



# विश्वनीति VIŚVANĪTI



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## From the Dean



It is with great pleasure and scholarly pride that we present this special issue of Viśvanīti, dedicated to the complex, contested, and compelling region we know variously as West Asia or the Middle East. Curated with intellectual care by the Centre for West Asian Studies, this volume brings together some of the most thoughtful and nuanced analyses emerging from the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

West Asia has long served as a crucible of world politics—an arena where empire and resistance, religion and revolution, energy and entanglement coalesce with often tragic intensity. From the Ottoman disintegration and colonial reconfiguration, through Cold War alignments and oil politics, to today’s kaleidoscope of sectarian conflicts, external interventions, and aspirations for reform, the region defies easy categorisation and rewards patient, interdisciplinary study.

This issue, shaped by the faculty and scholars of the Centre for West Asian Studies, is both timely and enduring. The essays delve into themes ranging from the enduring conflicts in the WANA region and the shifting geometry of American engagement, to energy politics and speculative futures for Gaza’s reconstruction. They collectively echo a singular truth: West Asia remains central to our understanding of the global order in flux and its importance to India remains unparalleled.

The issue is anchored by Professor Kumaraswamy’s heartfelt and illuminating tribute to Professor M. S. Agwani, the doyen of West Asian studies in India. As the architect of our intellectual engagement with the region, Professor Agwani’s legacy—as teacher, scholar, administrator, and institution-builder—continues to animate the work of CWAS and the School of International Studies. His pioneering contributions, from establishing the Gulf Studies Programme to mentoring generations of scholars, represent the finest traditions of academic rigour and institutional commitment.



The other essays in this volume span a rich and diverse intellectual terrain. Professor Sameena Hameed offers a nuanced examination of “Trumponomics and the WANA Calculus,” analysing how economic nationalism in the United States, under the second Trump administration, reshapes energy politics, trade flows, and strategic realignments in the region. Dr. Vrushal Ghoble, in his incisive article on “The Changing West Asian Security Arc,” maps the historical trajectory of American engagement in the region, identifying emerging patterns of recalibration and disjuncture.

Dr. Muddassir Quamar’s contribution, “Enduring Conflicts in West Asia and North Africa”, brings a sobering clarity to the layered nature of protracted conflict in the region-arguing for interdisciplinary approaches that move beyond reductive sectarian or geopolitical explanations. Dr. Jajati Pattnaik’s essay explores the bold and contentious idea of the Ben Gurion Canal, reimagining Gaza as a node of connectivity and commerce, while critically engaging with Trump’s controversial proposals for the region.

This issue also includes a perceptive review of Albert Hourani’s classic *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, penned by Ms. Srishti Gupta. The review is a reminder that no analysis of West Asia is complete without attending to the intellectual history of the region-its debates on modernity, identity, and reform.

Together, these contributions reaffirm the Centre’s reputation as a leading hub of scholarship on West Asia in India and globally. They reflect the range and depth of intellectual work being undertaken at CWAS-combining archival insight with contemporary relevance, and scholarly detachment with a deep human concern.

As Dean of the School of International Studies, I commend the contributors for their erudition and the editorial team for their vision and diligence. This issue of *Viśvanīti* is not only a tribute to a foundational figure, but also a testament to the vitality and relevance of area studies in our School. In an era of great global fluidity, the study of West Asia reminds us of the value of rooted knowledge, regional expertise, and critical engagement.

Let this issue then inspire us all-to think more deeply, question more fearlessly, and learn more openly from a region that, despite the shadows of conflict, remains luminous with historical meaning and strategic significance.

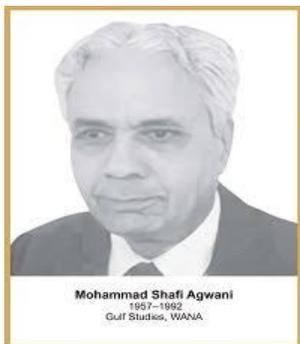
**Amitabh Mattoo**

**Dean, School of International Studies**

## Pioneers of SIS

### Remembering Prof. M. S. Agwani (1928-2018)

*P. R. Kumaraswamy*



Professor Mohammed Shafi Agwani. All the current faculty members on the region across the country were either directly or indirectly taught by him. Recognition, however, has not been commensurate to this unique distinction. He was born in Udaipur in 1928, and after schooling, he obtained a Foundation for Cooperation Fellowship and pursued his PhD during at the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands from 1952 to 1954, the nascent phase of regional transformation in the Middle East. His doctoral thesis was on *The US and the Arab World: 1945-1952*. His supervisor was renowned historian Professor C D J

Brandt.

Upon returning to India, Professor Agwani had a brief stint at Aligarh Muslim University and in 1957, he was one of the pioneers when the Indian School of International Studies was set up at Sapru House, and he laid the foundations for the West Asian Studies—the official nomenclature for the region—in the country. In 1965, he became a professor.

Under the Act of Parliament, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi piloted the formation of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, the first Central University of the country since independence, and in 1970, the Indian School of International Studies was merged with it, and became School of International Studies. In his new role within the University, Professor Agwani conducted extensive research on various aspects of the modern Middle East and his yeoman contribution focused on training and preparing the future students and experts of the region. Some of the later scholars, including Professors K R Singh and Gulshan Dietl, were his doctoral students. I had the distinction of being his last student.

