



Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammad bin Salman (L) and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi hold a press conference at the presidential palace in New Delhi in February 2019. (Indian Foreign Ministry / Anadolu Agency / Getty Images)

Outlook for India–Middle East Relations: National Aspirations and Interests Will Crash Against Hindutva Ideology

Talmiz Ahmad

India's image at home and abroad is being shaped by two factors that are deeply intertwined: the personality of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the ideology of Hindutva — Hindu nationalism — that he robustly advocates. These elements taken together have evoked mixed responses to the country and its leader. At home and in large sections of the Indian diaspora in Western countries, there is widespread enthusiasm for his vision; many Indians admire the celebration of India and the retrieval of its glorious heritage, as well as the fact that it is now poised for leadership in world affairs.

At the same time, many in India and abroad are anguished over the apparent loss of India's affiliation with the norms of multiculturalism, secularism, and pluralism; its identity as the standard-bearer of a developing country accomplishing economic and technological achievement while upholding the values of democracy and human rights; and its long-standing accommodation of diverse communities and belief systems in a vibrant constitutional order.

For Modi and his ideological cohorts, the attainment of "*Hindu Rashtra*," an India built on "Hindu" values, is



central to his leadership. The prime minister's foreign engagements and, indeed, India's foreign policy itself have been mobilized to subserve this project so that Modi's messianic persona boldly and fearlessly secures the *Rashtra*; the project and its prophet are thus an integrated entity.

However, the project has created misgivings in several world capitals — especially in the Middle East, a region that is crucial for India's energy, trade, and investment interests and is home to an 8-million-strong Indian community that directly supports over 30 million people at home by remitting to the national exchequer over \$35 billion annually.

As prime minister, Modi has devoted considerable effort toward building economic cooperation and strategic partnerships with the countries of this region. But the region has large and influential Muslim populations who are appalled by the visceral hatred for their co-religionists in India and the violence that is directed at them with impunity in the effort to attain the *Hindu Rashtra*.

This chapter will examine the wellsprings of the *Hindu Rashtra* project and the implications it could have on India's interests in the Middle East as it pursues its Hindutva agenda.

India's Economic Parameters

There has been consensus in the Hindutva "family" that India "must get its rightful place in the world and in international institutions," and it needs a robust economy to realize this aspiration.¹ In 2015, Modi spoke of India becoming a "leading power." The Indian foreign affairs analyst C. Raja Mohan has explained that this meant placing India "among the major powers — the global directorate if you will."²

By the time Modi became prime minister in 2014, India was already in the vanguard of global economic success: In 1990-2000, its GDP had increased by 5.4%; it increased by 8.8% in the next decade, including a record growth of over 9% in 2005-07, before falling to 7.1% in 2010-17. Most forecasts predict that in 2030 India will be the world's third largest economy, after China and the U.S.^{3,4}

But under Modi, the success narrative has not gone as planned:

- India has a workforce of 450 million people, but 418 million (93%) are employed in the unorganized sector.
- In 2015, the World Bank estimated that about 50% of the Indian population (about 500 million people) was living in poverty; a later World Bank estimate said that the share of rural residents living in poverty had gone from 31% in 2011-12 to 35% (320 million) in 2017-18.
- A 2020 U.N. report said that 23% of Indians (about 275 million people) were exposed to food insecurity, the highest proportion globally, and that the number had increased by 62 million between 2014 and 2019 — i.e., in Modi's first term.
- India was ranked 94th out of 101 countries in the 2020 Global Hunger Index and 116th out of 174 in the 2020 World Bank Human Capital Index.
- India was one of the countries that was worst hit economically by the pandemic: GDP shrank by 7.3% in 2020-21, but decline in growth had started much earlier — 8% in 2016-17, 6.6% in 2017-18, 6% in 2018-19, and 3.9% in 2019-20.
- Economic outlook is not much better: India's annual average rate of growth is expected to be about 4-5% over the next five years; however, even a 6% growth will not allow India to reach the prime minister's target of making the country a \$5 trillion economy by 2025. India will thus remain a "low-income" country.^{5,6,7}

