



Fire to fuel

India must brace for the impact of oil supply cuts after the drone attacks in Saudi Arabia

The immediate impact of last week's drone attacks on the Saudi Aramco-owned Khurais oilfield and Abqaiq oil processing facility has been the suspension of more than half of Saudi Arabia's daily crude oil output, thereby affecting contribution to global supply. While the Saudis have restored a portion of the supply that was hit, the sudden disruption resulted in the highest spike (nearly 20%) in Brent crude prices in more than a decade before the U.S. President's statement that America would release some of its strategic reserves resulted in the price easing back to \$66 per barrel (a 10% increase over the day). While the Houthi militia fighting Yemen's Saudi Arabia-backed government in a four-year-long civil war claimed responsibility for the attacks, the U.S. has suggested that Iran was responsible for them. After a belligerent statement that the U.S. was "locked and loaded" to respond to this alleged provocation from Iran, Mr. Trump suggested that he was still trying to draw the Iranians to make a deal over their nuclear programme. Iran's response has been to dismiss the allegations accompanied by a refusal to talk on the U.S.'s terms. Yet, for all his bluster and erratic policy decisions, Mr. Trump has sought to avoid conflict or to engage in new military adventures – an opening Iran must seize and work toward de-escalation through diplomacy. Meanwhile, the Saudis must halt their Yemen intervention and leave it to the UN to broker peace in a battered country. The Saudi-led military campaign, buttressed with logistics support from the U.S. and the U.K., has only brought a stalemate in Yemen, while escalating the conflict to include energy supply targets that the world had imagined to be secure.

The sudden disruption of global crude oil supply is the unintended consequence of the unravelling of the painstakingly crafted P5+1+EU-Iran nuclear deal, the Saudis' reckless adventure in Yemen and the Iranian empowerment of its proxies in West Asia as a response. This development is bound to affect several emerging economies, including India's. The Union Petroleum Ministry has sought to allay fears of a supply cut by relaying messages of assurance from Aramco officials, but there is already an indication that crude prices would rise further due to an increase in the risk premium, leading to increased fuel pump costs. With India importing more than two-thirds of its oil from West Asia, a price surge is expected to impact the current account, and will result in further currency depreciation as was the case on Monday. Higher fuel costs and the imported inflation could also hurt the consumer at a time of a slowdown in the economy. The government should be prepared to handle the fallout with steps such as re-evaluating the excise duties on petroleum products.

Deadly spread

Overcoming 'vaccine hesitancy' can reduce the global spread of measles infection

With a 30% increase in measles cases worldwide in 2018, the World Health Organization, in January 2019, included 'vaccine hesitancy' as one of the 10 threats to global health this year. The threat from vaccine hesitancy, which is defined as the "reluctance or refusal to vaccinate despite the availability of vaccines", only appears to have grown more dangerous to public health. After a surge in measles cases in 2018, there have been around 3,65,000 measles cases reported from 182 countries in the first six months of 2019. The biggest increase, of 900% in the first six months this year compared with the same period last year, has been from the WHO African region, with the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar and Nigeria accounting for most cases. There has been a sharp increase in the WHO European region too with 90,000 cases recorded in the first six months – more than the numbers recorded for the whole of 2018. The infection spread in the European region has been unprecedented in recent years – 1,74,000 cases from 49 of the 53 countries between January 2018 and June 2019. Last month the U.K., Greece, the Czech Republic and Albania lost their measles elimination status.