Spanning over three decades at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Professor Agwani held several administrative positions and nurtured the institutions. He convinced the University Grants Commission to establish the Gulf Studies Programme and functioned as its Director between 1978 and 1988. This programme inspired similar ones devoted to other parts of the world until their termination by UGC in the previous decade. Besides being the Chairperson of the Centre, he was also the Dean of the School of International Studies and Rector of the University. Eventually, on 7 October 1987, he became the sixth Vice-Chancellor of JNU, a position he held until October 1992.

Some of his prominent works include: *The Lebanese Crisis: 1958* (1965), *Communism in the Arab East* (1969), *Politics in the Gulf* (1978), *Islamic Fundamentalism in India* (1986), *Religion and Politics in West Asia* (1992), and *Contemporary West Asia* (1995). He edited

*The West Asian Crisis (1968)*, *Detente: Perspectives (1972)*, and *The Gulf in Transition (1987)*. Widely travelled, he authored numerous academic works that continue to inspire his students and followers. His last work, *Life in Academic: A Memoir (2013)*, was a recollection of his personal and academic journey.

Behind the tough and stern exterior, Professor Agwani had eyes for the details. His encyclopaedic knowledge of the complex Middle Eastern region was accompanied by academic discipline. His students would vouch that he meticulously and tirelessly went over multiple drafts before finalizing them. It is a rare feat that many can never imagine in today's AI age when only one draft reaches the supervisors days before the submission date. A strict disciplinarian, hard taskmaster and no-nonsense professional, he demanded the same rigor from his students. Some could not meet his demands and fell out along the way.

Professor Agwani held several distinguished positions and was a Visiting Professor at Columbia University in New York, Advisor to the President of the University of Bahrain and a member of the National Commission for Minorities. Widely travelled, he engaged with scholars and students across the globe and inspired them through his sharp and provocative ideas. He also served on the editorial boards of several international journals. Occasionally, he also undertook diplomatic assignments for the government of India.

Fond of calling himself a 'student of the region', Professor Agwani taught, trained and groomed generations of academics who currently carry forward his legacy. He always advised and demanded academic *Openness and Credibility* which are the guiding principles for any student of the region. After a brief illness, Professor Agwani passed away on 20 July 2018 at the age of 90. And even after all these years, he continues to be the unparalleled doyen of Middle Eastern studies in India. Someday, the country will also recognize and honour its priceless jewel.

**P. R. Kumaraswamy is Professor at Centre for West Asian Studies, School of International Studies, JNU, New Delhi.**

## Viewpoint

### Trumponomics and the WANA Calculus

*Sameena Hameed*

The April 2 announcement of tariffs (calling it the 'Liberation Day') by the Trump administration in the US and the implementation of 'America first' approach in its dealings with allies and adversaries alike marks a tectonic shift in the American role in shaping the global order. The rise of protectionism in global trade had already set in the latter half of the previous decade with several countries imposing trade barriers and tariffs. The withdrawal of the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and other international agreements like the Paris Accords and the climate change negotiations during the first Trump administration was part of a broader retreat of globalization as a phenomenon that shaped global and regional supply chains in the past few decades.

Under Trump administration, the US withdrew from important multilateral organisations like the UNHRC, UNESCO; and this year announced withdrawal from the WHO as well. Its apparent drift from its role as global security guarantor and commitments for international peacekeeping have left all regions to recalibrate their political, strategic and economic partnerships and priorities. Trumponomics aims to put the American interests first and above its otherwise costly commitment of providing global security guarantees. However, the style is interesting; the first round of shock and awe policy announcements is more often followed by concessions to some countries. So was the April 9, 90-day pause of tariffs for about 75 countries, signalling several others including China to reach out for a 'deal'. The West Asia and North Africa

(WANA) region that has been one of the most turbulent theatres of global politics and at the same time, a regional pivot to the international energy market is realigning itself to Trumponomics.

The Trump administration unilaterally exited the nuclear deal (JCPOA) negotiated by the P5+1 countries to curtail Iran's nuclear weapon ambitions and reimposed sanctions on Iran in 2018. While the US exercised 'maximum pressure' on Iran, the Islamic Republic reportedly hiked its nuclear enrichment to 60 percent since then. Over the years, the US sanctions have not only decimated Iran's oil exports but have impeded its access to technology and investments in its energy sector. Despite having the second largest natural gas reserves in the world, Iran had to face frequent blackouts in the last winter, unambiguously illustrating the biting impact of the sanctions. The Trump administration also recently removed the 120 days waiver granted to Iraq for its electricity and gas imports from Iran even as the former faced acute power shortages. While the US imposed a fresh round of sanctions, targeting Iran's oil sector, the reciprocal tariffs imposed on Iran was at the base rate of 10%, and the Islamic Republic was later reportedly removed from the listed countries. The US opened direct talks with Iran and President Trump publicly stated his desire for a deal in two months. The recent lifting of sanctions on Syria further isolates Iran, an ally of the deposed Assad regime and put the US at the Centre of post-war reconstruction of Syria and revival of its oil and gas sector.

