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# Reading the Silence: India and the Arab Spring

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*Reading the Silence: India and the Arab Spring*

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**P. R. Kumaraswamy**

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*P. R. Kumaraswamy*

**To**

**Shyam Babu**

**With affection, admiration, and gratitude**

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### **ABSTRACT**

High political, economic, and energy stakes conditioned India's nuanced response to the Arab Spring. Proud of its diversity, India's foreign policy agenda has never been democracy promotion, and India was prepared to accept the choice of the Arab people to determine their leaders and political system within the norms of their respective societies. The geographically proximate region, especially the Persian Gulf, is vital for India. Hence, other than evacuation of its nationals, India's reactions to the Arab Spring have been few and far between. And even these responses have been measured, underscoring Indian reluctance to take any stand. India has been extremely cautious about the developments in the Persian Gulf, hoping that the ruling regimes would survive. Given the presence of about six million Indian expatriate workers in the Gulf countries, India's studied silence—rather than being a sign of indifference towards popular sentiments or an endorsement of the authoritarian regimes—was the only option available for India. It was a reflection both of its crucial interests in the region and of its preference for stable and internally viable political states in the region. Thus, economic interests, more than political calculations, have determined India's post-Cold War Middle East policies—a fact visibly demonstrated following the Arab Spring. India's traditional reluctance to make democracy promotion a principal foreign policy objective also played into this relegation of political considerations. The muted and calibrated Indian reactions to the Arab Spring challenge the hopes for an assertive India in the international scene. At a macro level, India's calculated and interest-driven positions during the Arab Spring are also a sign that its aspirations for great power status will be through consensus and accommodation rather than by taking a leadership role—that is, through measured steps, not aggressive public statements. This is the irony of the “self-appointed frontrunner for the UNSC.”

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*Silence is golden*, as the proverb goes. This aptly sums up India's response to the tumultuous events collectively described as the Arab Spring. Reading the *Annual Report for 2010-11* of the Indian Foreign Ministry (Ministry of External Affairs, in the official parlance), one would remain ignorant of the Arab Spring. The Report, which chronicles official positions on global affairs up to March 31, 2011, does not make any reference to the events happening in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Two presidents had been overthrown by then, but the entries dealing with India's ties with Tunisia and Egypt are silent on this. Nor does the Report mention India's endorsement of the UNSC Resolution 1970, which referred Muammar Quaddafi to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for a war crimes trial. Some have called these omissions a "deafening silence."<sup>2</sup>

But this silence, upon a closer reading, speaks quite revealingly of India's approach towards, interests in, and difficulties with the Arab Spring. Like the rest of the world, India was caught unawares when confronted with the fast-moving developments that engulfed the entire Middle Eastern region—from Morocco in the west to Bahrain in the Persian Gulf. Many in India knew of the prolonged popular Arab discontent with the status quo and yearning for change; yet, neither the pundits nor the practitioners could have foreseen the timing, pace, and magnitude of events. The conditions were ripe, and Mohamed Bouazizi, albeit unintentionally, provided the missing spark.

Fortunately for India, the changes of Arab regimes have been slower than initially predicted. While the rulers of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen have either left or were forced to leave, their exits, with the exception of the Tunisian case, were protracted. The prolongation of these stalemates enabled India and other countries to fine-tune their reading of and response to the events.

India had to navigate between its desire to support the popular yearning for change, freedom, and good governance and the hard-nosed national imperatives of protecting its political, economic, and energy interests in these troubled countries. Hasty moves on either front would have been disastrous, which is why it treaded rather cautiously. India's positions have been situational and

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\*The author is extremely grateful for the support and critical comments of Avraham Sela on an earlier draft. All errors and omissions are the author's alone.

