



A thought for today

The civil war across the Middle East between the Shia and the Sunni empowers groups like ISIS and al-Qaida

PETER L BERGEN

Arab Split

Qatar's isolation by its neighbours exacerbates Middle East tensions

With Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt cutting off ties with Qatar, the Arab world has plunged into further turmoil. Yemen, Libya's eastern-based government and the Maldives too have joined the ban against Qatar which sees a severing of diplomatic ties with Doha apart from blocking off land, air and sea routes to the gas-rich nation. The immediate provocation for the move appears to be statements purportedly made by Qatar's emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, supporting Muslim Brotherhood and criticising the Sunni coalition against Iran. However, tensions have been brewing over Qatar's actions within the Gulf Cooperation Council for years.

Qatar's position within the coalition of Gulf Arab nations has been different from other members. Although Doha sees itself as a neutral mediator, its support for groups representing political Islam such as the Palestinian Hamas and the Brotherhood has riled Riyadh. Plus, Qatar is seen as soft on Iran with which it shares the world's largest gas field. That Qatar's isolation by its powerful neighbours comes just weeks after US President Donald Trump used his Saudi visit to squarely blame Iran for fuelling extremism in the region may not be a coincidence. Riyadh could be using this opportunity to curb dissent within the Sunni flock and get them to line up behind it.

The ban against Qatar will certainly hurt the Qatari economy, which will impact the many Indians working there. Most of Qatar's food supplies are imported via Saudi Arabia and Doha has emerged as an international aviation hub. These are bound to be affected. However, signs are that Qatar is looking to negotiate its way out of the blockade, having stated that the statements attributed to Sheikh Thani were the handiwork of hackers. If the US is not in its corner, Qatar has few options.

This is a pity as Shia-Sunni sectarian strife will only provide a filip to terror groups such as Islamic State. What's needed is for Arab countries to work out a compact with Iran. Given US interests in the region, this is precisely what Washington ought to be facilitating. As far as India is concerned, New Delhi has done well to state this is an internal matter for the Gulf countries to handle. Its only focus should be to provide assistance – if required – to Indians in Qatar.



No Vendetta

CBI actions against NDTV raise disturbing questions on media harassment

CBI's searches this week at the residence and other properties of the promoters of NDTV, Prannoy and Radhika Roy, raise a number of disturbing questions. While no one is above the rule of law, the latter should not be arbitrary and whimsical. As the Editors Guild's expression of "deep concern" over the raids rightly emphasized, entry of police and agencies into media offices is a serious matter and should not be undertaken lightly. Details of the case registered against the Roys are unfortunately bound to lead to questions about the functioning of CBI.

The essence of the case is that the Roys, acting in collusion with some officials of ICICI Bank, carried out inappropriate financial transactions about a decade back. The complainant, however, is not the bank itself but a person claiming to be a shareholder of both NDTV and the bank. Barring the Roys, NDTV and a holding company no one else has been named in CBI's First Information Report (FIR). This is odd given the myriad laws that have been allegedly violated by many entities.

CBI needs to be perceived as fair-minded if it is to get rid of pejorative descriptions such as "caged parrot". Moreover, it is the basic dharma of any democracy that governments have to live with criticism emanating from the media even if they do not like parts of it. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized recently, such criticism is healthy as it is the only way government mistakes and shortcomings can be highlighted. Muzzling the media means government is no longer accountable to society; moreover, it would radically undermine India's soft power abroad at a time when Modi has done much good work raising its profile. As the country's premier investigative agency, CBI must conduct itself in a manner where it is seen to act only out of the noblest of motives.



The loathed neutral

When India plays Pakistan, fence sitters are hit for six

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Anyone who has grown up watching cricket in India – correction, anyone who hasn't been living under a rock – knows that India-Pakistan cricket matches are special. Even if you aren't a cricket fan, an India-Pakistan encounter is bound to pique your interest. Blame it on politics, sociology or the alignment of the planets, when India and Pakistan play cricket sparks are bound to fly.