The deal with Iran with attendant lifting of

sanctions has implications for the global energy markets, as the Iranian oil supply will further soften the oil market, which is already under pressure from slowing global demand. The WANA region accounts for 37 percent of the global oil production and 40 percent of global oil exports. The US has also emerged as the largest producer of crude oil and hydrocarbon liquids with record production at 20.16 million barrels per day in 2024. Less than 10% of the US oil imports comes from the WANA region. Nevertheless, large Gulf oil producers in OPEC like Saudi Arabia have been crucial to keep oil prices within a threshold range. As the US shale oil industry has relatively high costs, oil prices have to be at least above US\$ 38 per barrel for existing wells and above US\$62 per barrel for new wells to operate profitably. In the past, the Trump administration has exerted significant pressure on OPEC+ to agree on substantive oil production cuts, when the competitive production led to plunge in oil prices in early 2020. Similarly, in April 2018 and in March 2025, Trump pressured the OPEC producers to increase oil output and cool the international oil prices.

The US has overtaken Qatar to be the leading exporter of LNG in the world. However, Qatar is actively expanding its production capacity to reclaim its top spot. Both the players compete actively in the global and the regional market. Several countries in the WANA region are increasingly dependent on natural gas imports as the domestic consumption jumps with increasing population and economic growth. Egypt would be increasingly dependent on LNG imports from the US and piped gas imports from Israel as its own domestic production continues to dwindle. A few other countries may also import LNG from the US to curry favour with the Trump administration.

The first foreign visit of President Trump during his first term was to Saudi Arabia in

May 2017, also marking the first time that a US president chose the Kingdom as a destination for his inaugural foreign visit. The first foreign trip for the second Trump administration was also to Saudi Arabia, followed by Qatar and UAE in May, underscoring the importance of the rich Arab Gulf countries in Trumponomics. They are among the highest spenders on defence, signing billions of dollars of weapon deals with the US suppliers. The US signed an arms deal with Saudi Arabia of about US\$ 110 billion during Trump's visit in May 2017. Besides, Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWFs) of the GCC holding trillions of dollars in assets are being solicited for investments by several countries around the world. As plans for Trump's visit to the region surfaced in March 2025, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE committed to invest at least US\$1 trillion into the US economy over the next decade. UAE has also set up a fund to invest about US\$25 billion in powering data centres and AI projects in the US. The Deal Diplomacy during Trump's visit to the region in May reportedly secured him about US\$ 2 trillion worth of businesses and investment commitments. The acceptance of personal gift of Boeing aircraft to Trump by Qatar sparked legal and ethical controversy but firmly upheld the defining principles of Trumponomics over Qatar's hosting of leaders of Hamas, which the US designated as foreign organisation.

Several countries in the region like Bahrain, Oman, Jordan, Morocco and Israel have free trade agreements with the US and are speculative about the status of their trade relations and operative legal framework. Jordan, the first Arab country to have free trade agreement with the US and second country to normalise relations with Israel, now faces a much higher tariff of 20%. Israel is imposed with a 17 percent tariff, significantly higher than 10 percent imposed on Türkiye, Egypt and the GCC. Though Morocco and Türkiye would

face a 10% tariff for their exports to the US, their automobiles and automotive parts exports would be subjected to a higher tariff of 25%.

Several countries view it as an opportunity to leverage their comparative advantage as production sites for exports to the US. The value added tax in GCC countries is relatively low compared to Europe. The North African countries like Algeria and Tunisia are subjected to much higher tariff rates making their crucial exports like ammonium fertilizer, textiles, olive oil, dates, etc. more expensive in the US market. Since, energy is exempted, Iraq which is imposed with a 31% tariff is largely unscathed.

The countries that have their domestic currencies pegged to the dollar like the GCC and Jordan would have to deal with the cascading effects of inflation in the US on their economies. Trumponomics is

apparently not good economics, as the barrage of tariffs led to falling stock markets, rising US debt interest rates, and warnings of rising prices and job losses in globally interconnected supply chains. But President Trump is more of a businessman with a penchant for 'deals' rather than forging multilateral collaboration and partnerships. The Abraham Accords negotiated under his administration's aegis despite enormous strain during the Gaza war has largely survived due to the underlying economic and strategic interests. His strategy of making shocking announcements and suspending them later leaves room for individual countries to negotiate. His bizarre proposal of dealing with the issue of reconstruction of Gaza strip as a real estate project has drawn sharp criticism and spurred alternative regional initiatives. Indeed, the WANA countries would be pressured to review their strategic calculus and shared economic interests.

**Sameena Hameed is Professor and Chairperson at the Centre for West Asian Studies, School of International Studies, JNU, New Delhi.**

## Analysis

### **US and the Changing West Asian Security Arc**

***Vrushal T. Ghoble***

West Asia's significance in global affairs lies in the landmass it holds. Its remapping has been done time and again, as the region changed hands from one dynasty to another. The European powers, however, were influential and successful in retaining the regional dominance and control over the vast territories. Consequently, the boundaries drawn up by the French, and the British remained while the United States entered the region for its pursuit of oil. The determinants for resources were just the beginning for the US in West Asia, followed by economic growth back home, thus engaging Washington in oil discoveries, contracts and alliances. The following pages attempt to do a brief analysis of the US approach towards West Asia which has been engaging, but also at times revealed signs of discomfort and disengagement from regional issues.