<sup>1</sup> For a dated but historic discussion see, Prithvi Ram Mudium, *India and the Middle East* (London: British Academic Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Satish Chandra and Sushant Sareen, "India's Deafening Silence on the Tumult in the Arab World," Vivekananda International Foundation (New Delhi) website, 27 February 2011, <http://www.vifindia.org/article/2011/february/25/Indias-Deafening-Silence-On-The-Tumult-In-The-Arab-World> (accessed 25 January 2012).

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country specific. Although a subregional pattern can be discerned, it is difficult to outline an overarching Indian position towards the Arab Spring. By and large, India settled for following the popular trends in individual countries without appearing to be interventionist. Its responses reflected two prime considerations: the level of unpopularity of the ruler and India's core interests in that particular country. There were, however, some notable exceptions to this trend.

This examination of India's response to the Arab Spring is structured in three parts. It begins with a brief background of India's relations with the Middle East. This is followed by a discussion of India's changing interests in the region. The first two parts prepare the ground for understanding India's reading of and responses to the Arab Spring and enable the outlining of the emerging patterns in India's Middle East policy.

In recent years, India has been vociferous in its campaign for recognition as a great power. In the words of its Permanent Representative to the UN, Hardeep Puri, "India entered the UN after 19 years, and [has] no intentions of leaving" when its term ends in December 2012.<sup>3</sup> Many see such brazen Indian posturing as unusual and unprecedented. For example, in July 2009 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton identified India as one of the "self-appointed frontrunners for permanent UNSC membership." Although the remark evoked considerable anger in India, it was a correct assessment.<sup>4</sup> This approach is also reflected in the debates concerning the Arab Spring, where some wanted India to take a position that reflected its great power aspirations by exhibiting a willingness to "shoulder" international responsibilities. However, as the following narrative indicates, an assertive Indian position, despite expectations, was absent during the Arab Spring. India has been more cautious than in the past—a caution that can be seen in the rarity of its public responses to the widespread protests in the Arab countries.

It is essential to begin this discussion by recognizing that the end of the Cold War fundamentally changed India's interests in the Middle East, transformed its capabilities, and enhanced its presence and influence.

### **The Middle East during the Cold War**

The term "civilizational link" is commonly used to convey the historical nature of India's relations with Iran. However, it is an equally valid phrase for India's relations with the Middle East. Archeological discoveries established strong links between the Indus Valley Civilization and what is now known as Iran during the early Harappa era (3200-2600 BC). Trade flourished between the two, involving copper, silver, turquoise, spices, silk, etc. Similar historic trade existed between the western coast of India and what is now the Kingdom of Bahrain. Even before the birth of Islam, the Arabian Peninsula was a major trading center for Indian merchants. In

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<sup>3</sup> "India may enter UNSC by 2012 end, says envoy to UN Hardeep Puri," *India Today* 23 September 2011, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/india-may-enter-uns-c-by-2012-end-hardeep-puri/1/152474.html> (accessed 14 February 2012).

<sup>4</sup> "Reporting and Collection Needs: The United Nations," US Secretary of State, WikiLeaks, 31 July 2009, <http://www.wikileaks.ch/cable/2009/07/09STATE80163.html#> (accessed 14 February 2012).

addition, after the seventh century, Mecca was a major trading destination for Indian merchants, especially during the hajj season.

India had closer ties with all prominent monotheistic religions that emerged in the Middle East. The Jews were trading with the rulers of the western coast during the Second Temple period. Their first known arrival is dated at the sixth century BCE, during the Kingdom of Judah (ninth century BCE), when a small number of Jewish people landed on the coast of present-day Kerala. A much larger influx occurred following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD, which set off two millennia of Diaspora existence. Christianity was brought to the western coast shortly after the crucifixion of Christ. According to sources in the Indian tradition, Saint Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Christ, arrived on the western coast of India and sowed the seeds of Christianity. He is believed to have been buried on the east coast in present-day Chennai following his death in 72 AD.