A 2018 report on vaccine confidence among the European Union member states shows why vaccine coverage has not been increasing in the European region to reach over 90% to offer protection even to those not vaccinated. It found younger people (18-34 years) and those with less education are less likely to agree that the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine is safe. According to a March 2019 report, only 52% respondents from 28 EU member states agree that vaccines are definitely effective in preventing diseases, while 33% felt they were probably effective. More alarming is that 48% of the respondents believed that vaccines cause serious side effects and 38% think vaccines actually cause the disease that they are supposed to protect against. A striking similarity was seen in India too. A 2018 study found low awareness to be the main reason why 45% of children missed different vaccinations in 121 Indian districts that have higher rates of unimmunised children. While 24% did not get vaccinated due to apprehension about adverse effects, 11% were reluctant to get immunised for reasons other than fear of adverse effects. Thus, much work remains to be done to address misinformation. With social media playing a crucial role in spreading vaccine disinformation, the commitment by Facebook to "reduce distribution" of vaccine misinformation will be helpful in winning the war against vaccine deniers. Measles vaccine not only provides lifelong protection against the virus but also reduces mortality from other childhood infections. This is because measles viruses kill immune cells, leaving the child vulnerable to infectious diseases for two to three years.

Red Sea redlines and Yemen's inflection point

The civil war may have entered its endgame, crossing two watersheds which could cast a shadow over Indian interests



MAHESH SACHDEV

Yemen is in the south-west corner of the Arabian Peninsula. Though most Yemenis vouch for national unity, the northern and southern parts of the country are two distinct entities. While the north is hilly and fertile and has some oil reserves, the southern part is mostly desert. The country has a population of around 27 million, with most living in the north. With GDP per capita of \$944, which is less than half of India's, Yemen's poverty is a sharp contrast to the oil-riches of her northern neighbours.

The country is a tribal society with a strong sense of identity and kinship. While almost all Yemenis are Muslims, the population in the north is mostly Zaidi which is closer to the Shia sect followed in Iran. The southerners are mostly Sunnis akin to a majority of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) citizens. While the north remains rooted in esoteric Zaidi traditions, the south which was colonised by the British to protect the sea route to India became relatively more westernised. South Yemen also had close links with India – the Nizam of Hyderabad relied on troops from Hadhramaut and the founder of Reliance Industries, Dhirubhai Ambani, began his career in Aden.

A history of conflict

The roots of the current imbroglio can be traced to the 1930s when north Yemen's Imam ceded to the resurgent Kingdom of Saudi Arabia three provinces that many Yemenis still considered theirs. In the 1960s, north Yemen passed through a six-year-long civil war between the Imam's fighters with Saudi support, against the Republican forces backed by Egypt. The civil war resulted in formation of

Yemen Arab Republic in 1968; it also established a quasi-tradition of foreign dabbling in Yemeni politics.

A united Republic of Yemen was finally established in 1990. In 1994, a section of the south tried to secede, but the insurrection was put down after a short civil war. In 2004, the northern Shia militia called "Ansar Allah" began an insurgency led by dissident cleric Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, head of the Zaidi sect, against President Ali Abdullah Saleh. In November 2011, the Yemeni Arab Spring movement managed to remove Saleh who was replaced by his southern deputy Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi; Saleh and his clan remained influential till his assassination in 2017. The al-Houthi rebelled against Mr. Hadi, ousting him in 2014 and forcing him to flee to Riyadh where he currently heads an 'internationally recognised' but largely ineffective government of Yemen. Saudi Arabia, apprehensive of an al-Houthi led Yemen becoming a surrogate of Iran (a regional Shia rival), cobbled a military coalition comprising the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt and other Sunni powers, with Pakistan reluctantly opting out. This coalition began a military campaign ("Operation Decisive Storm") against the al-Houthis in March 2015, mostly through aerial bombardment, with army units supporting Mr. Hadi's forces in southern Yemen; it also imposed a naval blockade. Four years on, the civil war has ground to a stalemate, with the al-Houthis hunkering it out in the north. The United Nations has described Yemen to be currently in the grip of the world's worst humanitarian catastrophe, with over 11,000 deaths and 3 million internally displaced.

During the past month, the Yemeni civil war seems to have entered its endgame, crossing two watersheds which could cast a shadow over India's strategic national interests. Though both these developments



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ments were a long-time coming, each arrived with a bang and the potential to alter the future course of the conflict.