#### **West Asia and the US**

The discoveries in Iraq involved the British, French and the US fighting for oil, resulting in the Red Line Agreement in 1928. The security engagement had begun and the architecture was being formed. Oil became the new financial instrument that would shape the years to come. The US made it clear that the desert land's Saudi Arabian oil. The oil policy formulated by the US and the security structure that followed to secure the resource became synonymous. The agreement between the US President Roosevelt and the Saudi King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud validates the strategic dimension of the agreement of 1945. The design of the coup for Mossadegh's fall in Iran (Operation Ajax) also impacted the security of the Gulf and President

Eisenhower's policy of economic or military aid to the region. Since the era of Roosevelt, the US doctrine towards the region has predominantly been of similar nature. Thus, the US reinstated the Shah and strengthened its position in Iran. Oil revenues also promoted the buying of weapons from the US, which Washington endorsed under the Nixon Administration. Essentially, Saudi Arabia and Iran had become two pillars through which the US maintained its influence across the region and it began to be known as the 'Twin Pillar' policy.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution was a dichotomy, as a closer ally US became more aggressive and developed animosity towards its supportive pillar in the region. As a result, Washington framed a Dual Containment policy that would restrict the Soviet influence particularly directed towards Iraq that developed the Socialist Ba'ath Party in Iraq. Additionally, the eight-year long Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) was another defining moment in the region, during which various external actors supported different parties, often in an opportunistic manner to further their own political, economic and security interests. This was evident by US support to Saddam regime in Iraq as well as covert US engagement with Iran via the Iran-Contra affair.

President Clinton's policy observed that the oil diplomacy engaging West Asia was in the American interest. The US intervention in the 1990-91 Kuwait war under the Presidency of George W. Bush Sr. assisted Kuwait and formulated a policy that would repeal Iraq, but also put

the US forces in Saudi Arabia, through Operation Desert Shield. President George Bush Jr. was instrumental in the Iraq war in 2003 and under the War on Terror theory, Iraq was framed as a part of the nexus-Axis of Evil and the war commenced. A war that raised many questions ended up in a political vacuum creating a sectarian inferno that was difficult to douse, eventually exacerbating the sectarian flare in the wider region.

In the last two decades, Türkiye sometimes moves closer to Russia in certain matters. This is evident in issues like S-400 purchases from Russia. In its own Neo-Ottoman doctrine, Türkiye is trying to reshape the region and in this effort, sometimes it aligns with the US and the West and in certain instances it diverges from the US position on regional issues. Apart from the interventions, the fragmentation of West Asian society has also been due to the sectarian dynamics. This promoted the American actions and built animosity between Tehran and Washington. While US proceeded with maximum pressure policy to chock the Islamic Republic in all manner, Iranian regime pivoted to Russia and China to secure its economic and security ties; also pursuing a policy of aiding various Non-State actors across the region which threatened US interests and this policy is identified as maximum resistance creating a network of proxies known as 'Axis of Resistance'.

### **Emerging Security Arc**

The rebalancing of the West Asian system was inevitable. The security dynamics and political structure is aligned with the West's Neo-colonial attitude. The US and its strategy fabricated the region, which was a mixture of policies that strengthened a few states while taking some to the brink of war. The changes that have affected the region since the Arab Spring of 2011 are continuously

transforming the geopolitics of the region. The alliance building mechanism was done through arms sale and US deployment across the region through a large number of military bases, thus, keeping the relations alive.

America's traditional mode of diplomacy engages its goals and the policy that meets them, which in many instances differs from the stated aim and the actual outcome. For instance, the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 became synonymous with failure of the US policy, making the Iraqi system fragile. As stated earlier, there is a substantial change in the behaviour of big powers. The US inability to contain the Russian expansion as seen by its direct intervention in Syria and war on Ukraine is another example of the American power paralysis.

Furthermore, President Obama's decision to withdraw troops from Iraq in 2011 added to the regional crisis that was already seeing movements across the Arab world, infested with ISIS. Similarly, the US policy of opposing Assad regime in Syria and aid various non-state actors in the region, directly or indirectly, came full circle with the over-throw of Bashar Al-Assad. Accordingly, the US relations with a few countries in West Asia have been flourishing, some of its decisions in the region and inability to control the escalated crisis have strained ties. The divergences and conflicts in the region had a trickle-down effect which eventually spread to other countries as well.

A few factors are responsible for an uneven equilibrium of the US diplomacy in the region. Firstly, the US - West Asia relations have been historic that were based on an oil and security barter, that made the ties durable. West Asia, particularly the Gulf states were privileged by the US security assurance. This assurance tested the challenging times that the Gulf countries went through.

Futile measures such as withdrawal of troops from Iraq; or, the nuclear deal with Iran in 2015 caused ruptures in the region's outlook towards Washington. The implications of this partnership, underpinned by decisions and stakeholders' interests has become delicate. While balancing its relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, a few US Presidents showed a mild stance towards the latter, infuriating Saudi Arabia. Second, the crisis in Gaza shows another limitation for the US power projection in the wider region. As the war is live streamed through media it has created a blowback across various parts of the globe including Universities inside the US.