Likewise, Islam arrived in India in the early eighth century following the military victory of Mohammed bin-Qasim, who fought on behalf of the Damascus-based Umayyad Caliph in 712 CE. During the British rule, India had the largest Muslim population in the world.<sup>5</sup> This factor influenced, and at times determined, British policy towards the Middle East, especially in Palestine. Over the centuries, a number of Islamic sects began emerging in British India, such as the Ahmadiyya and the Bohra Muslims. While Iran was the birthplace of the Baha'i faith, the world's largest number of the followers of this faith can now be found in India. The Zoroastrians make up the fourth major religious group, who came to India due to the rapid Islamization of what was then known as Persia. The people of this pre-Islamic faith moved in large numbers to India, especially to the areas around Bombay (present-day Mumbai) and the Surat coast, and are commonly known as Parsis. All of these religions and their followers have adapted, acclimatized, and in some cases assimilated into India's social and cultural milieu. Indeed, followers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have acquired a distinct Indian or South Asian flavor. Their customs, conventions, and norms have been different from those of the believers of the Middle East.

In modern times, the arrival of the British on the subcontinent in the early seventeenth century added geo-strategic dynamics to these historic links. Under the British, the region gained political importance and the British Indian interests in the Persian Gulf were determined, pursued, and administered from the Bombay Presidency on the western coast of India. Beginning from the late eighteenth century, Britain entered into a number of arrangements with the rulers of the principalities around the Gulf, which gradually paved the way for the Trucial States and modern-day Arab kingdoms in that region. Some of these future states were administered by the Bombay presidency. Until 1959, the Indian Rupee was the legal currency in Kuwait while the Reserve

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<sup>5</sup> Currently India has the third largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia and Pakistan. *Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population* (Washington, DC: PEW Research Center, October 2009), <http://www.pewforum.org/newassets/images/reports/Muslimpopulation/Muslimpopulation.pdf> (accessed 14 February 2012).

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Bank of India issued a separate Gulf Rupee for external financial transactions. This arrangement continued until 1965, four years after Kuwait became independent.

Following its independence from Britain in 1947, India's approach towards the Middle East followed a pattern that was prevalent in its dealings with other parts of the world. As a newly independent country, it sided with the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America that were suffering under foreign rule and occupation. Fighting colonialism and imperialism became the prominent themes of its foreign policy.

India jealously guarded its newly won political freedom. Non-alignment, therefore, became an effective instrument through which India sought to further its interests—that is, it did not identify itself with either of the rival blocs of the Cold War. Through the Asian Relations Conference (1947) and Bandung Afro-Asian Conference (1955), India reached out to other newly independent countries that were equally struggling to retain their political freedom and economic autonomy. The formation of the Non-aligned Movement in Belgrade in 1961 institutionalized this process. Thus, despite the military setback at the hands of China in 1962 and the perceived foreign policy bias in favor of the Soviet Union, India continued to favor non-alignment.

India's interests in the Middle East were pursued along two broad themes. The first involved political support for the Arabs; the second meant close engagement with Arab leaders who were committed to secularism and socialism. The former was maintained through India's policy of eschewing diplomatic relations with Israel<sup>6</sup> and the latter by befriending Arab nationalists like Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt. Hence, Israel remained an exception to the general India policy of cautious reactions.

India was often quick to respond to, and condemn, Israel for many developments. Prime Minister Nehru, for example, was prompt in censuring Israel over the tripartite aggression against Egypt in 1956 and used the war as an excuse to rule out formal ties with the Jewish State.<sup>7</sup> This was in contrast to his position regarding the Hungarian crisis, which emerged around the same time. While Nehru dithered, his close confidant V. K. Krishna Menon depicted the Soviet invasion as “internal affairs” of the socialist countries.<sup>8</sup> This duality was also visible in the foreign policy approach of Nehru's daughter, Indira. Driven by the pro-Soviet slant of Indian foreign policy, she would not as Prime Minister condemn the Czechoslovakian crisis of 1968 but sided with Moscow. This, however, did not prevent her from depicting Israel as the “aggressor” on May 25, 1967, more than ten days before the commencement of the June war.<sup>9</sup> A few years later, when Egypt and Syria launched the war on the day of Yom Kippur, she quickly blamed Israel for the aggression. Driven by its pro-Arab foreign policy, New Delhi was in the forefront of many anti-Israeli measures and resolutions in the UN General Assembly, including the infamous November 1975 resolution that depicted Zionism as racism.