But do they? Over the last few years, India-Pakistan matches have mostly been one-sided affairs with the Men in Blue clearly proving superior in all areas of the game. True, given that the two teams play each other so infrequently these days, there is great anticipation around these matches. But going purely by the cricket on display, the rivalry of yesteryears which featured the likes of Kapil Dev, Imran Khan, Mohinder Amarnath and Javed Miandad has morphed into tepid proceedings today.

So when India and Pakistan took to the cricket pitch in their latest encounter, i, as a lover of the game, ventured to suggest that it wouldn't be a bad thing if Pakistan won this one. After all, a Pakistan victory would certainly inject much-needed spice into India-Pakistan cricket. The temperature in the room dropped. I could feel icy stares from every angle. "Black tongue!" someone shouted. "Traitor!" came another indignant retort. "How can you even say that?" someone enquired aghast. "Check his passport", was becoming a common refrain.

Rattled by the verbal bouncers, I tried to play my best backfoot defence. "Of course I support India", I clarified. "But with India winning most of these matches of late, don't you think it will be good for the game if Pakistan also does well?" However, it was too late. The die had been cast and I had been branded as that most loathed entity in any India-Pakistan match – the cricket loving neutral. No matter how much I tried to justify my position – even pleading at one point that I was just trying to lower expectations so that in case India did lose it would be easier to absorb the shock – no one had any faith in my outswinger.

As it turned out, India did end up securing an emphatic victory over Pakistan. And it did turn out to be a tepid affair – compared to Team India, the Pakistani side seemed like a club squad. Then someone said, "Those who are unhappy with India's win should assemble at India Gate for a candlelight vigil." It's then that I realised what a fool I was – India-Pakistan matches are as much about cricket as a Chinaman delivery is about Chinese takeaway.

Let The Maharaja Go

Air India disinvestment will erase doubts about NDA government's will to reform

Baijayant 'Jay' Panda



There is a buzz in the air about the possible privatisation of Air India (AI), that quintessential public sector white elephant. Since 1991, this has been seen as the ultimate litmus test of every Indian government's reformist convictions, which none has yet managed to conquer.

That is ironic, since on several occasions the respective governments of the day have managed far more substantial economic reforms. Consider two examples from either end of the 26 years since liberalisation began. First, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's dismantling of industrial licensing was much more impactful than the government getting out of any one company or sector.

Similarly, the enactment of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) by the present government heralds a seismic shift in India's economy. While Rao deftly used India's looming international repayments default to push through his reform, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had to manage his economic magnum opus without any such crisis for cover.

The former is often appreciated for his shrewd use of the old adage to never waste a good crisis, and the latter deserves similar kudos for sheer persistence. For GST did not arrive on autopilot. No stone was left unturned to make it happen, despite many setbacks along the way, including widespread rumours last year that the government was no longer serious about it.

Nevertheless, to investors and markets there is something sexy about privatising a marquee Public Sector Undertaking (PSU) that does not seem to be matched by more structural reform, at least in the short term.

That could be for a variety of reasons, one being that the fiscal benefits of privatising a prominent PSU boondoggle are immediately visible. The bleeding of public finances that is stanching may be relatively small compared to, say, the fiscal deficit. But it is more or less undisputed, whereas agreeing on the exact long-term benefits



of a deeper reform is usually beset with many ifs, ands, or buts.

Despite sporadic PSU selloffs, it has long been known that India finds it difficult to decisively put behind decades of misguided government efforts at running commercial enterprises. Even using the term privatisation has proved a taboo, with euphemisms like strategic disinvestment being favoured instead.

Other attempts at political correctness have included reliance on Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) as an alternative to encouraging outright private sector investment. That camouflage opened the doors for private investment into such previously forbidden areas as infrastructure, where the gap between what is needed and available from public coffers is gargantuan. But the results have been discouraging, mostly due to the public sector partners' bureaucratic DNA overpowering their role as the fig leaf in these projects.

That such subterfuge was felt necessary despite the desperate need for private

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investment, says a lot about Indian politicians' diffidence about selling reforms on merit and logic. It should be instructive that reformist legends like Thatcher and Reagan were not alone in having to market their policies. Even autocratic China's Deng Xiaoping, who otherwise had no need to persuade the Chinese public about anything much, turned salesman for economic reforms.