The new West Asian security arc shows

that the countries are not equipped to offer freedom and other fundamental facilities and services to its people. Thus, 2011 Arab Uprisings have not been successful – in many places as a result, security is compromised. The scope of this assorted power tagging between the region and actors like Russia and China was limited; but has become relevant given the American neglect of the region, if not a thoughtful departure. Previous failed interventions such as Iraq and Libya are haunting the US psyche which has least interest for another intervention in wider West Asia. The US under Trump may prefer fewer engagements in the long term and the security architecture in the region may observe a change in the coming years.

**Vrushal T. Ghoble is Assistant Professor at Centre for West Asian Studies, School of International Studies, JNU, New Delhi.**

## Opinion

### **Enduring Conflicts in West Asia and North Africa**

*Md. Muddassir Quamar*

The West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region has witnessed perpetual conflicts since the early twentieth century, especially after the Ottoman defeat in World War I and its eventual disintegration. The area remained embroiled in conflicts during the inter-war and Cold War periods. The Arab-Israeli conflicts (1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973), the Islamic revolution in Iran (1979), the Iraq-Iran War (1980-88) and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait leading to the Gulf War (1990-91), preoccupied regional politics through the latter half of the century. During this period, the region endured colonial occupation, coup d'états and civil wars triggered by local, national, regional and international factors.

#### **Conflicts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The twenty-first century began with the scourge of terrorism taking centre stage with the 9/11 attacks in the US. The subsequent developments kept the region on the boil, especially as Iraq and Yemen bore the brunt of the US's war on terror. In the meantime, the region witnessed a rising tide of Islamism, jihadism and sectarianism, with the broader Shia-Sunni divide gaining prominence. The Arab uprisings beginning in Tunisia in 2010 and spreading in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and other regional countries during 2011-12 caused the sectarian conflicts and civil wars to intensify and divide the region along narrow geopolitical fault lines. The rise of Daesh (Islamic State, also known as Islamic State in Iraq

and Syria (ISIS) or Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL)) and other terrorist groups kept the region preoccupied as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict became relegated to the background despite the occasional flare-ups between Hamas and Israel.

Meanwhile, WANA experienced a proliferation of armed non-state actors (ANSAs), including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Kataib Hezbollah and others in Iraq, Houthis in Yemen, Zainabiyoun and Fatemiyoun brigades in Syria and Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine. The ANSAs thrived on the existing fault lines to emerge as power brokers in respective countries and gradually began to pose security threats beyond the borders. Iran, as the flagbearer of anti-imperialism since the 1979 Islamic revolution, took advantage of the situation to mold some of these ANSAs as its proxies to gain strategic depth. In the meantime, Türkiye focused on the region under the strategic depth doctrine and zero-problem with neighbours policy evoking accusations of neo-Ottomanism. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states led by Saudi Arabia that took the mantle of Arab politics emboldened by their financial strength and US security umbrella to tide over the regional turmoil.

#### **What explains the enduring conflicts in WANA?**

As the region has remained embroiled in protracted conflicts with multiple layers of

clashes, fights, competitions, tensions, rivalries, and wars, scholars have provided various explanations for the persistence of the conflicts in WANA. One of the simplest explanations is that the region has historically been conflict-ridden; the history of the region is full of wars and conflicts as the Arabs, Persians, and Turks have fought among themselves for power and control of the region's resources. This explanation, however, ignores the fact that the medieval history of the world is full of wars and conflicts, and it was not unique to the WANA region. The other explanation points to the colonial legacy, underlining the continuation of external interventions creating and perpetuating regional conflicts.

A more recent explanation, and to an extent rooted in regional politics, is the sectarian framework arguing that the conflicts in WANA emanate from sectarianism. The people and the states identify more with their primordial identities, leading to tensions, rivalries and conflicts. Some of the regional conflicts, especially in Iraq and Lebanon or, to an extent, what is happening in Yemen, can be explained through this framework. Still, it does not fully explain the endurance of regional conflicts. Most regions worldwide have ethnic, sectarian and ideological differences and divisions, and they do not necessarily devolve into conflicts.

So, why do the conflicts persist in WANA? Finding a simple answer is difficult given the complexity, since no one factor can explain the perpetual nature of the conflicts. Numerous local, national, regional, transnational and global factors, sometimes interconnected, and at times not directly linked, have created a fertile ground in WANA for the protracted and enduring conflicts. Of course, global geopolitics and its regional implications, as well as regional geopolitics and its fallouts, play important roles in creating the conditions for the conflicts. However, an

important point that needs to be emphasized is the distinct nature of different regional conflicts, meaning that the different regional conflicts are distinct and cannot be understood through one overarching explanation.

### **Need for alternative perspectives**

Therefore, it is important to rethink some of the established explanations. One of the ways this can be done is to look for a more interdisciplinary understanding wherein the political, geographic, sociological and economic factors need to be examined without necessarily ignoring the geopolitical and sectarian factors. Broadly, five aspects come to the fore as one looks to explain the situation more holistically. This in no way can completely decipher the endurance of conflicts in WANA but does provide a fresh frame of reference that can help further academic inquiry in understanding the perpetual state of conflicts in WANA.