The explanation for this poor economic record during the Modi period is now well documented. In the run-up to the 2014 national elections, Modi had projected the "Gujarat Model" as the basis for economic achievement during his 12-year stint as chief minister. As the U.S.-based economist Ashoka Mody has said, what most observers then failed to note was that in Gujarat, "Modi was not promoting entrepreneurship. He was subsidising favored industrialists who created virtually no jobs and polluted the land and water."⁸

This flawed "model" continued to be pursued after his election victory in 2014 when, as Ashoka Mody says, "politically connected Indian businessmen were continuing to scam government-owned banks" — nonperforming loans of banks (i.e., loans not being repaid on time) rose from 4% in late 2014 to about





Supporters of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena party rally at their convention in Mumbai, India, on Jan. 23, 2020. Party leader Raj Thackeray unveiled a new saffron-colored party flag that symbolizes his party's drift toward the Hindutva ideology. (Satyabrata Tripathy / Hindustan Times via Getty Images)

9% in 2017; for government-owned banks, 12% of the loans were nonperforming.⁹

To compound the country's economic malaise, in November 2016, Modi dramatically announced demonetization of 1,000-rupee and 500-rupee notes, thus abruptly removing 86% of currency in circulation. With the bulk of national employment in the unorganized sector, millions of daily-wage earners were left without income or employment, and the national economy received a shattering blow as numerous small and medium enterprises closed down; there were several reports of starvation and deaths from different parts of India.¹⁰

Hardly had the country recovered from this hammer blow when, in July 2017, the government introduced the Goods and Services Tax (GST). This was largely recognized to be a positive initiative, as it would eliminate cascading taxes (i.e., taxes on taxes) and

integrate the country into one common market. However, the GST regime was introduced in such haste and with several important high-tax earners excluded from it, that it in fact harmed the national economy. As Mody points out:

Modi stood by cluelessly as his officials chaotically rolled out the hugely complex GST. In both the demonetization and GST cases, Modi's actions (or inactivity) inflicted the maximum pain on India's most vulnerable citizens. Farmers and small businesses saw their incomes drop, and workers saw their jobs disappear. ... against the promise of millions of new jobs under Modi, the Indian economy employed fewer people — yes, fewer people — in 2018 than in 2012.¹¹

By the time of the 2019 elections, Modi no longer spoke of economic development or the "Gujarat



model”; having failed to provide economic success, it was now necessary to shift “from aspirations to resentments” by asserting the “strongman” persona before the country’s enemies at home and abroad.¹²

Hindutva Politics and Foreign Policy

Under Modi’s leadership, for the first time since India became a free nation 75 years ago, the country is being shaped as a majoritarian order in which “minorities are actively and regularly persecuted, dissent is punished, the judiciary is unable to balance executive overreach, freedoms are restricted ... and the State is vicious.”¹³

The basis for this is the ideology of Hindutva, a concept first defined and expounded by the Hindu intellectual Veer Savarkar (1883-1966) in 1923. Savarkar propounded the twinning of faith with politics, which yielded an ethnic-national identity for Hindus based on their shared race; their ties to the sacred land of Bharat (India); and their affiliation to the language, Sanskrit, the “mother of all languages.” To these he added “Hindu culture,” which uniquely distinguishes Hindus from adherents of all other faiths.^{14,15}

It is important to note that, while Hindutva adopts “religious symbolism, emotionalism, and vocabulary” from Hinduism, the principal effort is to draw only its ethnic historical-cultural aspects from the faith and give lip service to rites and spiritualism.^{16,17}

Modi as prime minister has adopted this mindset and approach as the central feature of his personality and administration, and has linked this with populist politics. He has achieved this through the systematic use of a compliant mass media and robust social media factories run by Hindutva zealots, largely in Western countries. This has been accompanied by actual acts of violence by Hindutva cadres against Muslims and by denigrating Muslim political and cultural heritage while extolling Hindu history and culture; Sarkar (p. ix) notes that “we no longer have riots in this country, we have pogroms.” She adds: “Hindutva’s Hinduism is not just to unify Hindus but to do so under a violent agenda against non-Hindus.”¹⁸

Hindutva does not have a foreign policy discourse. This has enabled Modi to selectively anchor his

policies in populist pronouncements and actions that boost his personal credentials as the champion of Hindu interests. For instance, he draws from Hindutva the assertion of masculine strength — toughness and decisiveness defining the leader (and, hence, the nation he leads) in the face of external challenges.

