

OUTCOME DOCUMENT

**REALIGNMENTS
IN WEST ASIA**

18TH FEBRUARY 2021



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REALIGNMENTS IN WEST ASIA

West Asia continues to be one of the most conflict-prone regions of the world. The geopolitics of West Asia has seen many changes in recent times. Gulf States led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have withdrawn a three year blockade on Qatar. With President Biden in the White House, there are strong speculations that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or the Iran nuclear deal will be revived. Besides, the Syrian civil war and the Yemen War continue to rage on with external forces' interference. The war on ISIS appears to be in its last stage.

An important development in the region was signing of the [Abraham Accords](#) on August 13, 2020 between the U.S., Israel, and the UAE. It was followed by normalisation of relations between Israel and Bahrain. The Accords encourage “efforts to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue to advance a culture of peace among the three Abrahamic religions and all humanity”.

The Arab spring completed ten years in 2020. However, the civil wars in Syria and Yemen do not show any signs of abetting. Syria continues to be in shambles, the consequence of which the world has seen through the refugee crisis. Yemen continues to be in a state of fix. The Saudi Aramco drone attacks on oil processing facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais by Yemeni Houthi rebels in September 2019 had raised fears of further escalation in the situation. The singular ray of hope in the region is that the war on ISIS has seen significant advances. After the death of its Amir, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in 2019, the group has lost its grip over the region even as lone-wolf terrorists inspired by its ideology continue to engage in violence as far as Europe.

U.S.-Iran tensions have continued to escalate after the U.S pulled out of the JCPOA and re-imposed sanctions on Iran. The killing of Major General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 further inflamed the situation. President Joe Biden may lift the sanctions and revive the Iran deal. However, the United States will have to tackle the closing of ranks by the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Israel's strident opposition.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia successfully hosted the G20 virtual summit during the Covid pandemic. Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom is remaking its image after the dastardly murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi by government agents in October 2018. The Kingdom has also shown willingness to reconcile after a blockade of Qatar by the Arab quartet led by the Saudis in 2017 failed to isolate Doha.

India imports over 1.4 billion barrels of oil, two-thirds of it from West Asia. Affordable and reliable oil supplies are a precondition for India's growth and economic well-being. The economic importance of West Asia goes beyond oil – almost 8 million Indians live and work in the GCC states, and their remittances form an important part of India's forex earnings. Any unrest in West Asia also threatens this vital economic engine.

India recognises the importance of West Asia. Prime Minister Modi's Link West policy has seen relations flourishing with the Arab world and Israel.

How will India's relations with the West Asian countries develop further? Will more Arab countries recognise Israel? Will sanctions on Iran be lifted? How will the Arab world be impacted with a new U.S. administration in Washington? This webcast will focus on geopolitics, security, and energy dimensions of West Asia. It will be moderated by Gateway House, with three experts in discussion.

AGENDA

The webcast will focus on the following issues

GEOPOLITICS

Objective: The Abraham Accords and the Al-Ula agreement are two significant geopolitical developments in West Asia. The Abraham accords signed between Israel and UAE is a peace treaty in the region brokered by the United States. UAE and Bahrain have now recognised Israel as a nation state with full normalisation of the relationship. Driving force behind these diplomatic moves is the United States which under President Trump had taken an unorthodox view of the region, seeking to reimagine U.S. engagement with the region. The movement of U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was a part of this U.S. approach.

The [Al-Ula agreement](#) was signed in Saudi Arabia between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar. This agreement restored the diplomatic ties between Qatar and the four Arab states, ending its three year old blockade. The agreement focuses on solidarity and stability amongst the members of the GCC.

Additionally, the Syrian civil war with U.S., Syrian Democratic Forces and Kurds on one hand and the President Assad, Russia and Iran continue to be a long-drawn conflict.

What role will the new U.S administration play in the region? How will India manage its relations with West Asia? Will more countries in West Asia recognise Israel?

SECURITY

Objective: West Asia continues to be the region on short fuse. The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and the subsequent rise in tensions between the two countries have sparked fears of a wider regional conflict. The killing of Major General Qassem Soleimani have sparked fears of retaliatory violence with Iranian officials warning that Iran will avenge Soleimani's killing. President Biden's actions in the coming months will shape future relations with Tehran. The Saudi-Iran tussle also led to Saudi Aramco oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais being attacked by drones by the Houthi rebels of Yemen, supported by Iran.

On terrorism, ISIS influence has been considerably reduced but their last remnants will need to be eliminated. ISIS after Baghdadi is seeking to gain new grounds. A weakened ISIS may also seek to instigate attacks and violence by its associates in Europe and North America. Thus, the focus on counter-terrorism cannot be relaxed.

Will there be another war in the region? How will U.S. and allied forces continue their involvement in the region?

ENERGY

Objective: The world, India especially, continues to depend on West Asia for its energy needs. Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the UAE are leading oil suppliers to India, while Qatar exports liquefied natural gas. Political instability in the region is a risk to the energy security of the world and of India. If the Biden administration relaxes sanctions on Iran, energy supply chains may get a boost.

Energy volatility remains a concern. Oil prices had hit a major slump due to the coronavirus pandemic and is now recovering. However, the very low prices in early 2020 and potential large scale adoption of electric vehicles may result in shelving of long term investments, creating shortages in the future.

How will energy markets evolve in the next few years, given the emerging trends in technology? What can be done to contain volatility in the energy markets? How can a balance be maintained to protect the buyer and seller countries?