Firstly, the absence of democratization in the WANA societies has contributed to the conflictual dynamics. This means that the societies and politics in WANA remain organized in hierarchical structures with few avenues for elite circulation, social mobility, and wealth distribution. In most regional countries, the lack of democratization has caused an abject failure in the state-building process, leading to perpetual inequalities and concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few.

Secondly, the people in the region have suffered due to persistent inequalities in the distribution of wealth, disbursement of justice, and access to education, employment, healthcare, and other basic amenities. This, in turn, has created a sense of marginalization, injustice and lack of dignity that was often highlighted during the Arab uprisings in Tunisia, Syria, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain, where the

major rallying cries heard were adala (justice) and karama (dignity).

Thirdly, the consistent violation of rights and freedoms of different sections of society, including the nearly nonexistent political rights, the absence of the rights of women and minorities, and the stifling of freedom of expression, leading to the regional countries turning into police states that seek to control all aspects of people's lives and reduce any chances of plurality, heterogeneity and scientific and artistic innovation.

Fourthly, the region has been afflicted with weak states and poor governance, especially as many regional countries have witnessed the proliferation of non-state actors who have established their own areas of influence. The state has gradually lost popular legitimacy due to the factors explained above and the rise of crony capitalism. In turn, the state has often lost the monopoly on the use of force and suffered a legitimacy crisis, causing serious unrest among the people, especially among the young.

Finally, the states in the region have been unable to resolve differences without resorting to violence, thus often relegating

diplomacy and dialogue to the sidelines. Differences and divergences are preferably settled through the use of force and violence. This pattern has been witnessed in the region during the Cold War and the post-Cold War periods continuing into the twenty-first century, as seen in the post-Arab Spring regional politics and the current spate of violence in the Gaza Strip.

### **Summing Up**

The conflicts in WANA are not new, and the region has witnessed a series of conflicts since the twentieth century that have continued to be part of the regional landscape in the twenty-first century. This has often evoked scholarly inquiry that underlines the historical and geopolitical roots of the perpetual state of conflict in the region. Broadly, the academic debates on the enduring conflicts have focused on the historicity, colonial legacy and sectarian politics as explanations for the protracted conflicts in WANA. However, they only partially explain the situation, given that other parts of the world also suffered from such factors in the past. Hence, there is a need for fresh frameworks rooted in an interdisciplinary approach to explain the enduring conflicts in WANA.

**Md. Muddassir Quamar is Associate Professor, at Centre for West Asian Studies, School of International Studies, JNU, New Delhi.**

## Perspective

### **Reimagining Gaza: The Ben Gurion Canal as a Catalyst for Peace and Prosperity**

*Jajati K. Pattnaik*

Donald Trump's proposal to reengineer the Gaza Strip has sparked intense debate, unsettling geopolitics in West Asia and beyond. His vision of transforming the Palestinian enclave into a "Middle East Riviera" includes describing Gaza as "an incredible piece of real estate". This pronouncement has generated global discourse, prompting op-eds, debates, and media scrutiny. Immediate priorities for Gaza include sustainable peace and reconstruction.

Since Israel's establishment in 1948, Gaza has been a focal point of geopolitical tension. Its geostrategic significance, compounded by layered political conflicts, renders the issue complex and multifaceted.

#### **Historical Context and Geostrategic Importance**

The ancient history of Gaza can be traced back to 3000 BCE during the Canaanite civilization. Its geostrategic location made it a prized possession for successive empires, including the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Babylonians. During the Ottoman period, Gaza was administered as part of Greater Syria. From 1917 to 1948, it remained a British-mandated territory before coming under Egyptian control following the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. In the aftermath of the 1967 War, Israel occupied Gaza. The 1993 Oslo Accords paved the way for limited self-governance under the Palestinian Authority. The fraught Israel-Palestine relationship has profoundly shaped Gaza's trajectory, positioning Gaza as a symbol of Palestinian nationalism.

Hamas's aggressive campaigns against Israel have drawn significant military responses from the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). Israel controlled Gaza until 2005, when it disengaged under geopolitical and international pressure.

The 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access (AMA) between Israel and the Palestinian Authority granted Palestinians greater control over Gaza and the Rafah Crossing on the Gaza-Egypt border. However, Hamas won the elections in the Palestinian legislative council in January 2006, leading to the formation of a new Palestinian Authority Government under the leadership of Ismael Haniyeh. The Hamas's full takeover of Gaza in 2007, replacing the rival Fatah, changed the geopolitical narratives of the region. Israel imposed restrictions on the movement of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, imposing a complete blockade. Gaza became a hub for underground tunnels, Hamas operations, and rocket attacks on Israel.

The October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel underscored Gaza's descent into chaos and militancy. Trump's vision posits that Gaza under Hamas is unsustainable, proposing reconstruction through the temporary relocation of Palestinians to Egypt and Jordan and the eradication of Hamas. While the IDF has weakened Hamas's leadership, the group retains influence, and the ceasefire remains fragile, with hostages still unreleased.

