledgements of airstrikes and the occurrence of Warsaw summit; both within a span of a month."*²⁷

And following these, the US added IRGC as a "terrorist" group and even announced that sanctions on Iran would be put back on track as waivers granted to seven nations which includes China and India has been cut-off since May 2019.^{28,29} Adding to it, present Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is yet to start his fifth term in office, who is a natural ally of the US.³⁰ Even though the role of the US on land is declining day-by-day, other forms of hard power like the sanctions to an extent would decelerate the morale of Tehran in the short run.

INDIA AS AN OBSERVANT

India's civilisational and cultural connect with the Arab world has been a crucial factor for its engagement in the region. The bonhomie that India shares with Israel in recent times is primarily due to its strategic interests.³¹ India has defence relations with a few countries in the region and for the last 25 years, Israel has been an important defence equipment exporter to India. India's relation with Iran has been economic in nature and is not

influenced by India's relation with a third country.³² The Chabahar Port development and oil imports are key to India's strategic interests.³³ Even today, India maintains a friendly relation with Syria.³⁴ India's relations in Gulf have been influenced by the Diaspora spreading across the infrastructural and medical sectors.³⁵ However, the contribution by Indian man force to the regional economy's development is crucial as well as assists in formulating India's West Asia policy.

Let it be in Yemen or West Asia as a whole, Indian nurses have contributed hugely in medical sectors in the region. In Iraq, during 2014, a delegation of forty-six nurses from India was kept as hostages by the Islamic State (IS) but later freed.³⁶ According to one of the nurse, the IS left them stating that *"they were saying you are Indians and we are not targeting you people"*.³⁷ Though many were stuck during the civil strife in Yemen during 2015, the nurses along with other fellow citizens were rescued later from there which was famously called as *Operation Rahat*.³⁸ In March 2016, Indian Catholic priest Tom Uzhunnalil was abducted by unidentified armed men and was freed a year later.³⁹ Despite all these issues India has dealt with each nation independently and has not made any regressive policy alterations against any of them.

As a result of India's non-interventionist policy in the region, it is imperative for the South Asian giant to maintain its economic and strategic motives intact. The Indian government in the recent past has shaped its policies ranging from de-hyphenation to also abstaining the United Nations (UN) resolution on Jerusalem displaying a transition from thinking to linking West.^{40,41} However, it is disappointing to observe how India's extended neighbourhood is destabilising and with rising conflicts it has only become more alarming; most of the nations who are involved in showcasing its power element in the region have maintained decent relations with India. Moreover, it is crucial in India's part to meet its energy requirements as well as its policy options in the region. India's acceptance to Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC)'s invitation to Chair the Summit in 2019 displays the nation's receptive approach in the

recent times.⁴² Lastly but not the least, the question is whether India's "Non-Interventionist Policy" binding its national interest has stood the test of the current challenges.

CONCLUSION

The regional security perspective in West Asia is multifaceted in nature. The crisis involves human and environmental security issues which are particularly in the red zone. In the current context, the balance in the region is threatened by a dominant nation spreading its presence hosted by a vulnerable entity. The enduring synergy between Iran and Syria is a challenging one in the region overall. The contention for a regional power status is not just to be in terms of their military engagement but other factors involving the economy and development which are also vividly crucial. Moreover, for decades West shaped the security dynamics of the region. In recent times, other international players have looked upon seizing the opportunity to influence the vulnerable region. However, from India's point of view, oil and a large number of expatriates constitute its major economic responsibilities and concerns.

India's independent policy towards every nation in West Asia makes the South Asian giant amiable for all. As a country dependent on energy, India has been hoping for a stable regional economy which is still curtailed by embargos. However, the regional dominance for power in West Asia is not healthy for its extended neighbourhood.

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