FLOW OF WEBCAST

Date: 18 February 2021

Time: 1 hour 10 minutes (5:30pm IST to 6:40pm IST)

OPENING REMARKS

Time: 5:30pm – 5:36pm

Welcome remarks from Gateway House (3 mins)	Manjeet Kripalani , Executive Director and Co-founder, Gateway House
Opening remarks from KAS (3 mins)	Peter Rimmele , Resident Representative to India, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

MODERATED PARTICIPANTS DISCUSSION

Time: 5:36pm – 6:19pm

Moderator	Sameer Patil , Fellow, International Security Studies Programme, Gateway House
Panellists	Panellist 1: Ambassador Navdeep Suri , Distinguished Fellow and Director of the Centre for New Economic Diplomacy, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi Panellist 2: Professor Efraim Inbar , President, Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security

AUDIENCE Q&A

Time: 6:19pm – 6:34pm

Moderator	Sameer Patil , Fellow, International Security Studies Programme, Gateway House
Panellists	Panellist 1: Ambassador Navdeep Suri , Distinguished Fellow and Director of the Centre for New Economic Diplomacy, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi Panellist 2: Professor Efraim Inbar , President, Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security

CLOSING COMMENTS BY PANELISTS

Time: 6:34pm – 6:37pm

SUMMATION OF DISCUSSION & CLOSING REMARKS

Time: 6:37pm – 6:40pm

Closing remarks from Gateway House	Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia , Distinguished Fellow, Foreign Policy Studies Programme, Gateway House
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HOUSE RULES AND INTERVENTION GUIDELINES

FLOW OF DISCUSSION

Time: 1 hour 10 minutes

Welcome remarks	3 mins	Welcome remarks by Manjeet Kripalani, Gateway House. Moderator informs participants about flow of the session and house rules
Opening remarks	3 mins	Opening Remarks by Peter Rimmele, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
Moderated discussion	43 mins	Moderator informs participants about flow of the session and house rules. Discussion begins; questions asked to each of the experts on the subject by the Chair
Q&A	15 mins	Audience Q&A
Closing Comment by each panellist	3 mins	Panellists
Closing Remarks	3 mins	Closing remarks by Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia, Gateway House

Note:

- Time will be strictly adhered to.
- No Power Point slides, audio or videos permitted.
- Bios will be shared in advance. There will be no formal introductions.

SPEAKING GUIDELINES

Participants in each session must address the policy question presented for discussion. It helps keep the discussion focused and facilitates documenting specific assessments and policy recommendations.

- Designated speakers: Responsible for giving introductory remarks to launch the discussion
- All session participants and delegates: Encouraged to participate during the roundtable discussion.
- We encourage evidence-based interventions.
- We discourage generalized assessments and repetition of facts that are already well-known.
- Please use the raise hand option on Zoom when seeking the Chair's attention to make an intervention.

INFORMATION DISCLOSURE POLICY

This meeting is open to the public.

PARTICIPANTS

Sameer Patil

Fellow, International Security Studies Programme, Gateway House



Sameer Patil is the Fellow for the International Security Studies Programme at Gateway House. Prior to this, he was Assistant Director at the National Security Council Secretariat in Prime Minister's Office, New Delhi, where he handled counter-terrorism and regional security desks. Sameer has written extensively on various aspects of national security including counter-terrorism, cyber security, Kashmir issue, India-Pakistan and India-China relations. He is also a dissertation advisor at the Naval War College, Goa. In 2019, he was a recipient of the Canberra Fellowship, awarded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia.

Peter Rimmele

Resident Representative to India, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung



Peter Max Rimmele is currently the Resident Representative of Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung Office, India. He has a First Law Degree from Freiburg University, as well as a Second Law Degree from the Ministry of Justice Baden-Württemberg, Germany and a M.A. in Geography. After working as a jurist, judge and lecturer, he took public office as Ministerialrat, Head of Division at the State Ministry of the Interior in Saxony, Germany, from November 1991 on until 2000. There he first served in the Police and Security and later in the Local Government Department. On behalf of the German Foreign Ministry he served in East Timor as Registrar General, Head of Civil Registry and Notary Services (UNTAET), and became later the principal Advisor for Governance Reform for GIZ (German International Cooperation) to the Ministry of Administrative Reform and the Anti-Corruption-Commission of the Republic of Indonesia, where he served for 7 years. He then moved to Rwanda, also as Principal Advisor Good Governance/Justice Program. Earlier he was Resident Representative Lebanon, Director of Rule of Law Program Middle East North Africa, Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung.

Ambassador Navdeep Suri

Distinguished Fellow and Director of the Centre for New Economic Diplomacy, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi



Navdeep has had a 36-year long career in the Indian Foreign Service. He served in India’s diplomatic missions in Cairo, Damascus, Washington, Dar es Salaam and London. He was India’s Consul General in Johannesburg, High Commissioner to Australia and Ambassador to Egypt and the UAE. He also headed West Africa and Public Diplomacy departments in India’s Ministry of External Affairs. Navdeep has a master’s degree in economics. He has written on India’s public diplomacy and soft power, India’s Africa policy and the Indian IT outsourcing industry. Navdeep’s initiative to introduce social media in the Ministry of External Affairs and its diplomatic missions in 2010 was commended. His contribution to building stronger ties between India and UAE was recognised by the President of UAE when he conferred on Navdeep the country’s second highest civilian award — the Order of Zayed II.

Professor Efraim Inbar

President, Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security



Professor Inbar was the founding director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, a position he held for 23 years (1993-2016), and a professor of political studies at Bar-Ilan University. He has been a visiting professor at Georgetown, Johns Hopkins and Boston universities; a visiting scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; a Manfred Warner NATO Fellow; and a visiting fellow at the (London-based) International Institute for Strategic Studies. He was president of the Israel Association of International Studies; a member of the Political Strategic Committee of the National Planning Council; chairman of the National Security Curriculum committee in the Ministry of Education; and a member of the Academic Committee of the IDF History Department. He has authored five books: *Outcast Countries in the World Community* (1985), *War and Peace in Israeli Politics. Labor Party Positions on National Security* (1991), *Rabin and Israel’s National Security* (1999), *The Israeli-Turkish Entente* (2001), and *Israel’s National Security: Issues and Challenges since the Yom Kippur War* (2008), and edited fourteen collections of scholarly articles. He is an expert on Israeli strategic doctrine, public opinion on national security issues, US Middle East policy, Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy, and Israel-Turkey relations.