Modi also seeks to impart a “Hindu” veneer to his foreign policy pronouncements by using Sanskrit words to describe various aspects of interstate relations. For instance, in 2016, Modi said that India’s “strategic intent” is shaped by our civilizational ethos of *yatharadwad* (realism), *sah-astitwaa* (coexistence), *sah-yog* (cooperation), and *sah-bhagita* (partnership).¹⁹

Modi and his associates also derive certain attributes of the national “strategic culture” from the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharat and the Arthashastra of Kautilya, affirming the Hindu roots of world statecraft and diplomacy. Thus, former diplomat and current external affairs minister Dr. S. Jaishankar has said: “The Mahabharata is indisputably the most vivid distillation of Indian thoughts on statecraft.”²⁰

Foreign policy for Modi is thus a string of robust pronouncements that assert his strength and decisiveness and the country’s lofty global status. The reality is that what passes for Modi’s foreign policy has no basis in a longer-term vision of the national interest and a well-thought-out strategy to realize that vision or interest.

This is not surprising since the principal effort of the administration is to constantly consolidate the prime minister’s base and appeal at home. This is achieved through projecting on television screens the pageantry and ceremony that accompanies his external engagements, the honors conferred on him, and the respect with which he is received and his remarks heard.

This is complemented by Modi’s high-profile wooing of the Indian overseas community. He has been at his best in addressing large gatherings of the Indian diaspora, where he has enchanted them with his persona and wit, and has exuberantly drunk from the cup of their adulation as they repeatedly and exultantly chant his name.





India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi reviews an honor guard during the nation's 73rd Independence Day at Red Fort in New Delhi on Aug. 15, 2019. The event commemorated the end of Britain's colonial rule. (Prakash Singh / AFP via Getty Images)

On occasion this posturing has let him down. On the basis of India's hoary traditions, in January 2021 at Davos, Modi claimed for India the status of *Vishwaguru* ("world-teacher") for its success in fighting the COVID pandemic and saving the world from the scourge. Three months later, India was hit by the deadly Delta strain of the virus that felled India's health sector and caused the deaths of several thousand people. The national GDP declined and millions of Indians were pushed into poverty and hunger. At the same time, India's rich flourished through what French political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot has called "collusive capitalism": The richest 10% control about 78% of the national wealth; the richest 1% control 58%.²¹

Modi's nine years as prime minister have confirmed that the attainment of a *Hindu Rashtra*, founded on the robust and unrelenting implementation of Hindutva ideology, will remain the principal driving force of his government. This project will presumably gain further resonance and vigor as Modi moves into his third term as prime minister if he wins the 2024 elections.

The project has been remarkably successful. In the eyes of his support base, the sense of collective national resurgence and global achievement under Modi's leadership have not been diluted by credible facts relating to nongovernance or misgovernance; pervasive evidence of corruption and venality to benefit



a small coterie of cronies; gross misuse of state power and flouting of the rule of law; obvious failures to deliver on the economic front; and the systematic emasculation of national institutions that are intended to safeguard Indian democracy.

The prime minister and his cohorts are convinced that, regardless of the policies followed at home, other countries need India — for its markets; its huge opportunities for foreign investment; and the availability of its vast and talented human resources for the global corporate sector, as high-end technology specialists in the developed world, and across the employment ladder from blue-collar to technician to the professional in the Gulf.