Drone attacks fallout

The most significant recent development in the Yemeni war has been the coordinated pre-dawn drone attacks last Saturday on the two Saudi upstream oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais. Though al-Houthi militia claimed responsibility, the details (10 drones were said to have engaged 17 targets) and sophistication (accurate hits nearly 1,300 km away from the Yemeni-Saudi border) leaves many questions unanswered. The strikes managed to put 5.7 million barrels per day of crude production out of action – over half of Saudi output and nearly 5% of global supplies. This caused an unprecedented 19% initial surge in oil prices on Monday, with Brent crude topping \$71 a barrel. In a worst case scenario of the hostilities escalating or long-term derailment of Saudi production, oil prices could rise above \$100 a barrel. These game-changing attacks not only mark a dramatic escalation of the conflict but also showcase the efficacy of an asymmetric warfare. With most hydrocarbon assets in the Gulf region currently defenceless against such attacks, this vulnerability is a foretaste of any future conflict in this tension-prone region.

The second development has been the growing rift within the Saudi-led coalition. In July 2019, the UAE announced a drawdown of its forces from Yemen where

they have anchored the coalition ground forces. By the end of August, Yemeni government forces were compelled to withdraw from southern port of Aden leaving it to the UAE-backed units of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), formed in mid-2017.

The STC calls for an independent South Yemen and is vehemently against the presence of Islamists in Yemen such as Islah party (member of Saudi-led coalition), al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State. The UAE is estimated to have trained and equipped thousands of fighters for the STC and other Yemeni militias. Abu Dhabi has also been expanding its strategic presence in neighbouring Eritrea and Somalia.

Many observers foresee the current civil war coagulating into a de facto division of the Republic of Yemen roughly along the pre-1990 border: between an al-Houthi-led north and an STC-dominated south. Yemeni re-partition, if realised, may strongly impact the intra- and inter-state dynamics from Yemen itself to Yemen-Saudi ties and to the UAE-Iran-Saudi Arabia triangle. Riyadh's inability to attain its objectives in Yemen – despite enormous military resources at its disposal – may have long-term consequences, possibly making it more reliant on the large Sunni states such as Pakistan and Egypt. If a viable South Yemeni state takes shape, the STC's symbiotic ties with the UAE would put Abu Dhabi in the driving seat along the geo-strategic Bab al-Mandeb Strait – a choke point connecting the Arabian Sea with the Red Sea onwards to the Suez Canal.

Indian interests

These two aforementioned developments are significant as most of India's west-bound sea trade passes through Bab al Mandeb. India, therefore, needs to watch the evolving situation carefully and revive long-standing ties with the emerging stakeholders in Yemen,

particularly along the southern coastal belt. The weekend's drone attacks on Saudi oil facilities, too, have direct and serious implications for India as world's third largest crude importer (with Saudi Arabia supplying nearly a fifth). The oil price surge hits India precisely when the economy is already struggling. A rise of oil price by even a dollar raises India's annual oil bill by \$1.5 billion, the country having spent \$112 billion on crude imports in 2018-19.

A highly volatile oil market and a tense regional situation would also affect India's thriving economic engagements as well as its manpower there. Additionally, the attacks could affect Saudi Aramco's ongoing negotiations of two major upstream investments in India totalling over \$30 billion with Reliance Industries and the proposed Ratnagiri Refinery, respectively. In view of direct negative fallout on our interests, India has rightly condemned the Abqaiq-Khurais attacks. Further, it needs to take evasive actions in order to avoid being trapped in the worst case scenario; such steps could include frontloading India's biofuel programme, expanding its strategic petroleum reserves and diversifying its crude sources away from the West Asia.

At a different level, drones could emerge as a weapon of choice for motley anti-Indian non-state actors. Indeed, many of them are no worse than the al-Houthis in their resourcefulness and foreign sponsorships. Much of our infrastructure could be vulnerable to copy-cat attacks using such affordable and effective platforms available virtually off-the-shelf internationally. India's defence and security experts need to urgently devise counter measures to mitigate such vulnerabilities.