There are indications that change is in the air. Modi's aggressive marketing of his Aardhaar-linked reij of the cooking gas subsidy, as well as his political pitch for GST during recent state election

campaigns, augur well. If enough of his colleagues take the cue – not to mention down and out opposition leaders looking for a new game plan – it might even represent a turning point.

Taking stock of this government's track record on economic reforms would have to acknowledge not just the once-in-a-generation GST, but also a bunch of other measures. Those should include mid-level efforts on both the legislative front, such as the one permitting more Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the insurance sector, as well as executive fiat, like the recent one abolishing the Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB) altogether.

There are a number of other such measures, such as the deregulation of diesel pricing, the bankruptcy law, permitting the private sector to invest in railways and defence, and back into commercial coal mining. But there remain a number of items on investor and markets' wish lists that are still pending, including labour law reform, deregulation of kerosene and fertiliser pricing, and many more.

When many commentators were critical of the government's cautious approach to reforms back in 2015 and 2016, they may not have fully understood the dynamics of political capital. For instance, its lack of numbers in the Rajya Sabha could not be overcome, leading to an early setback in the ambitious attempt to redo the land acquisition act.

But irrespective of whether or not commentators have given enough credit to this government's economic reforms in the meantime, they can today rightfully ask for greater boldness from it. And the PM, his pockets bulging with the most political capital he has ever had till now, would do well to heed them.

On Air India, finance minister Arun Jaitley was reported to have said that if the private sector could run 86% of civil aviation, it could very well run 100%, and without a Rs 50,000 crore public subsidy for one airline. If that sentiment is translated into action, it would dramatically change the perception about this government's reformist credentials.

The writer is a BJD Lok Sabha MP. Views are personal

'India's moment to show global leadership ... Trump's decision on Paris Accord created a leadership vacuum, it will be filled'

Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterated in Europe that India will stick by its commitments on climate change after US President Donald Trump announced that US will withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord and accused India of getting unfair advantages from the agreement. Erik Solheim, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, spoke to Rohit E David on the impact of Trump's decision, how many US states and companies are defying his decision and India's role.

Q&A

■ What's your response to Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord?

President Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement is obviously a major disappointment. It's regrettable because the science is so clear and compelling and because there are countless reasons to act, and to act now. Fundamentally, it's about being a global problem that threatens the future of our planet, our children and grandchildren. The Paris Agreement was presented by President Trump as a burden, and that's not the case.

We know that investing in renewable energy creates more jobs, better jobs and better paid jobs – and that's already happening in the US. Fighting climate change means making an investment in global security – because global warming is also a driver of conflict, instability and terrorism that threatens

many nations, including the United States.

■ What impact will it have globally?
I am convinced the Paris Agreement and broad climate action is unstoppable. President Trump's decision has given us a new sense of urgency. It's also created a leadership vacuum, but like all vacuums, it will be filled.

■ Can the world fight climate change without the US?

It will be tough, but it can be done. For example, China is moving very quickly into renewables and could well exceed its targets. We're seeing a very positive dynamic in India too, where there is proof that clean energy can solve rural poverty and deliver greater energy security. India must move ahead on this – not because it needs to make up for Washington's withdrawal, but because low-carbon growth can lift millions out of poverty and improve public health. PM Modi said it would be a morally criminal act for the world not to do its part on climate change. That's a very strong signal of support.

It's also important to emphasise that while Washington is pulling out, the United States is not. We've seen incredible, perhaps unprecedented commitment from many US states, cities, big businesses and from the

grassroots. California, for example, is the world's sixth largest economy and a global leader on environmental protection. Ultimately, US firms and innovators like Microsoft, Apple, Tesla, Facebook and countless others understand that if they want to be ahead of the game and compete in a globalised economy, they need to lead the charge towards a low carbon future. They've made it clear that will not change.

■ Can the UN still hold countries together to ensure they fight against climate change?

The Paris Agreement and climate agenda are still in place, and we'll continue to work with all willing parties to make progress.

