

# Turkey, Israel and the Region : Implications for India

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India has vital economic, political and strategic interests in the

Middle East. It has strong trade relations with the Persian Gulf countries and depends on petroleum imports from the region for energy security. The presence of over 8.5 million Indian expatriate workers and the annual remittance of nearly US\$ 30 billion are vital links between India and the region. The security of India's and international sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean and Arab Sea demands cooperation with the Gulf countries. Further, coastal security, especially to prevent use of sea for terrorist attacks, cannot be ensured without close engagements. Similarly, the emergence of Islamist terrorism and the fear of its spread in the subcontinent has led to closer security cooperation with Middle Eastern countries. Therefore, India has been steadfast in its diplomatic outreach to the region and this has found a new dynamism under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This has led to a growing engagement not only with the Gulf but the wider Middle East.

India has close strategic relations with Israel and has friendly ties with Turkey, the two important countries in the Middle East. Both are the allies of the US and are driven by their national security in dealing with the neighbourhood and had in the past maintained friendly relations with each other. In fact, as one looks at the Fertile Crescent – Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine – the two have significant geopolitical role and stakes. Thus, the Syrian crisis has witnessed significant involvement of Israel and Turkey with their armed forces crossing the borders with an objective to neutralise security threats. These military incursions along with the deepening security footprints of Iran in Syria threaten to snowball into a major crisis and any flare up in this trouble spot has the potential to inflame the whole region. Given India's vital stakes in the Persian Gulf and Middle East, this will adversely affect its interests and national security.

## **Turkey, Israel and the Region**

Both Turkey and Israel have been playing a significant role in regional developments in the Middle East. Both are driven by domestic political developments in pursuit of their foreign policy. The domestic situation in Turkey is under tremendous stress due to continued aggressive policy followed by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan who has preponed the Parliamentary and Presidential elections to June 2018, earlier scheduled for November 2019. If Erdogan wins the elections, which seems likely given the current domestic political situation, Turkey will remain on the current path of trying to expand its strategic involvement in the region. This is visible from Turkey rushing to support Qatar after the June 2017 boycott by the quartet of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt. It has come out in support of Iran after the US pulled out of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and has opposed the US move to shift the embassy to Jerusalem. Its support for Hamas and the Palestinian militancy though have been subdued due to concerns about strong Israeli reaction, Turkey continues to raise concerns about the situation in the Gaza Strip and has given refuge to some of the top leadership of Hamas. However, its relation with Israel has been permanently damaged and chances of any reconciliation are lean. Its support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, especially in the wake of the removal of Mohammed Morsi, has strained relations between Ankara and Cairo.

Turkey's actions in Syria have put it in a peculiar situation with the Syrian regime, Iran, Russia and the US. All are opposed to the Turkish military presence in Syria but allowed it to take control of northwestern enclave of Afrin so as to disallow the Kurds the strategic advantage they were looking for. Nevertheless, it has put Turkey in a vulnerable position vis-à-vis both the US and Russia who have only tactically allowed Ankara a presence in Syria. In addition, Turkey has been for long in a diplomatic row with the US over the deportation of Fethullah Gulen and has arrested an American pastor and some Turkish staff of the US embassy in Ankara. Turkey's desire to play larger role in the regional affairs has forced it to align with Russia and Iran on the Syria peace process and it has stepped up efforts to remain a

relevant player. Nonetheless, the policies and interests of Russia, Iran and Turkey in Syria do not always converge and there are vital differences. For example, on the Kurdish issue Russia is ready to allow some degree of autonomy but both Turkey and Iran are opposed to it. Similarly, on the issue of Turkey's military presence both Bashar al-Assad and Iran are opposed. Russia on the other hand wishes to stabilise the situation in Syria and do not want it to become a quagmire that it cannot leave, akin to the US presence in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Israel's regional policy is currently focussed on militarily countering Iran in Syria. It wants to counter Iran and its growing regional influence through the US and by aligning with Saudi Arabia and the UAE that share some of the Israeli trepidations vis-à-vis growing Iranian influence in the region. Israel was instrumental in pushing the Trump administration to withdraw from JCPOA. The tensions between Israel and the US over regional issues, evident during the Obama administration, has given way to significant convergence of policy direction in the Middle East. Israel, for example, has welcomed the US move to shift the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem as long overdue. The violence associated with Jerusalem move is likely to abate and diplomatic opposition to the US in the UN might not be a major problem for both Trump and Netanyahu. Notably, both the Trump administration and Israel believe that this move will force the Palestinian leadership to accept the peace the 'ultimate deal' being prepared by the US. Nonetheless, Israel continues to face threats from Hezbollah, Hamas and other militias which are used by Iran as proxies in advancing its regional interests. Thus, the bulk of Israeli strategic calculus is focussed on countering Iran as it feels Tehran has established military presence close to its borders in Syria. The Trump Administration has a hawkish view of Iran and has decided to undo the Obama legacy of US-Iran rapprochement and moved in tandem with Israel and Arab Gulf countries to isolate Iran. This, in their calculus is likely to place the Iranian regime under immense pressure and put brakes on its growing regional influence. Even though the hopes of public understanding with Gulf countries has been dashed due to Jerusalem move, but they remain on the same page when it comes to Iran.