Manjeet Kripalani

Executive Director and Co-founder, Gateway House



Manjeet Kripalani was India bureau chief of *Businessweek* magazine from 1996 to 2009. She holds two bachelor's degrees – in law, and English and history – from Bombay University and a master's degree in international affairs from Columbia University, New York. Her political career includes being deputy press secretary to Steve Forbes during his first run in 1995-1996 as Republican candidate for U.S. President in New Jersey and press secretary for independent candidate Meera Sanyal's Lok Sabha election campaign in 2008 and 2014 in Mumbai. She is currently a member of the Center for American Progress' U.S.-India Task Force, a member of the Asian advisory board of the International Centre for Journalists and the Overseas Press Club, and sits on the executive board of Gateway House, the Indian Liberal Group and Emancipation, all non-profit organisations.

Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia

Distinguished Fellow, Foreign Policy Studies Programme, Gateway House



Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia is a Distinguished Fellow, Foreign Policy Studies Programme at Gateway House. He is a member of CII's two bodies: International Trade Policy Council and Africa Committee. He served as Chair of FICCI's Core Group of Experts on BIMSTEC and continues to head its Task Force on the Blue Economy. He is a founding member of the Kalinga International Foundation. As Director General of the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) from 2012-15, he played a key role in strengthening India's Track-II research and outreach activities. During a 37-year innings in the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), he served as Ambassador to Myanmar and Mexico and as High Commissioner to Kenya and South Africa. He dealt with a part of South Asia, while posted as Joint Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs. A prolific columnist, who has also written a critically acclaimed book, *India-Myanmar Relations: Changing Contours* (Routledge), he is a frequent speaker on foreign policy issues in India and abroad.

OBSERVERS

- Pankaj Madan, Deputy Head - India Office, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
- Neha Aneja, Executive Assistant to Representative to India, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
- Simran Dhingra, Research Officer, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
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- Kripal Singh Rawat, Accounts Officer, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
- Manu Emmanuel, Advisor/Team leader Administration, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
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- Saloni Rao, Intern, Gateway House

SECTION II

KEY FINDINGS

Since the Arab Spring a decade ago, the geopolitics of West Asia has transformed. The recent Abraham Accords and the Al-Ula Accord with Qatar, and the potential lifting of sanctions on Iran, will further change the regional landscape.

- ❖ **Abraham Accords:** Compared with Israel's earlier peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, the Abraham Accords are qualitatively different. They lend religious legitimacy to the state of Israel by using the word Abrahamic. It implies that Muslims and Jews belong to the same Abrahamic tradition. These accords are a historical step to remove anti-Semitism as they counter the widespread notion in the Arab world that Israel is the creation of the colonialist powers. Post-Accord, the rapid pace of normalisation between Israel and the UAE (including the visa-free travel arrangement) has been surprising.
- ❖ **The GCC Al-Ula accord:** The Al-Ula accord materialised due to the push from the Trump administration. The Arab Quartet's (Saudi-Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt) blockade on Qatar did not yield the desired result. So, the Arab Quartet was looking for a way to mend relations. But, Qatar will continue to have a different policy than its neighbours, as it harbours distinct regional ambitions. It has maintained relations with Iran, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.
- ❖ **Role of the UAE:** The UAE punches far above its weight in the region. A prospering economy and a capable military have enabled it to take on a greater share of regional responsibility. The UAE has also emerged as a vanguard against religious and fundamental extremism by taking a hard-line against groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and deporting terrorist masterminds to India. Due to the Saudi and Emirati crackdown on terrorist networks, the Gulf is no longer the playground of terrorists as desired by Pakistan. The UAE has prioritised tolerance with other faiths by establishing a high-profile Ministry of Tolerance and the Abrahamic Family House.
- ❖ **Biden administration's West Asia policy:** President Biden will not be Obama 2.0, he will have a different West Asia policy from his predecessors. It will retain some elements of President Trump's policy, such as retaining the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem and building on the Abraham and Al-Ula accords. He is also unlikely to prioritise the Palestine issue. But on Iran, the U.S. policy will change as Biden will seek to bring Tehran to the negotiation table. It is difficult to say whether he will succeed.
- ❖ **Israel/Arabs on U.S. return to Iran deal:** From the Israeli standpoint, if the U.S. returns to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Israel will be forced to reassess its options as it cannot tolerate enhanced Iranian nuclear capabilities. Arabs, too, found the JCPOA problematic because it encouraged Iranian efforts to create a 'Shia crescent' to encircle the Arab world. Arab countries did not have any representation in negotiations. They are lobbying Washington to protect their interests, but in the eventuality of the U.S. return to the JCPOA, they may have to realign themselves to adjust to the new reality.

- ❖ **Other regional players:** Turkey, once a democracy, is now an authoritarian regime. It can be a balancing power against Iran, but its behaviour is destructive. In some aspects, such as trade and commerce, President Erdogan has adopted a pragmatic policy. Egypt, which was once central to the Arab world, has lost its status after the failed Arab Spring. The current government is more repressive than the Mubarak regime. Today, Saudi Arabia and UAE have taken the lead in setting the region's direction. A case in point was Qatar's boycott, which was decided upon by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and Cairo merely implemented it.