President Trump said the US will no longer provide funding on climate change, and this is a major disappointment. But funds such as the Green Climate Fund will continue to operate and support countries to take action.

■ What role do you see for India in ensuring the climate deal stays?

This is India's moment to show great global leadership. India needs to continue to do what it does best: innovate. India has a rich history of entrepreneurship and charting its own course. It's the world's largest democracy with a huge, vibrant civil society. By forging ahead with a shift to a greener and cleaner economy, it will be stronger and wealthier as a result.

■ Trump said that the Paris Accord is not tough enough on India and China. Why is India becoming a target?

It's regrettable that climate action has been presented by President Trump as a kind of punitive transaction, because that's simply not the case.

■ India has said that developed countries must deliver on pre-2020 promises on climate change. Your views?

Absolutely. We expect all nations to deliver on the commitments.

■ Are you satisfied by the way India has been tackling climate change?

India has turned a corner and stopped seeing climate action as a cost but rather a fast track to strong development. India's private sector is also taking a leading role. If we look at the dynamism of the solar energy sector in India at the moment, it's unrivalled.

Obviously, India has major challenges, especially in energy. But it also has the solutions at hand. India's potential for action is huge, and I'm convinced it has the leadership and political will to unlock this potential.

dilbert



True & Noble Convictions Lead To Selfless Service

Swami Chinmayananda

Actions are the louder expressions of thought. The quality of thought is ordered by the nature of our inner 'belief' and 'faith'. Where faith is shaky, thoughts are vague, and actions weak and purposeless – indecisive and timid. If our service to the world is to be effective and productive of sure results, then our head and heart must be inspired by our own 'convictions'.

We have faith, but not firm conviction. We have certainty but not self-resurrecting belief. Those dynamic convictions that drive us to spectacular actions and blazing results cannot be had by accident. They are not built-in resources in any individual. We have to discover and cultivate them in ourselves, by our own study and planned self-education. Vedanta unfolds this in all its students.

Penetrating study into the depths of the Upanishads, understanding of the way-of-life mapped out by Krishna in his scientific and logical discourses in the Gita, do transform the thought-pattern in the student and he discovers for himself a new purpose and a clearer vision of the goal of his life. He grows first in his faith in himself, and then he discovers certain definite convictions maturing within him. Through earnest study and subjective investigations of these ideas in one's own mind, through "deep reflection", one can discover new horizons to one's life. Only with this inner expansion of vision shall we realise the opening of some secret chambers of power and strength in ourselves, and with an irresistible gush of intelligent determination and will, apply ourselves in action in the world around.

If the convictions are true and noble – "Buddha-like" – then service to man springs forth, bringing blessings of compassion and friendship, love and peace to all. If the convictions are false and ignoble – "demon-like" – that service to people rattles out, blasting the world with the curses of hate and war, death and destruction.

Such an intellectual sense of conviction must now slowly mature to become our belief. By themselves, convictions may not stand the onslaught of the rough life or its plethora of stormy outbursts. When in our life happenings are unfavourable, at a time when we need our belief the most, we may find ourselves empty, cheated, sans conviction, sans belief. In this inner poverty, the intellect stops in fatigue, the heart turns dry. If convictions are acquired through

study and if they can become our belief through reflection, then, belief can fructify to become a "way-of-life". Only through meditation practised mindfully to keep us constantly in touch with our belief, and bringing it out as the expression of all our actions, feelings and thoughts, shall we grow mightily in our belief. It will then come to waft its fragrance all around us, adding a new attractiveness in all our actions. If this is practised for some length of time with deep sincerity, firm determination and zealous regularity, the positive pitch of our total life will resound in harmony with the true notes of our belief. Such an individual can never again ever miss his spiritual glow even in the most trying moments of stress and strain.

Let us, through study, reflection and meditation, grow from conviction to belief and ultimately earn our Perfect Way-of-Life. (The writer is founder, Chinmaya Mission.)

Sacredspace

Best Medicine

Patience is to be practiced not by force, but by adjustment with the circumstances of natural life. In the worldly life, full of stress and strain, the best medicine is to have patience.

Dadaji Amiya Roy Chowdhury