As far as the regional turmoil in the Middle East is concerned, both Turkey and Israel will continue to play a significant role. Turkey has come a long way from its foreign policy objective of zero-problems with neighbours and despite the ability of President Erdogan to antagonise all his neighbours, Ankara has been able to handle regional challenges by pursuing a policy of active involvement with regional players and straddling with dominant global powers. Though Ankara's quest for conflicting foreign policy objectives emanating from economic, political and strategic interests has created a confused foreign policy, it has managed to secure its core interests. On the other hand, Israel remains isolated in the region but its military capability is a major shield of defence. It knows that its regional enemies can only be deterred by continuously growing its military capability and, hence, the focus on military capacity. Simultaneously, it has built strategic partnerships with established and emerging global powers to secure its national interests.

#### **India, Israel and Turkey**

India has strong bilateral relations with Israel and friendly ties with Turkey. It has no outstanding issues with any of them. India's relations with Israel are centred on security and defence, science and technology and growing people-to-people contacts. It is indeed developing into a major strategic partnership where the two sides not only understand but are ready to make special concessions for each other. India's ability to leverage political and diplomatic relations with Israel and Gulf countries is significant and a case in point is the beginning of direct Air India flights to Tel Aviv via Saudi airspace. The bonhomie on display between Benjamin Netanyahu and Narendra Modi during their respective visits to India and Israel demonstrate the close understanding the two sides have developed over bilateral issues. Nonetheless, when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, India has been cautious and aware of its historical support to the Palestinian cause. Though under Prime Minister Modi, New Delhi has pursued a policy of de-hyphenating bilateral engagements with Israel and Palestine but as was evident from Indian response to the US embassy move, it is not ready to take sides when it comes to the conflict. Similarly, India is unlikely to be drawn into the proxy or direct conflict between Israel and Iran. New Delhi is unlikely to be

pulled into any US, Israel and Gulf alignment that might be on the horizon to isolate Iran.

With Turkey India has friendly relations but does not have close strategic cooperation. The bilateral trade is marginal and there are no significant political engagements. Though there is desire on part of both sides to seize economic opportunities and develop bilateral ties, the chances of it materialising are limited as relations for a variety of reasons remain frozen in time because New Delhi and Ankara saw each other aligned with the opposite camps in the Cold War politics. The likelihood of a change in this is remote, especially under the present government in Ankara, which on many occasions took up mantle of Kashmir conflict in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and at other multilateral platforms.

Given the current situation in the region, the likelihood of any direct confrontation between Israel and Turkey is remote but tension is expected to remain. Turkish support for Palestine and Hamas and its willingness to come out openly in support of Iran will be an irritant for Israel. For Turkey, Israel does not present a direct challenge but Ankara's inability to play any constructive role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and tendency to jump into regional conflicts can complicate its already fragile and tense relations with Israel. Though Israel and Turkey are not at the centre of the explosive geopolitical situation in the Middle East, they might find themselves in opposite camps in case of a major crisis that may envelop the whole region.

### **Implications for India**

Given India's vital stakes in the Middle East and its growing engagement with the regional countries, any significant flare up or conflict will adversely affect its interests. When it comes to the situation in Syria, India has largely remained aloof and has been supportive of the legitimately elected government. It, however, maintains that the problem in Syria should be resolved through peaceful dialogue. But as the Syrian quagmire evolves into a regional and global struggle for power, can India afford to remain indifferent? This question becomes more important if seen in the context of India's close and friendly relations with the regional countries and its growing global profile.

India's interests in the Middle East will be significantly affected in case of a regional hot war. The core of its interest lies in the Persian Gulf. Given the growing vulnerabilities in the region, India will be impacted in many ways. Its economy will be adversely affected if a conflict arises in the region and damages its trade with regional countries. In the eventuality of a war, the chances of a steep rise in international oil prices cannot be ruled out and Indian economy will be significantly affected in such a scenario. Simultaneously, given that 60 per cent of India's energy imports come from the region, its energy security will also be adversely affected. The security of the 8.5 million Indians and planning an emergency rescue for such a large population can be a nightmare for the country. Even though India has in the past successfully organised the rescue of its nationals from trouble spots such as Kuwait in 1990, Egypt and Libya in 2011 and recently in Yemen, the numbers are not comparable.

Therefore, what are the options for India? New Delhi cannot afford to take sides with the conflicting parties in the eventuality of a regional conflict. It will have to maintain a safe distance from regional conflicts without compromising on bilateral engagements. India will need to balance its relations with all regional countries involved as it has been doing. At the same time, India cannot afford to remain indifferent. New Delhi has been urging regional players to practice restraint and use the option of negotiations and diplomacy to resolve conflicts. However, it has not taken any active interest in engaging with interested parties to try and figure out the possibility of New Delhi playing a larger role in keeping the region peaceful. Some of the regional countries and many observers within India have advocated establishing diplomatic channels to bring the regional adversaries together on negotiation table. India, thus far, has remained reluctant given the complexities involved. Nevertheless, if India has to safeguard its interests and realise its global potentials, it will have to be ready to rethink this policy and work toward devising a more proactive approach. For this to happen, it will have to maintain friendly relations with all regional countries including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel and Turkey and balance its ties with global powers with regional interests including the US, Russia and China. The possibility of working with multilateral organisations such as the

Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as well as with individual countries with friendly ties can also be explored.

To conclude, it can be argued that India cannot afford to remain indifferent to the emerging geopolitical tensions in the Middle East. It has vital stakes in the region and to safeguard those interests it needs to go beyond the current policy of balancing relations and keeping a safe distance. While this is necessary to protect the Indians residing in the region and other national interests, given the prospective cost of a major conflict, India needs to work with other emerging global powers to stabilise the regional situation and prevent any significant flare up.

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