Trump's proposal appears to reject the two-state solution, advocating instead for the forced evacuation of approximately 2.1 million Palestinians—an unreasonable and

contentious plan. A geostrategic alignment between the US and Israel on Gaza is evident, yet West Asia's persistent conflicts complicate resolution. As the architect of the Abraham Accords, Trump advanced regional peace, but unilateral American action cannot resolve the crisis. A negotiated settlement involving all stakeholders is essential, though achieving consensus in West Asia's fractured geopolitical landscape is challenging. Sectarian divides and competing interests undermine regional unity, with economic imperatives often superseding theological or ideological cohesion. The Arab World, navigating climate change and the decline of fossil fuels, increasingly relies on technological partnerships with the US and China.

### **The Ben Gurion Canal: A Connectivity Milestone**

The proposed Ben Gurion Canal, named after Israel's founding prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, could revolutionize connectivity between Asia, Africa, and Europe. Envisioned in the 1960s, this 257-km canal would connect the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea via Israel's Negev Desert and Gulf of Aqaba, rivalling Egypt's Suez Canal. Linking Eilat on the Red Sea to Ashkelon on the Mediterranean, the canal would enhance the strategic prominence of Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Regional cooperation could transform West Asian geopolitics, fostering regional economic integration.

**Possible Routes of the Ben Gurion Canal**



**Source: Google Earth**

The Suez Canal, a 193.3-km waterway operational since 1869, is Egypt's monopoly on Europe-bound trade. Historically, Egypt has leveraged the canal geopolitically, notably restricting Israeli ships from 1948 to 1950 and closing it during conflicts like the 1956 Tripartite Aggression and the 1967 Six-Day War. These closures disrupted global trade, highlighting the need for an alternative. The Ben Gurion Canal would mitigate Egypt's dominance, easing congestion and ensuring uninterrupted commerce. The 2021 Ever Given incident, where a container ship blocked the Suez Canal, underscored its vulnerability, causing significant economic losses. An alternative waterway would address such connectivity crises, particularly amid global tensions like the Ukraine-Russia conflict and Houthi disruptions in the Red Sea.

### **Gaza's Economic Potential**

Gaza's strategic location on the Eastern Mediterranean, bordering Egypt and Israel, positions it as a potential economic hub. Its seabed holds over one trillion cubic feet of gas reserves, making the region a burgeoning energy node. Developing a Gaza-Ashkelon-Ashdod-Tel Aviv-Hadera-Haifa maritime corridor could transform Gaza into a logistics hub, enhancing global supply chains. The Gaza-Eilat corridor via the Ben Gurion Canal would connect the Eastern Mediterranean to the Gulf of Aqaba, streamlining trade with Indian Ocean littoral states. This route is significantly shorter than the long and arduous journey from Gaza to Eilat via the Suez Canal. Additionally, cruise tourism from Eilat to Gaza, by leveraging Gaza's ancient monuments, could generate substantial revenue, driving socio-economic progress.

The canal aligns with initiatives like the

India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), bolstering regional supply chains. By bypassing the Houthi-threatened Red Sea-Suez route, Gaza could emerge as an energy and AI gateway for Asia, Europe, and Africa. Such transformation requires massive infrastructure investment to address Gaza's poverty and insurgency, which have long hindered development.

### **Challenges and Pathways to Peace**

The Ben Gurion Canal serves the interests of both Palestine and Israel, but the proposal faces significant political and logistical obstacles. The deep-seated animosity between the two, exacerbated by the October 7 attack and subsequent IDF operations, complicates peace prospects. A commerce-driven approach-emphasizing trade, connectivity, and economic growth-offers a viable path to

sustainable peace. Gaza's historical role as an economic oasis suggests that it could once again become a hub for tricontinental commerce. The canal's development, coupled with dialogue and economic incentives, could shift perceptions and foster cooperation.

The Ben Gurion Canal represents a transformative opportunity for Gaza, Israel, and the broader West Asian region. Tackling connectivity vulnerabilities and reducing reliance on the Suez Canal would unlock economic potential and promote peace through prosperity. However, success hinges on inclusive negotiations and a commitment to prioritizing Palestinian welfare. Gaza's geostrategic significance, combined with its economic promise, positions it as a springboard for regional stability and global connectivity.

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## Book Review

### **Arab Thought in the Liberal Age by Albert Hourani**

***Srishti Gupta***

What does it mean for a society to modernise without losing its soul? This is the central theme of Albert Hourani's book, *Arab Thought in the Liberal Age*. It is a classic work, painting a vivid picture of the evolutionary landscape of Arabic thought. It reflects how Arab thinkers responded to their encounters with European modernity. The debate revolves around whether new interactive changes should be embraced within Islamic identity or resisted, as it may challenge traditional precepts. Thus, the entire process is marked by contradictions, reinterpretation and reformulation. It brings the observation closer to the Hegelian dialectics of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis in Arab thought.

Albert Habib Hourani is a Lebanese British historian, specialising in the history of the Middle East. The book examines the time frame from 1798-1939. The former is a seminal year for the first direct interaction of the Middle East with Europe, when Napoleon invaded Egypt. While 1939 brought the world to the brink of the Second World War. The developments post-World War II are dealt with in the epilogue, with quick reference being made to developments of the Cold War phase. The book keeps its focus on the Liberal order.