- ❖ **India and West Asia:** In recent years, India has prioritised relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia and UAE under its 'Look West' policy. However, it has also demonstrated a remarkable finesse of talking to other countries, which are hostile to each other.
 - The strategic partnership with UAE and Saudi Arabia has brought rewards in political, economic and energy spheres. This is especially true in energy, where India has developed its first strategic petroleum reserve with the UAE's help. More investment opportunities from UAE can materialise only if India improves its domestic investment regulations.
 - The U.S. sanctions on Iran have hurt India. So, any potential easing will benefit India as it will be able to resume relatively normal bilateral trade.
 - The condition of the Indian diaspora has improved over the last 5-6 years. For instance, Qatar has tightened its labour laws to improve its global standing as it prepares to hold the FIFA World Cup in 2022. India too is working with many governments in the region to provide better protection to its workers, most of whom are blue-collar.
 - On the security front, India has taken on more responsibilities in the maritime domain rather than free-riding. There are opportunities to expand this engagement through the Indian Ocean Rim Association and other platforms.

- ❖ **ICC ruling on Palestinian territories:** Israel perceives the recent International Criminal Court (ICC) ruling (that the court has jurisdiction to investigate potential war crimes committed in Palestinian territories) as biased. By approaching the ICC and other international organisations, the Palestinian side is avoiding direct negotiations with Israel. Israelis perceive their military's behaviour as spotless barring a few exceptions that its judiciary has dealt with.

- ❖ **Democracy in West Asia:** The experience of the Arab Spring has demonstrated that a realistic approach to the region is needed to promote democracy. It is a choice between democracy and stability, as seen from the events in Egypt, Libya and Iraq. It is for this reason that there are not too many democracies in this region.

SECTION III

WEBCAST TRANSCRIPTS' BRIEF

Introduction:

Manjeet Kripalani:

- Welcome to the Gateway House-KAS Webcast. Today, we will be talking about realignments in West Asia. What a fantastic change we have seen! 10 years ago, with Arab springs and now with Abraham accords. Sanctions on Iran will perhaps be lifted and then we will have a new West Asia. 10 years ago, people were rebelling against autocracy and now autocrats have recast themselves as reformers. Low oil prices in early 2020 had a lot to do with this.
- How new is this new West Asia? Are the leaders more responsive or in a game of self-preservation? Is the world really looking for a changed region, in the midst of so much political turmoil, with China, the economy, the receding dominance of the West, technology, the pandemic? What will a new west Asia look like? What are the international implications? What will it mean for India, which is so dependent on its energy and remittances from its diaspora in West Asia?

Opening Remarks:

Peter Rimmele: A pleasure indeed to partner with Gateway House for a discussion on one of the most discussed regions.

- It is constantly changing, infused with fast-paced dynamics and remains volatile. From the early months of the past year - the overall security picture of West Asia appears rather bleak. Civil wars in Yemen and Syria continue to shatter lives and destroy livelihoods.
- Simultaneously, the heated political rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the isolation of Qatar, and competition between Saudi Arabia and Turkey for the leadership of the Islamic world set the stage for a scenario that evoked vivid memories of the Cold War in many of us.
- On yet another front, the recurring skirmishes between US under the Trump administration and Iran were spiralling out of control. A sequence of escalating events culminated in the assassination of the Iranian general Soleimani. Even now, there is a staring match going on between the two countries over the re-entry of the US into the JCPOA accord.
- The US recognition of Jerusalem as capital of Israel did not help matters much. As a result of these issues, crucial issues concerning geopolitical challenges, regional security and energy security have resurfaced.
- Besides these challenges, we should not underestimate the fact that recently, more rays of hope have been shining on the overall picture of West Asia. The realignment of some West Asian countries through the historic Abrahamic Accords and al-Ula Agreement are a breath of fresh air, representing the first of many diplomatic building blocks needed to build sustainable peace in this historically volatile region.
- However, in light of manifold geopolitical challenges, we cannot rest on our laurels, and must continue to strive on reconciliation intended to finally draw the Arab-Israeli conflict to its end.

The realignment of policies between the UAE, Bahrain and Israel ought to be widened to encompass other member of the Arab league to shape a new era of peace across the region.

- As all nations face diverse global challenges like the COVID pandemic, this is a good example for possible cooperation. We can only overcome them through high levels of intergovernmental collaboration in the fields of intelligence and security, while fostering firmer economic partnerships. Amongst all these clashes of interests from geopolitical and geoeconomics perspectives, the world is looking at the US and the Biden administration to reassume a balanced leadership position against the already emerged China, using military aggression, wolf-warrior diplomacy, and stealthy economic mercantilism as some of its tools.
- As Manjeet mentions, from an Indian perspective, we have to look at the region mainly from the energy security perspective that might, with time may mitigate due to diversification into renewables as well as electric mobility. For the time being, there is a need for it to be taken seriously. As a desired side effect of such development, it would also mean that renewable energies would lead to reaching also the goals of the Paris Agreement.
- I conclude by asking all to derive inspiration and purpose from the latest push for peaceful coexistence in the West Asia, epitomised by the Abraham accords. Hereby the Élysée Treaty, a great example and as a KAS representative, I must bring it to fore as a striking testimony to the diplomatic efforts of Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle, and as also to the fact that enduring peace is possible between once-feuding states and its citizens, as seen with France and Germany.
- This ought to be a common goal for all nations. Establishing such close cooperation in the fight for a secure West Asia and the world as a whole will help us in building broader trust regardless of past differences. This is what we advocate at KAS for unity, multilateral cooperation and perseverance. These principles provide us with a compass in helping us steer through these global challenges.

Panel Discussion:

Sameer Patil: Thank you both for setting the scene.

Sameer Patil to Professor Efraim Inbar: West Asia has seen momentous changes starting with the Abraham accords. How do you see the regional dynamics in the near future from Jerusalem?