This optimism could be misplaced. Every serious commentator on India's future trajectory on the world stage, including some who are Modi's fervent supporters, has warned that India's great power aspirations will be seriously jeopardized by the divisive policies being pursued at home. The security affairs writer Manoj Joshi has said that India does not face an existential threat from abroad, but that there is a significant danger from within, with "religion-related social hostilities [being] very high."²²

Ashley Tellis, an American commentator on India's great power aspirations, has emphasized the need to strengthen India's liberal democracy and, among other prerequisites, "preserve a normative order that celebrates diversity."²³ C. Raja Mohan points out that "India can't afford to lose its own internal coherence."²⁴ Indian journalist, activist, and author Aakar Patel believes that India's actions at home "repel nations familiar with and accustomed to a particular representation of what India, the civilisational entity, was. There appears to be little or no external benefit to India being a Hindutva-minded State."²⁵

Relations With the Middle East

India's relations with the Middle East go back several millennia: There is archaeological evidence of substantial commercial, religious, philosophical, and people-to-people interactions between India and the peoples in West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula during the Indus Valley Civilization (3300-1300 BCE).

These close ties have continued, uninterrupted, to the present day.

These relations were affected, however, by the Cold War — India was closer politically and ideologically to the Arab republics that emerged in various countries after the revolution in Egypt in 1952 than they were to Arab monarchies. The republics projected a strong anti-colonial posture, spoke of nationalism and socialism, and had a secular order. Arab monarchies, on the other hand, were part of the Western alliance and, led by Saudi Arabia, anchored their ideological moorings in Islam. However, though India had limited political interactions with the Gulf monarchies that were allied with Pakistan politically and militarily, starting in the 1970s, as oil revenues filled the coffers of the sheikhdoms, Indians steadily came to dominate the regional employment landscape.

As the Cold War ended, India's high growth rates, its increasing demand for the Middle East's energy resources, and its own economic and technological successes (particularly in information technology), along with the resilience of its democratic system and enduring commitment to multiculturalism, made India a model of all-around achievement and an attractive political partner for West Asian nations.

This began with the visit to Riyadh of Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh in January 2001, when the Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal, got rid of the constraints of the "Pakistan factor" in bilateral ties by pointing out that the kingdom would view relations with India as important in themselves, not to be influenced by Saudi ties with any other country. In January 2006, the Saudi ruler King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz visited India as the chief guest at the Republic Day celebrations and established "strategic energy ties" with India.

It wasn't until the extremist assault on Mumbai in November 2008 that Gulf leaders recognized the role of jihadism in India-Pakistan relations. It was clear that this was a jihadist attack planned and mounted by religious extremists who had been nurtured and mobilized by Pakistani institutions and personnel as instruments of state policy directed against India. The attack motivated the Gulf nations to partner with India in counterterrorism efforts. This became the basis by





The national flags of Israel and India stand in the campus of the Centre of Excellence for Vegetables in Vadrad, a village about 70 kilometers (40 miles) northeast of Ahmedabad, Gujarat state, in January 2018. (Sam Panthaky / AFP via Getty Images)

which the largely energy-, economy-, and community-based ties acquired a “strategic” value.

Saudi Arabia took the lead in pursuing a “strategic partnership” with India on the basis of expansion of ties in political, security, economic, and cultural areas, as set out in the Riyadh Declaration in February 2010. The partnership’s immediate achievement was intelligence-sharing in regard to extremist elements. Following this, other GCC countries also deepened bilateral security cooperation with India.

Ties Under Modi

Beginning in 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi outdid all his predecessors in the frequency of his personal interactions with Gulf leaders, as well as in the results he obtained in order to give these relationships both variety and substance. In his first term as prime minister, Modi visited the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, and Israel, and

hosted at home then-Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This pattern of regular interactions with West Asian leaders continued in the early part of his second term, which began in 2019.

In every regional capital, the leaders conveyed that they saw India as their “strategic partner,” a status that reflected a high degree of shared perceptions and approaches on security issues. Thus, the 2015 joint statement with the UAE mentioned “shared threats to peace, stability and security,” and sought a “shared endeavour” to address these concerns. It referred to the need for the two countries to establish a “close strategic partnership” and called upon them to “work together to promote (regional) peace, reconciliation and stability.” The UAE also earmarked \$75 billion for investment in India’s infrastructure.