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<sup>6</sup> For details see, P. R. Kumaraswamy, *India's Israel Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru in Lok Sabha, *Debates Lok Sabha*, 20 November 1956, Series I, Vol. 9, Part II, col. 595.

<sup>8</sup> S. Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*, Vol. 2 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 292.

<sup>9</sup> Statement of External Affairs Minister M. C. Chagla, *Lok Sabha Debates*, 25 May 1967, Series 4, Vol. 3, pp. 871-876.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, India's Middle East policy revolved around Nasser, Egypt, and pan-Arabism. The sentiments of pan-Arabism and opposition to US-sponsored military alliances in the region became complementary to the pro-Soviet orientation of India's foreign policy that was emerging—especially since the mid-1950s. By befriending the secular Arab nationalist leaders, India was also seeking to diminish Pakistan's influence—particularly influence that could be used against India—in the region.

This Cairo-prominent policy was rudely shaken following the Arab defeat in June 1967. This defeat wrote Nasser's political obituary, brought down secular pan-Arabism, and reversed India's political interests in the Middle East. The downfall of Nasser-led Arab armies meant the demise of secularism and the emergence of religious conservatism, something strongly advocated by Pakistan. Nasser was replaced by pro-Western conservative monarchs led by Saudi Arabia as the new force in the Middle East. Their subsequent economic power, which was gained following the oil crisis of 1973, meant that India's brand of secularism was marginalized by an increasingly conservative Middle Eastern political climate. As religion increasingly became the dominant political discourse in post-1967 Middle East, India found it more and more difficult to evolve a common political platform with most of the countries of the Middle East.

Ba'ath-ruled Iraq was an exception to this trend. Although there were other secular leaders in the region, in particular Hafiz al-Assad of Syria, Iraq possessed not only a strong political ideology but also a powerful economic influence due to its oil resources. Thus, while millions of Indians found productive employment in the Gulf monarchies in the post-1973 Middle East, India was politically closer to Iraq, especially after Saddam Hussein became president. This friendly disposition towards Baghdad continued until the end of the Cold War. India—which called Israel an aggressor on May 25, 1967,<sup>10</sup> two weeks before the outbreak of the June war—refused to name Iraq an aggressor during its prolonged and futile war against Iran in the 1980s. It stepped in and bailed out Iraq, and hosted the Seventh Summit of the Non-aligned Movement in March 1983—when many countries expressed reservations about going to Baghdad amidst the Iran-Iraq war. In 1990, India was even reluctant to condemn Saddam Hussein for his invasion, occupation, and annexation of Kuwait.

On all other major developments concerning the Middle East, India was extremely cautious, careful, and often mute, frequently refraining from making any immediate judgment. Its refusal to name Iraq the aggressor against Iran in September 1980 was criticized by the aggrieved party. Likewise, its refusal to quickly condemn the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 was not easily forgotten by the Kuwaitis. The Turkish invasion of Cyprus in July 1974 and its defiant posture since then over the breakaway "Northern Republic" has been a nonexistent issue for India. And the 1971 Iranian occupation of the three islands belonging to the UAE never figures in India's political discourse on the Middle East. Indeed, no information exists in the public domain that would suggest an Indian position on any of these issues. In India's assessment, these bilateral issues and problems do not require any response from India. (Although it is interesting that this

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

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non-committal position did not prevent India from soliciting the support of these countries in its conflict with Pakistan over the Kashmir issue.)