Prof. Efraim Inbar: The Abraham Accords are a result of swaying historic trends in the Arab world.

- The first one is growing acceptance of Israel in the Arab world. Arabs in this generation were born to a situation where Israel was a *fait accompli*, and they decided to engage with Israel in different ways. The pioneers were Egypt in 1979, then Jordan in 1994 then the Palestinians with the Oslo Accords, which were not a great success, but brought acceptance to negotiate with Israel.
- The second one was started by the Americans, when the Obama administration decided to leave the Middle East. Trump continued withdrawal. What was most significant is the lack of American reaction to the destruction of oil fields in Saudi Arabia by Iran, and it is felt that the Biden administration will go along with this line because they need the Middle East less in terms of energy, since they have their own sources. The American wars in the Middle East were not very successful and they wanted to get out which is understandable. Parallel to what

has been happening is the growing threat of Iran in the region. Iran particularly through its proxies is very active in Yemen and Syria.

- Iran is trying to attain hegemony in the region. Iran inherits a Persian imperial tradition and they have this in mind. Beyond this, is the nuclear factor and their nuclear ambitions, which pose a regional threat particularly to the Gulf countries like UAE and Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Through a realpolitik lens, the lens of the leadership of all countries in West Asia, it is only Israel that can stop Iran.
- Israel has military capabilities and has demonstrated political will to put an end to hostile nuclear program in the past. This is the clear result of its strength. The Abraham Accords in contrast to the Egyptian and Jordanian peace treaties also lend legitimacy to the state of Israel. By using the word Abrahamic, they lend religious legitimacy to the Jewish people. We all belong to the same Abrahamic religious tradition, and this is a further step in an understanding between Israelis and Arabs in the region.
- Furthermore, the Abrahamic accords clearly undermine a widespread notion in the Arab world that Israel is the creation of the colonialist powers. This is indeed a powerful message that is communicated to the Arabs in the region. Indeed, we have seen Sudan and Morocco in joining this strength as a result of the American diplomacy which of course contributed to this great achievement.

Sameer Patil to Ambassador Navdeep Suri: PM Modi's 'Link West' policy has seen India's relations with the Arab world and Israel flourish. What is the next step for us? Where do we go from here?

Ambassador Navdeep Suri: There is strong personal commitment about the policy by the Prime Minister in the Gulf particularly. This needs to be placed in perspective. When he went to Abu Dhabi in August of 2015, that was the first visit by an Indian PM in 34 years. Since then, during my term as Ambassador, the Prime Minister visited twice more, and we have had Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed as the chief guest on Republic Day. You can see the intensity of the exchanges taking place.

- Along with this, Saudi and Israel are countries where India has placed special attention. The kind of strategic partnership that has emerged with UAE and Saudi Arabia in the last five years has been very rewarding for us in political, economic and energy terms.
- The political side of it, without wanting to bring in the India-Pakistan dimension, it is important to remember that a few years back Pakistan treated the Gulf as its backyard. That has changed dramatically and today it finds itself in this embarrassing position. For example, even for issues such as Jammu and Kashmir situation, it fails to draw support from its erstwhile allies. Dubai, for example, used to be the playground for terrorist groups but today the Emiratis have no hesitation in deporting such groups and actors to India.
- Where do we go from here? We have made beginnings in the energy sector which is important. India used to scout for energy assets from Venezuela to Vladivostok, but we never got a hold of these resources in our own backyard in Gulf. We received our first oil concessions from UAE in 2017, and thereafter we have developed the first strategic petroleum reserve in Mangalore in collaboration with the Abu Dhabi Company.
- I believe there are areas where progress has been made, but a lot of wrinkles remain that need to be ironed out in terms of our own investment regulations to be able to give more comfort to institutional investors that bring the type of patient long-term capital that the Indian economy needs.

- I would like to respond to Professor Inbar by adding a couple of points on the Abraham accords. It is important to look at where the Emiratis come into this. From their perspective despite all the hue and cry that they sold out the Palestinians, no one shines light on the fact of Netanyahu agreeing to freeze or suspend the proposed annexation of certain controversial areas in the West Bank. We need to remember this second part of the Abraham accords. Beyond this, two points strike me in particular:
 - The Abraham Accords are unlike the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, which has been cold. The speed at which normalisation took place between Israel and UAE really caught everybody by surprise. UAE is the only country with which Israel has launched the visa free travel arrangement. This move has caught a lot many by surprise.
 - What the Emiratis are trying to show is their acceptance of Judaism. It's a historical clean-up to remove anti-Semitism. A rabbi in Dubai, kosher food in a restaurant. There may be a political problem with Israel but a problem with Judaism is not present. This is a huge shift taking place before our eyes.

Sameer Patil to Prof. Efraim Inbar: Now that the Biden administration has taken over, do you see American policy with regards to the region and Iran changing? What is the view within and outside the government on this?

Prof. Efraim Inbar: The Biden administration has a very full plate to deal with domestic issues. It has foreign policy issues in Iran, China and Russia. However, there is a clear change in the situation of Iran.

- The Biden administration announced that it wants to return to negotiations with Iran over an improved JCPOA. In 2015, Israel had made a point that this agreement is full of holes and is not a good one. Biden administration, at least initially, has adopted the criticism that was once voiced by Israel and France.
- There is a change vis-à-vis Iran. Iran's response cannot be calculated. They play a tough game. In June they have elections for a new President and all approved candidates are hawkish. We do not know if the Biden administration's initiative to bring Iran to the negotiation table would be successful. In any case, it is my view that Biden administration will eventually go back to the agreement, and this will force us to think twice on what to do about the issue. Israel cannot live with Iran getting close to the bomb.
- There is another issue concerning the Middle East. The Biden administration does not put the Palestinian issue high on its agenda. They might not make the effort that the Trump administration made to bring the negotiations to the table. It seems they have adopted a moralistic position proposed by Israel.
- Biden announced that he will keep the embassy in Jerusalem that will bring about an additional dose of reality to the region. Israel is not going to give up on Jerusalem. If Palestinians are interested in peace with Israel, they should abandon this dream. Generally, there is fear in Jerusalem that Biden, though not Obama number two, will signal weakness particularly in West Asia. This remains to be seen if Biden and Blinken will learn the hard lessons of West Asia.