Similarly, the joint statement with Saudi Arabia spoke of the two countries' responsibility to promote peace, security, and stability in the region. It noted "the close interlinkage of the stability and security of the Gulf region and the Indian sub-continent and the need for maintaining a secure and peaceful environment for the development of the countries of the region."

In Tehran, Modi pointed out that India and Iran "share a crucial stake in peace, stability and prosperity" in the region and have shared concerns relating to "instability, radicalism and terror." The two countries agreed to pursue regional logistical connectivity projects and to enhance cooperation in defense and security.

The Indo-Saudi joint statement of February 2019 gave substance to the burgeoning "strategic partnership" between the two countries, with the bilateral dialogue being institutionalized through a Strategic Partnership Council set up at apex level to monitor progress. The Saudi side noted there were investment opportunities in India worth \$100 billion.

It is important to note that while the joint statements speak of strategic partnership, both India and Saudi Arabia recognize the central importance of economic ties. Saudi Arabia is particularly important to India in this regard. The kingdom is India's fourth largest trade partner: Two-way trade in 2021-22 was \$42.6 billion, while Saudi Arabia provided 18% of India's oil imports. The joint statements signed between the two countries have identified the following as new areas for bilateral cooperation: renewable energy, health care, food security, technology, climate change, and the defense industry sector.

Companies from the two countries are presently looking at connecting the Indian and Saudi coastlines with undersea cables to create a green energy grid to address problems stemming from fluctuations in supply of solar and wind energy. In the area of health care, the two countries are looking at joint medical research, adoption of best practices, and coordination in medical products regulations.

The UAE is the other significant regional partner for India. In recent years, these ties have been bolstered by regular high-level interactions, including the presence of the then-crown prince of Abu Dhabi (now

ruler of Abu Dhabi and president of the UAE), Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, as the chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations in 2017, and the UAE conferring its highest civilian award, the Order of Zayed, on the Indian prime minister in 2019.

In 2022, India and the UAE signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which exempts 80% of Indian goods exported to the UAE from customs tariffs; it is expected to boost bilateral trade from \$45 billion to \$100 billion in the next five years. The UAE's foreign direct investment in India has increased over the last few years and now stands at over \$12 billion. In the area of food security, the UAE has invested in India's organic and food processing industries, in addition to providing expertise to upgrade food transportation and storage facilities in India.

India's Ties With Israel and the U.S. Factor

Though India formally recognized the state of Israel in 1950, it backed the Palestinian cause and did not establish diplomatic ties until January 1992, though there were clandestine ties in the defense area.

As prime minister, Modi already had a history of personal engagement with Israel: He had visited Israel as chief minister of Gujarat in 2006 and had encouraged Israeli investments in his state in the dairy and agriculture sectors. During his first visit to Israel as prime minister in July 2017, he signaled a dehyphenation in India's interactions with Israel and the Palestine Authority: He did not visit Ramallah during his Israel visit, but instead invited President Mahmoud Abbas to India a month earlier and then paid a separate, stand-alone visit to Ramallah in February 2018, a month after Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit to India.

Several commentators have noted the close affinity between Zionism and Hindutva: Both ideologies are founded on the marriage of faith and politics; both uphold the sacredness of territory on the basis of ancient holy texts and claim an exclusive right to their sacred land; above all, both view Muslims as the evil "other" and condemn them to second-class status (legally in Israel, in practice in India).^{26,27}





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This strong ideological affinity is reflected in the positions adopted by Hindutva cohorts in response to Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. Thus, in May 2021, when there were clashes in Gaza in which 253 Palestinians were killed, including 66 children, there were numerous tweets from Hindutva elements backing Israel; a BJP member of Parliament said: “We are with you. Stay strong Israel.”²⁸