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In Kashmir, shaking the apple tree

The question is whether the dilution of Article 370 changes anything on the ground in Jammu and Kashmir



TABISH KHAIR

If I did not have a Muslim name, I might have written this article a bit differently. But given my name, there are certain things I cannot say anymore. For instance, I cannot talk of the matter that concerns me here in terms of human rights or the Indian Constitution. To do so would be to invite crude invective questioning of my genuine and deep love for India.

Hence, I do not ask if Article 370 was justified and I do not ask if its dilution by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government was constitutional. I do not even ask if our past and current treatment of the Kashmiri people, both Muslim and Hindu, has been defensible. Instead, I ask the only question permitted to me today because of my name: will it work?

Human rights minefield

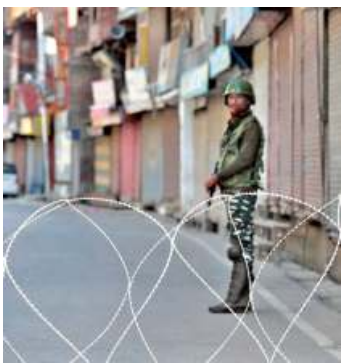
I also ask this question on the basis of a perception shared by most Indians, including many Muslims: that the 'Kashmir problem' was stuck in a quagmire, and any attempt to solve it is welcome. As an Indian Muslim, obviously, I believe that Kashmir is an integral part of

my country. In the past, I would have added that, alas, what matters is not what I believe but what Kashmiris believe. That, however, would be a matter of human rights, and I have vowed not to enter any such minefield.

Hence, from a purely Indian perspective, the BJP government may be congratulated for having taken a bold step. It has definitely shaken the apple tree of Kashmir. All I want to consider now is whether we are going to enjoy an unexpected harvest of apples, or be concussed in the downpour? The dilution of Article 370 has fully inserted our part of Kashmir into India, dissolving its problematic ambiguous status. But has it changed anything on the ground?

The problems of alienation among Kashmiris, militancy, and cross-border support of militants remain intact. These might worsen. There are only two ways they can be partly solved: either by a demographic reshaping of Kashmir and the invasion of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), or by winning over Kashmiri hearts. The former option has been dismissed by the Indian state, but even if it were to be adopted, it would involve mutating war, and make our region the most likely flashpoint for the next global conflagration.

The second option – winning over Kashmiri hearts – is not possible as long as curfews, etc. continue and leaders who can mediate



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between Kashmiris and India are locked up. Initially, curfew and a media blackout might have saved a few lives by providing time for tempers to cool down. But the fact that they are still substantially in place is problematic, and leads to dangerous gossip-mongering. Similarly, kicking out the Kashmiri leadership with the claim that it is corrupt is not enough. More so, because if all these leaders had just exploited Kashmiris then there would have been no need to lock them up: Kashmiris would not have listened to them anyway. India desperately needs to find credible interlocutors in Kashmir. This is going to be more difficult than in the past.

Unsettled border

Also, the borders of Kashmir stay unresolved. My moderate Hindutva friends tell me that, having gained full control of our Kashmir, the BJP government will now let

the current borders become permanent. I find this a naive or dishonest supposition. I am very sure that, sooner or later, there will be internal pressure on the BJP to take PoK, not to mention external pressure by PoK-based militants. Hindutva supporters might overlook the parts occupied by China, but they won't give up on PoK. The matter remains as unsettled as before, and more volatile.

To change anything on the ground, without the option of demographic colonisation, we need to think of how to treat Kashmiris. Now that they are indubitably Indian citizens, we need to treat them like Indian citizens. This would include, among other things, not firing pellet guns at their demonstrations – just as pellet guns are not used on protests by Indian citizens. Is this possible?