Sameer Patil to Ambassador Navdeep Suri: How do you see Biden's administration's West Asia policy, particularly in Saudi Arabia, since American officials have repeatedly spoken of recalibrating the US relationship with Riyadh?

Prof Inbar interjects:

- We know what kind of regime is in Saudi Arabia and sometimes you have to make difficult choices in foreign policy between emphasis of human rights and stability. The US undermined the regime of Mubarak in Egypt which was a bad call. I hope the same mistake is not committed in Saudi Arabia, particularly this time around.
- We have to be realistic about the region. We do not see too many democracies in the region. Turkey, once a democracy, is now an authoritarian regime. We should try to be realistic with our approach and not make choices that would bring about a worse situation. Iraq under Saddam versus Iraq today, what is better?

Ambassador Navdeep Suri to Sameer Patil:

- It is fair to say the Gulf countries, UAE and Saudi were heavily invested in the Trump administration. Two foreign policies were seen as successes - the Abraham accords and the al-Ula accords that brought about some degree of normalisation with Qatar, ending a four-year long feud. Having said that, speaking with my interlocutors, what caught me by surprise was the visceral dislike for the Obama administration.
- From a Gulf perspective the JCPOA was flawed, not that it wasn't hard on the nuclear issue but that it ignored two problems the Gulf had with Iran.
 - One - Interference in Arab affairs, and from the Arab perception, the effort to create a sort of Shia crescent from the eastern oil fields of Saudi Arabia, from Yemen and Saudi Arabia to Bahrain, Syria and Lebanon. This encirclement that they witnessed from an aggressive Iranian dispensation was deeply unsettling. How can you normalise the nuclear issue but discard regional security issue and not involve the parties' right there and actually have the 5+1, where countries not from the region are involved in the conversation?
 - Two - Iran's' nuclear strength. The over-the-top warmth or energy that Trump and Kushner put into a couple of areas that were of interest to them may not be replicated in quite the same way. According to me, we will see that the Gulf countries have to realign themselves to adjust to the new realities, even as they lobby Washington for protecting their concerns.

Sameer Patil to Ambassador Navdeep Suri: What of UAE? What are the considerations for Abu Dhabi when it views the region and assesses its position?

Ambassador Navdeep Suri:

- I shouldn't be accused of *localitis* when I say this, but UAE is quite an interesting country for it punches way above its weight in the neighbourhood. Partly because of the wealth and resources, partly due to its ambition, vision and competence of its leaders.
- After Israel, they have probably the most capable army in the Middle East perhaps more so than Egypt in terms of their assets. We see them willing to deploy that capacity in terms of

operations as far afield as Libya. Alongside the military capacity they display an effort to redefine the region and particularly the role of religion in the region.

- The Emiratis have taken themselves to the frontline against religious and fundamental extremism. They are taking a hard-line against the Muslim brotherhood. They recognise that political Islam is the beginning of slippery slope towards radicalisation. They are going a step beyond by creating a high-profile ministry of tolerance, a house of Abrahamic family with all-in-one complex. From a neutral perspective UAE is an interesting country to watch.

Sameer Patil to Prof. Efraim Inbar: I am going to ask a difficult question about the International Criminal Court's ruling on the 5th of February, that it would have jurisdiction to investigate the potential war crimes committed in the Palestinian territories. What are the options for Israel in this instance, given that they are not a member of the ICC?

Prof. Efraim Inbar:

- The Palestinian appeal to the ICC, as well as to other international organisations, is part of the strategy not to bring themselves to negotiate with Israel. For years, they have tried to create some kind of international consensus to force Israel to do things instead of direct negotiations.
- Many of those international organisations are, from an Israeli perspective, and should be from a wider perspective, morally bankrupt. The Human Rights Organisation doesn't go after China or Zimbabwe, or other countries that are clearly non-democratic. Israel is used to this unique treatment, and we do not pay much attention to these organisations, particularly since Israel's military behaviour is impeccable.
- I have been a combat soldier. I have been in the paratroopers and have seen a lot of my comrades fall. I think that the Israeli army is probably the most moral army in the world. I don't know if you are aware, at every division level, there is a lawyer that has to approve every military action. Every target has to be pre-approved. Of course, in the height of combat, you cannot call your lawyer about responding to fire. You have a certain freedom of action, but the air force doesn't attack any structure that has not received legal clearance. There are cases, unfortunately, of undisciplined soldiers, who don't behave as they should. Of course, we take them to court.
- We have a notion of purity of arms, we have to keep our arms pure. Not because of the international community. We don't care so much about the international community. The Jews have been an object of hatred and pogroms and many things, so we are not that sensitive to the international community. But I want to look in the mirror and be sure that I behave properly. Of course, there are situations where it's not always easy to make a decision. There are split second decisions, which are very difficult. I don't know how many of you in the audience have participated in military action. I think generally, the Israeli army, with exceptions, has behaved admirably in the battlefield.
- Therefore, the ICC doesn't bother us. Of course, we will take whatever action is needed. The Americans and many others are also not part of the ICC. These institutions are extremely biased against Israel. We live with it and will continue to live with the chorus that says "you are the bad guys." What is important is to be able to look in the mirror!