However, Hindutva’s ideological ties with Zionism have not had any significant impact on bilateral relations. An Israeli commentator, Orshit Birvadker, has urged both countries to “remain pragmatic in their engagements with each other and not allow sentiment to cloud their decisions.” An Indian observer has described the two countries’ defense ties thusly: “It’s all hard cash and the rest is Israeli guile.”²⁹

Leaders in the GCC were not particularly concerned when India established formal diplomatic ties with Israel; most of them had had behind-the-scenes interactions with Tel Aviv for several years, with Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar even hosting Israeli trade offices in the 1990s.³⁰ India, for its part, pursued its traditional approach to the region on a bilateral and transactional basis, i.e., having substantial, mutually beneficial but separate ties with all the regional states, without allowing one relationship to impinge on the other.

The “normalization” of relations between the UAE and Israel in August 2020 encouraged India, the UAE, and Israel to enter into a trilateral partnership in May 2021, which evolved into a “Quad2” in October 2021 when the U.S. joined the triumvirate; it was renamed “I2U2” in July 2022.³¹ This new partnership has been described as an “ad hoc, informal, issue-specific and geoeconomic initiative,” highlighting that the

partnership has no shared strategic vision and, hence, has no agenda in the area of regional security.³²

This was affirmed by the I2U2 joint statement, issued in February 2023, after a meeting of the foreign ministers of the four countries, which said that the “grouping is intended to mobilise private sector capital and expertise” to pursue projects in infrastructure, public health, green technologies, and food and energy security.³³ The important point to note is that not only is there no shared strategic content in this partnership, but the lead role in pursuing projects will also be that of the private corporate sector, not the governments concerned.

India’s ties with the regional Arab states have not been influenced by India’s expanding defense ties with the U.S. over the last two decades. And other than the I2U2 initiative mentioned above, there has not been any serious effort to expand engagements with broader trilateral or quadrilateral partnerships. The exception is, of course, Iran — since 2004, Indian has continuously subordinated its ties with Iran to accommodate U.S.-led sanctions, even to the extent of compromising its energy, economic, and logistical connectivity interests.

Hindutva Interventions

India’s robust pursuit of Hindutva and its attendant hostility toward Muslims at home has, so far, had a limited impact on India’s flourishing ties with the GCC nations. Generally, the Gulf monarchies tend to avoid commenting on domestic developments in friendly countries; they have no interest in a reciprocal scrutiny of their own domestic situations, which have frequently involved questionable human rights practices in a



political order that is authoritarian and defined by a lack of transparency and accountability.

Thus, the monarchies avoided comment on the destruction of Babri Masjid in December 1992 and the attendant countrywide communal riots in which large numbers of Muslims were killed. Similarly, there were no adverse comments after the post-Godhra riots in Gujarat in 2002, when several hundred Muslims were victimized. The general position by GCC leaders was to affirm faith in the resilience of India's democratic and secular order and its ability to correct the "aberrations" that occur periodically.

During Modi's prime ministership, amidst the considerable mutual bonhomie, there have been two occasions when uneasiness in the Gulf monarchies about the implications of the Hindutva agenda became public. The first occasion was in March-April 2020 when tweets reflecting Hindutva abuse of Muslims for deliberately spreading the COVID-19 virus came to the attention of GCC nationals. The response came not from government sources but from private citizens, though there would certainly have been behind-the-scenes official support.

Thus, the principal response came from a royal family member from Sharjah, Sheikha Hend Al-Qassemi, who admonished the source of the abusive tweet for his "rudeness" and reminded him that his "bread and butter" came from the Muslim people he scorned and ridiculed. Later, the princess recalled Mohandas Gandhi as the "fearless campaigner for the rights and dignity of all people." Following this, several other commentators joined the chorus in noting that Islamophobia in India was "state-sponsored," and distinguishing the medical treatment being given to Indians afflicted by the virus in GCC countries from the abuse being heaped on Muslims in India.