One argument against the former status quo is that Kashmir was a State where only some politically empowered families benefited economically in the past. The dilution of Article 370 is supposed to change that. But this will only happen if economic development in Kashmir involves the Kashmiri people, and this is possible only if Kashmiris have the socio-political space potentially available to all Indian citizens. Otherwise, a super class of extra-state economic beneficiaries will replace the supposed current class of in-state beneficiaries.

We know from our past experience of colonisation in India that this leads to greater exploitation and alienation.

In terms of international relations, India's vast economic potential and Pakistan's post-1980s history of tinkering with Islamist militancy have combined to mute international criticism of what is happening in Kashmir. But this is unlikely to last if any major act of violence occurs in Kashmir, unfortunately a likelihood given internal Hindutva pressures for a 'masculine' resolution and the external shift of the centre of Islamic jihadism from the Afghanistan border to the Indian one. The latter is also a tragedy because, largely thanks to the work of Muslim moderates, the ideology of global jihadism had been waning among disillusioned youths over the past five to six years.

In short, the dilution of Article 370 was bold in the context of Kashmir but not really bold in the context of India, because most Indians wanted it. For the Kashmir problem to be resolved, the Indian government will now have to take steps that are bold in the context of India too – steps that will cost them some support in India. Does the government or the BJP have the vision and courage to take such steps?

Tabish Khair is an Indian novelist and academic who works in Denmark

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Language and unity

The theory of one nation, one language will not work in India as there are several 'mother tongues' to which their speakers attach greater importance. Language is not only a medium of communication, but it is the soul or spirit that the speakers express their feelings and emotions inherited over the millennia. In the United States and the United Kingdom, English is the prime language; is it the language alone that binds their nations? It is their culture and national outlook that unites them despite differences in race, religion and status. It is not want of a single language that stands in the

way of unity in India, but it is the diabolic caste system, deep-rooted prejudices, discrimination, untouchability, economic and social disparities and corruption that divide India even after 73 years of Independence. So we must first set our house in order, and not project a particular language predominantly just because it is spoken by many.

It is good for a citizen in India to know his 'mother tongue' or local language, English and Hindi. Language learning must come spontaneously and volitionally – not through compulsion, direct or indirect.

M. GOVINDASWAMY,
Chennai

All is well?

The decision to detain former Union Minister and Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah, who also represents Srinagar in the Lok Sabha, under the stringent Public Safety Act has sent out a clear signal that the crackdown in Jammu and Kashmir is far removed from being eased; it is only showing signs of turning more severe (Page 1, "Farooq Abdullah detained under PSA, his house declared a jail", September 17). Are there signs that the move is intended to silence Dr. Abdullah who has been a vocal critic of the measures initiated in Jammu and Kashmir by the Central government?

Ironically, the Act in question was the brainchild of Dr. Abdullah's father, Sheikh Abdullah, and brought in for a different reason – to prevent timber smuggling and keep smugglers in prison.

C.V. ARAVIND,
Bengaluru

Court and data

If the judiciary is to endorse the position of the Central government whose strategy is to establish superiority through an information blackout as far as Jammu and Kashmir is concerned, what happens to the credible vision of the institution? The facts on the ground do not tally with what is being presented as data. If everything is fine,

"where not a bullet has been fired after August 5", to cite the Solicitor General Tushar Mehta and which is also an attempt to show that there is impeccable behaviour, why are law makers under house arrest?

ILANKO XAVIER M.,
Pune

Bengal famine

The Bengal famine, that claimed millions of lives, was orchestrated by the colonial government's egregious acts of omission and commission (OpEd page, "The preventable Bengal famine", September 17). On a par with the Holocaust for its inhumanity, the Bengal famine, however, remains hidden in the obscure

corners of history books. Western historians wanted to hide the harsh fact that a liberal democracy that took pride in the enlightenment values such as rationality and humanitarianism perpetrated a hideous crime against humanity. Britain should demonstrate the humility to apologise. The disturbing fact that greedy Indian farmers and corrupt bureaucrats also were complicit in the famine could be the reason why Indian historians failed to effectively project the Bengal famine as a dark chapter in the colonial project.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
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