Hourani's work serves as an in-depth critical source of understanding the intellectual churning that occurred in the Arab world during the 19th and 20th centuries. It deals with themes like the role of Islam in the state, society, and cultural horizon of the region. It tries to

connect the dots of the evolution of legitimacy of state structure in the Middle East. Hence, it is also useful in understanding the modern reality. It deals with themes of liberalism, nationalism, constitutionalism and secularism, which continue to be the heart of contemporary debates as well.

As the chapters proceed, they reveal the progression of the tug of war between being true to the roots and the modernisation debate, at the ideational level. Through scholars like Tahtawi, Bustani, Jamal al-din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, or Taha Hussein, the larger debate examines to what extent modernism is a Western phenomenon or the larger idea of Islamic Modernism should be espoused. The discussion around the essence of being 'Islamic' and 'Islamism' is beautifully woven in the work. The question of modernity, legitimacy and identity recur throughout, giving it an analytical coherence.

But the book doesn't limit itself to outlining the contours of the intellectual landscape. Rather, it dives deep into how the intellectual depth of each scholar evolved. Hourani draws a vivid picture of the social, cultural and geopolitical backdrop of the scholars so that it is easy to encapsulate their historical contextualisation too. For instance, Hourani explains that Tahtawi was open to embracing the Western ideas of modernity and supported social reforms, because he was writing when:

The religious tension between Islam and Christendom was being relaxed and had not yet been replaced by the new political tension of East and West. There is no sense of Europe being a political danger. France and Europe stood not for political power and expansion but for science and material progress. It was an age of great inventions, and he wrote of them with admiration: the Suez Canal, the plan for a Panama Canal, and the transcontinental railways in America.

(Chapter 4- The First Generations: Tahtawi, Khayr al-Din, and Bustani. Page no-81)

But when Jamal al-Din al-Afghani was formulating his work, the political climate was different.

The occupation of Tunis by France in 1881, of Egypt by England in 1882, pointed the moral, and from that time there took place a radical change in the political thought of the Near East.... For a Muslim, however, whether he was Turkish or Arab, the seizure of power by Europe meant that his community was in danger.

(Chapter 5- Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Page no 103)

This, when read in consonance with the idea promoted by Afghani, of pan-Islamic unity, Islamic Modernism, anti-imperialism and infusion of Islamic principles in political systems, it creates coherence. Further, Hourani draws on real-time writings, memos, and textual exchanges of the intellectuals. This use of real-life evidence humanises the scholars' struggles. Hourani portrays the scholars empathetically, without personal bias or emotional interference that might colour the intellectual tone. The author's bias has been skillfully avoided.

The book is far from unidimensional. It steps beyond the ideational structure and deals with issues of governance as well. It shows how the political structure adjusted

and undertook reforms, accepting the theoretical framework suggested by these intellectuals. The textual work by them was also used by the rulers to legitimise their rule and reforms. Their words mattered, which is the reason why when Abd al-Raziq questioned the caliphate system and the ruling elites, the punitive whiplash was harsh.

Another notable strength of the book is that it does not take sides overtly but just gives an account of what led to what. Thus, it presents a layered mix of political and intellectual history. For instance, the epilogue highlights how over the last two centuries, the relationship between the state and the people has evolved to a high degree:

"Whether the regime was that of a nationalist republic or a constitutional monarchy, the image was much the same. Its emphasis was on the people (al-qawm, al-sha'b), where a generation earlier it would have been on the 'watan'. The old nationalism called on men of goodwill to defend an oppressed watan, but in the new, the people were active: holders of authority and masters of their destiny, they pressed forward to remake the social world, and their view of their own welfare was the final criterion of their actions."

(Chapter 13- Epilogue: Past and Future, page 350)

This understanding is reflected in the renewal of the social contract, which the Middle Eastern states are experiencing today, and is also discussed at length in their 'Vision Documents'.

The chapters are arranged chronologically from the early encounters with Europeans, through Ottoman Tanzimat, to the rise of Arab nationalism. Sectionally, it is a dense academic work with intense academic rigour. Thus, it is not merely a leisure read, but it helps in developing higher-order scholastic skills in the domain. In terms of readability, it is slightly on the difficult side

with long sentences attempting to condense intense information.

Despite its richness, the book has certain limitations. First, there is no mention of any women intellectuals, even in a passing reference. Second, it is theoretically located within the Liberal context. This somehow portrays Arab intellectuals as mere reactionaries to the developments in the West. Thirdly, it also misses out on the postcolonial engagement of the region within the balance of the ideals of political modernism and Islamic identity. Some gaps have been acknowledged by the author himself. He states that he has laid extra emphasis on intellectuals from the Levant, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. He also accepts that the book is written from the perspective of scholars, though he admits that intellectual history can also be written from the perspective of the masses,

focusing on which ideas gained momentum and turned into ideology or movement eventually. This highlights his honest introspection and courageous acceptance. Nonetheless, these limitations do not diminish the merit of the scholarship produced by Hourani in its entirety.

Overall, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* is a masterwork for mapping the intellectual history of the Arab world. It offers a rare window into a generation of thinkers who struggled to make sense of modernity, colonialism, and the future of their societies, in their quest to find versions of an ethical and moral good life. For scholars, students or anyone interested in dense reading of the intellectual Arab history, Hourani's work remains an essential, well-researched and insightful read.

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