Modi intervened in late April 2020 with a relatively mild tweet in which he said: "COVID-19 does not see race, religion, colour, caste, creed, language or borders before striking. Our response and conduct thereafter should attach primacy to unity and brotherhood." Though observers saw this remark as displaying "little conviction and less enthusiasm," it was sufficient to bring the exchange of tweets from the Gulf to a close.³⁴

The response of the GCC states to Hindutva abuse two years later shifted from private citizens to official interventions. In late May 2022, a BJP spokeswoman, Nupur Sharma, made remarks on national television that were viewed as abusive of Prophet Muhammad and his family. Clippings of the interview reached GCC officials 10 days later. Most GCC and some other Arab governments conveyed their displeasure publicly, either through official statements or directly to the Indian ambassadors who were summoned to the foreign offices. Nonofficial sources in the region also called for the boycott of Indian goods, with some even seeking suspension of oil supplies to India.

Given the strong and widespread criticisms, the BJP, treating this as a party rather than a government matter, suspended the membership of Nupur Sharma, charging her with expressing "views contrary to the party's position." In a public statement, the BJP's national general secretary recalled India's history where "every religion has blossomed and flourished" and affirmed that the BJP "respects all religions ... and is strongly against any ideology which insults or demeans any sect or religion."³⁵

"The Voice of the Global South"

The rivalry of the West with China has imparted a new strategic value to India: Western countries, led by the U.S., give lip service to democratic values and even seek to frame the ongoing competition with China in terms of democracy versus authoritarianism. Meanwhile, however, they have largely refrained from criticizing India for its shift toward an authoritarian order and the gross mistreatment of its 200-million-strong Muslim community. As Sumit Ganguly and Nicolas Blarel wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, "India remains too important an economic and geopolitical partner in the wider contest with China."³⁶

However, whatever the Western calculations, India will continue to emphasize its commitment to strategic autonomy, or "multi-alignment" in the new jargon. As Christian Wagner has explained, there is a continuity in Indian perceptions regarding its status as a "pole" in the world order — to be a separate and independent actor, not part of any alliance.³⁷ Rejecting any possibility of joining a Western alliance, in January this year, India asserted its leadership of the "Global





South” by convening, in its capacity as president of the G20, a hybrid summit of 120 developing countries. The conference was titled “The Voice of the Global South,” and took place under the theme “Unity of Voice, Unity of Purpose.”

Indian officials said the conference provided a common platform to deliberate “on those concerns, interests and priorities that affect the developing countries and ... to unite in voice and purpose in addressing these elements.”³⁸ A later report quoted the Indian external affairs minister as saying that as G20 president, “India would represent countries that are not on the G20 table.”³⁹

India championing the interests of developing countries recalls the Bandung Conference of 1955, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Group of 77 founded in 1964 to strengthen the interests of developing countries at the United Nations. However, the Modi government has preferred to project it as part of the prime minister’s vision, “*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas*” (“Global Unity, Global Commitment, Global Effort”), drawn from Indian traditions that uphold “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*” (“The World Is One Family”), which is also the motto of India’s G20 presidency.

The leadership of the Global South appears to be a new “big idea” of the Modi government; not surprisingly, numerous commentators have swung into action extolling this development — one academic even said that India’s emergence as the voice of the Global South was “reshaping global order,” just as it had “disrupted” international relations during the Cold War and the post-1991 eras.⁴⁰

Leading the Global South draws heavily from Nehruvian traditions, much maligned by the Hindutva family, particularly the prime minister himself. More importantly, Modi hardly has the credentials to lead the Global South: The priority being given to the Hindutva agenda at home and the attendant abuse and mistreatment of the country’s large Muslim minority are hardly going to boost the confidence of the states of the Global South, particularly when many of them are Muslim countries or have large Muslim minorities.

Above all, most of Modi’s foreign policy initiatives and rhetoric “ring hollow, privileging optics over substance”; as noted earlier, they are aimed at bolstering Modi’s personal image before domestic constituencies.⁴¹

Outlook for India-Middle East Ties

Not surprisingly, India’s uncompromising pursuit of the Hindutva enterprise will have certain important consequences for its presence and role in the Middle East. The Nupur Sharma episode has affirmed that Modi has little inclination to moderate his Hindutva cohorts — they are his crucial support base and are essential to the realization of *Hindu Rashtra*. At the same time, GCC leaders, under pressure from large sections of their own citizens, are also finding it difficult to ignore events in India; social media respects no borders and is not easily controlled by governments.