Sameer Patil to Ambassador Navdeep Suri: Egypt used to be central to the Arab world, how is it coping with these changes? Because it is where the Arab Spring started, and now 10 years later, where we are now, how is Egypt coping – within and without?

Ambassador Navdeep Suri: I think it's not an easy change to swallow. I remember, from my first posting in Egypt in the early 80s, there was a prominent Egyptian intellectual, Mohammed Hussein Heikal, who was one of the great strategic thinkers of the region at that time. He captured the sentiment in Egypt towards the nouveau riche in the Gulf, who had recently acquired the oil wealth, and he famously called it the 'Camel to Cadillac' syndrome, saying that in one generation, these people have moved from a camel to a Cadillac, and what do you expect from them.

- Today, if you look at India's relationship with UAE, compared to Egypt, the breadth of our relationship is much greater, the depth of our relationship is also much greater. The reason is that Egypt somehow hasn't been able to get its act together.
- I think that they are in a state where post-failed Arab Spring, the government in place is even more harsh and repressive than the Mubarak government. I hear from many of my young Egyptian friends that they are voting with their feet. You are seeing a flight of talent because of lack of economic opportunity and the degree of political repression, or lack of political space. So, combined with the lack of resources and the inefficient bureaucracy, Egypt has found itself gradually slipping.
- Nowadays, you have Emiratis and Saudis, for example, calling the shots on certain aspects of foreign policy. The boycott of Qatar was a case in point, where the decision was taken elsewhere but Cairo had to implement it. Until you start seeing a strong economic and political revival of Egypt, it will continue to lose momentum in the region. It is no longer playing the leadership role that it used to play at the time of Nasser, Sadat and even to an extent, during the time of Mubarak.

Audience Q&A:

Sameer Patil: Thank you. Let us open the floor for the audience Q&A. Question to Amb. Suri, from Vice Admiral Chauhan. Do you think, looking at India's West Asia options, that this is an opportune moment for New Delhi to expand the membership of the IORA to include Saudi Arabia, and also Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and Iraq?

Ambassador Navdeep Suri:

- UAE is chairing IORA, as of last year. Some of these countries are already in an active membership role. Hopefully others will join in as well. It certainly makes sense for us.
- We see the Gulf as a part of our maritime security zone. There is a recognition in some of the Gulf countries that India, which is large, stable and increasingly more capable in the naval domain, is a net contributor to maritime security and stability in that region.
- We have an arrangement with Oman for the use of their facilities in Duqm. We have done naval exercises with the Emiratis, which were very useful.
- A year and a half ago, during the crisis in the Gulf, the fact that we deployed two naval vessels to escort shipping in the Gulf was taken as a positive thing that India is not a free rider in the security domain, but one that is willing to bear some of the weight. We did that independently without coming under the US umbrella. From all of those aspects, there is certainly a case for

a much greater level of maritime engagement, whether it is in the context of IORA or otherwise. There could be other platforms as well.

Sameer Patil: Thank you. My next questions are addressed to Prof. Inbar, both related to the Abraham accords. One - what led to this sudden restoration of peace between Qatar and other countries in West Asia, as well as with Israel? Second question is from Peter, does this also mean that the status of the para organisations in the region such as Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood will decline?

Prof. Efraim Inbar:

- Firstly, about Qatar. Qatar was returned to the lap of the Gulf States because the siege on Qatar didn't work and was clearly a failure of policy. Something had to be done about it, and to some extent, the Trump administration did them a favour by pushing for it, and they agreed.
- The basic dispute between Qatar and the rest of the Gulf, particularly on the issue of political Islam are over. Al Jazeera will continue to be a news show for many Arab politicians. The mere fact that Qatar funds so many Muslim Brotherhood activities in the region, and its alignment with Turkey continues to be a problem. For the time being, it is less of a public problem, but the dispute has not ended. We will see how it develops.
- Qatar always had some relations with Israel, during the Oslo accords. Now they bribe the Hamas not to send missiles into Israel, they send them money and COVID-19 vaccines and Russian-made sputniks. Qatar will continue to have a different policy because the leadership there has its own ambitions.
- For the second question, I want to reinforce the observation made by Amb. Suri: the Abraham Accords are qualitatively different from the peace accords we had with Egypt and Jordan. We see a warm peace. My institute has excellent relations with an Emirati institute. I was never able to establish such a close dialogue with Egyptian institutes.
- It's incredible what is going on between Israel and the Emiratis, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. This is, indeed, quite a development. In Israel, we are extremely pleased with this development, and we thank President Trump and Jared Kushner for their efforts, which brought about this important development. Israel was one of the most for-Trump countries, more than America.
- About Hamas and Hezbollah, they are off-shoots of Iran. Hezbollah is clearly a proxy with little freedom of action, it doesn't make its own decision and gets its money partly from Iran and partly from smuggling, be it arms or drugs. Hamas is somewhat different, it has some leverage but it gets money and training from Iran. A real proxy in Gaza is the Palestinian Jihad organisation. These types of organisations will continue to prosper and be there, as long as we do not deal strongly with Iran

Sameer Patil: Thank you, Prof. Inbar, Amb. Suri, I'm going to refer to the issue you discussed during your initial comments about energy. What do you see of the oil sanctions on Iran, in terms of India's own purchase from Iran, in terms of the potential Indian buying of crude oil from Iran, and its impact on the political relationship we have with Saudi Arabia and the UAE?