These realities will set the limits on the content and direction of India’s ties with the Middle East. India’s principal area of cooperation with the region will be business — a widening role of the Indian corporate sector in the lucrative projects in the region. This will supplement the traditional ties founded on energy, trade, investments, and the employment of Indians in diverse economic enterprises. Clearly, despite the robust rhetoric contained in the numerous joint statements commemorating India-Gulf engagements, neither India nor the GCC countries see any prospect of a “strategic” content in the relationship — ties between the two sides will remain bilateral and transactional, and largely commercial in content, as they have been for the last several decades.

Over the last decade, despite the U.S. disengagement from the Middle East and the several advantages that India had to shape and pursue a strategic role in regional affairs, India exhibited neither the will nor the capacity to take its responsibilities to another level. It therefore dismissed the opportunity to view the region as a strategic space to promote peace and stability and, over time, with regional partners, shape a comprehensive regional security arrangement — that the Middle East desperately needs.

That role now belongs to China. A newcomer to the Middle East and, until now, diffident about playing



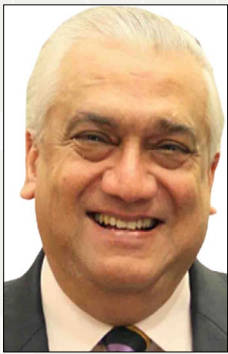


a political role in the region, China shrugged off its hesitations and brokered the Saudi-Iran peace agreement in March of this year, with itself as a party to the agreement and its effective guarantor. China has thus heralded the emergence of a new regional geopolitical scenario.

China assumed this responsibility as it recognized the crucial importance of a stable region where its energy and economic interests would be safeguarded and its Belt and Road projects – logistical, technological, and health-related – successfully implemented. It brought to the region a broad and constructive strategic vision

and was not daunted by the complexity of the region's divisions and disputes, or by its own limited experience in addressing these challenges.

For India, even the “business-as-usual” scenario that supports its economic interests might not be sustainable. As the hot winds of Hindutva blow through the country, with their attendant abuse, venom, and violence, and the nation is fractured along fault lines of faith, caste, language, region, and ideology, the state could experience regional and global isolation – becoming a pariah rather than the *Vishwaguru* it had aspired to be.



Talmiz Ahmad joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1974. Early in his career, he was posted in a number of West Asian countries such as Kuwait, Iraq, and Yemen, and later, between 1987-90, he was consul general in Jeddah. He also held positions in the Indian missions in New York, London, and Pretoria. He was the head of the Gulf and Hajj Division in the Ministry of External Affairs in 1998-2000.

He served as Indian ambassador to Saudi Arabia twice (2000-03 and 2010-11), to Oman (2003-04), and to the UAE (2007-10). He was also additional secretary for international cooperation in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas in 2004-06, and director general of the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), New Delhi, in 2006-07. In July 2011, the Saudi government conferred on him the King Abdul Aziz Medal First Class for his contribution to the promotion of Indo-Saudi relations.

After retirement from foreign service in 2011, he worked in the corporate sector in Dubai for four years. He is now a full-time academic and holds the Ram Sathe chair in international studies, Symbiosis International University, Pune.

He has published four books: “Reform in the Arab World: External Influences and Regional Debates” (2005), “Children of Abraham at War: The Clash of Messianic Militarisms” (2010), and “The Islamist Challenge in West Asia: Doctrinal and Political Competitions After the Arab Spring” (2013). His latest book, “West Asia at War: Repression, Resistance and Great Power Games,” was published in early April this year.

He writes regularly in the Indian and West Asian media and lectures on the politics and economics of West Asia, Eurasia, and the Indian Ocean; political Islam; and energy security.

Endnotes

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