Ambassador Navdeep Suri:

- On the first part, the US sanctions on Iran have had a disruptive impact for us. India has tried to adapt but several of our refineries were conditioned to take the Iranian crude as opposed to other kinds of crude. We have had to make the adjustments for that. For us, having a diversity of sources, particularly in our own neighbourhood makes sense.
- The fact that we lose out on a major market in our neighbourhood is problematic, so the US sanctions are not something that makes India very happy. We have tried to find ways to work with the Americans, for example, the carve-out on Chabahar port was an exception made by the Americans so that a project that was important to the interests of both countries could continue.
- We will be happy if the sanction pressure on the Iranians is eased, and we are able to pursue relatively normal trading relations with Iran. India has never been a fan of unilateral or single-country sanctions. We prefer the multilateral UN Security Council approach towards sanctions and will be guided by that approach.
- Iran on one side and Saudi and the UAE on the other side is not a matter of either-or. What we have demonstrated over the years in terms of foreign policy is our ability to talk to each of the parties, even though they might be at war with each other. Take the case of Israel, everybody speaks of PM Modi's historic visit to Israel, but conveniently forgets about his equally historic visit to Ramallah.

Sameer Patil to Turkish economist Dr Huricihan Islamoglu: I would like to ask you about Turkey's expanded role in West Asia? How do you look at it from Istanbul?

Dr. Huricihan Islamoglu: I would like to respond to that with a larger case of developments in West Asia. An important legacy of the Trump administration in the region may be that the Arab-Israeli conflict will no longer dominate the landscape. Even oil and gas policies may not dominate the discussion.

- Yesterday, looking at the New York Times, I noticed something out of the ordinary. There was an article showering praise on Turkey's President and his policy of intervention in Syria. The article is by a staunch and passionate critic of the President but tells us that the Turkish army in northern Syria provided millions of Syrians with refuge. The author could not help but notice that education and health services provided by the President either.
- Similarly, positive signals were transmitted to Ankara from the new administration in Washington, notwithstanding the risks regarding the human rights violations by Erdogan's regime. Somethings are certainly changing in West Asia. What I am suggesting is that what we are witnessing is not another rearrangement of the state of affairs regarding the flow of energy resources from West Asia by big powers. This is not happening behind closed doors of the US military power. Failure of the previous attempts in Afghanistan and Iran mirrored the failure of the Western governance of the global economy with a priority of enabling and protecting western corporations and their investments.
- In 2008 crisis and now the COVID crisis, the governance of the global economic order is increasingly shifting to regional powers. The new pattern of governance is one which will be crafted by alliances and negotiations. Regional powers and big corporations, western and Chinese will be part of such struggles. The new pattern of governance according to me is not dictated by western powers or outside powers.

- The new pattern of governance is more likely to speak to the aspirations and expectations of regional actors, seeking market openings, employments opportunities, and infrastructure. Of the regional actors, more aptly described as the emerging economies in the region, I can see Turkey, Iran and Russia and Israel. I see Israel's regionalisation and normalisation as part of this process, and it was long overdue. I don't see this as an occasion for whitewashing Israel's arms violations against Palestinians and the injustices committed against the Palestinians. These two issues must be kept separate.

Sameer Patil to Ambassador Navdeep Suri: Two questions. First, regarding the issue of the diaspora. Looking at the recent changes, what impact does this have on labourers working in West Asia and the promotion of human rights? Second, what do you think is the feature of this connectivity project – the International North-South transport corridor?

Ambassador Navdeep Suri:

- Answering the second question first. I have tried mentioning the Chabahar project and the North-South project as important regionally, and not just to India, to create an alternate route. We remain committed but apprehensive. We are watching the developments between China and Iran.
- On the diaspora, we have got close to 8 or 9 million Indians in the Gulf, which is a different diaspora to the other expats in the sense that some 70% of the community is blue collar. Because it is blue collar it comes with a lot of challenges. Many Gulf countries have regulations that leave something to be desired in terms of the protections they offer to the labourer. It remains a constant endeavour and battle for agency in the region to do what we can in terms of using our good offices with the government and labour courts just to make sure our people are dealt with fairly.
- I should add that if we look at the trend, over the last 5-6 years, things have improved. Qatar for example, in holding the World Cup tightened labour laws to improve its global standing. Countries try building their own brand equity around the world and realise that the treatment of labour is crucial to the image they seek to portray around the world. For their own sake they have made changes in their labour legislation. From our perspective, three issues with regards to labour that we have been working on are:
 - 1) To see whether anybody who goes through the unskilled category goes through our National portal where protection is afforded, and contracts are provided.
 - 2) To ensure emigration portals can be calibrated with other countries to ensure the same systems are available around the markets. This will enable us to get better protection for our workers, in case an employer tries to substitute an original contract with a predatory one.
 - 3) Whether we can up skill our people.

Prof. Efraim Inbar: Turkey is part of West Asia and decided to be part of West Asia against its traditions that wanted to distance Turkey from the Arab and Muslim world and this decision is reinforced by Islamists tones in the current ruling elite of Turkey. Turkey is a strong country with a ready army. It could act as a balance for Iran. The relations between the two countries have been very cautious. They have refrained from going to war with each other and I must admit there is a

pragmatist streak in Erdogan with commercial relations between the nations playing a role. In other areas though the behaviour of Turkey is destructive.

Closing Remarks:

Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia: A very thought provoking and stimulating dialogue we have had in the past hour. This was not for 101 types. This was for advanced students. This was not a helicopter view of West Asia but a microscopic view that gave to us a very clear idea of the complexity and the fault lines of a very difficult and yet a very challenging region. The Abraham accords have bestowed legitimacy on Israel that makes it seem as a native actor in the region. Few pointers from the discussion:

- Biden will not be Obama
- Abraham accords have bestowed legitimacy on Israel
- UAE is a very interesting country punching above its weight.
- Political Islam is a slippery slope
- ICC is a fly on the wall, it does not matter.
- Gulf is no longer the playground of terrorists as pictured by Pakistan.

Thank you, all.