However, silence is not always a viable option. When response is demanded, India looks for emerging international or regional consensus on a given issue. Except for core national issues, such as Kashmir, it has deliberately avoided taking a leadership role. India's aspiration for a major international role on the wings of Nehru's individual stature and popularity was halted in 1962 when it suffered a politico-military defeat at the hands of China—effectively burying Indian activism and international diplomacy in the snowy mountains of the Himalayas. Subsequently, India settled for a passive role, with only minor instances of activism in the 1980s. It was only in the mid-1990s—as its economic liberalization began to bear fruit—that India began re-aspiring to a role beyond the confines of South Asia. This coincided with its newly found friendship with Israel, the only Middle Eastern country on whose issues Indian response had been swift and vocal, especially since the late 1950s.

Since 1947 India played second fiddle to major regional players and emerging regional consensus. Contrary to often-repeated claims within the country, India was not the first non-Arab country to recognize the PLO. This honor goes to China, which recognized the Palestinian leadership in January 1965. The Indian recognition of the PLO did not occur until 1975, when the Indian ambassador in Beirut, S. K. Singh, negotiated and signed the necessary agreement. By that time, the Arab League had recognized the PLO as the “sole and legitimate” representative of the Palestinian people, and, moreover, the PLO was on the verge of being admitted to the United Nations as an Observer. In a similar way, the Indian decision to normalize relations with Israel came in the wake of the Madrid conference and the emerging international consensus towards a negotiated settlement for the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Indian decision, in this instance too, followed the Chinese decision to normalize ties. Indeed, it was only after all five permanent members of the UN Security Council normalized or restored relations with Israel that India moved closer.

Whenever India does react or is forced by circumstances to respond, its positions are terse and non-committal. The initial official Indian response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, for example, merely expressed “concern” without explicitly condemning the aggression. The same trend can be seen in its reactions to the popular unrests in Syria. India issued no official statements following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005. The Indian prime minister's special envoy to the region, Chinmaya Gharekhan, made only an indirect reference to it, mentioning “the recent developments in Lebanon” in passing.<sup>11</sup> It wasn't until November 2007, more than thirty months after the assassination, that he made a public reference, observing that the Lebanese Prime Minister's “tragic assassination on 14th February 2005 has unleashed forces which have once again led the country on the verge of another civil

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<sup>11</sup> “By Official Spokesperson and India's Special Envoy to West Asia, Mr. C. Gharekhan,” Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) website, 3 March 2005, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=10059072> (accessed 25 January 2011).

war.”<sup>12</sup> But at the time of the assassination, even the Ministry’s *Annual Report* remained silent.<sup>13</sup> Following a similar pattern, when asked about an Indian response to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s repeated declarations of obliterating Israel, the official spokesperson merely stated, “We have recognized Israel decades ago.”<sup>14</sup>

Of course, regional consensus has not always been forthcoming, especially on inter-Arab issues and disputes. When the stakes have been vital, India has settled for a moderate middle path whenever possible. To avoid taking sides over an issue, India has often counseled political settlement through negotiations and compromise. For example, rather than condemning Iraq for initiating conflict in 1980, it urged both Iran and Iraq to seek a political settlement. The same balancing efforts have been made with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict since the normalization of relations with Israel. Moving away from its erstwhile practice of condemning Israel’s policy towards the Palestinians, New Delhi has been urging both sides to shun violence and seek a negotiated settlement. Its response to periodic upsurges of violence has been accompanied by a call for “restraint” from both parties. For example, within hours of the commencement of the Gaza War, or Operation Cast Lead, in December 2008, India admitted that it was “aware of the immediate cross-border provocations resulting from rocket attacks particularly against targets in southern Israel.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly nuanced positions were apparent in the early stages of the Second Lebanon War, when India held Hezbollah and its kidnapping of Israeli soldiers responsible for the tension and conflict in the region.<sup>16</sup> This position would have been unthinkable during the pre-1992 years.

Close observation reveals that during the Cold War, India’s actions and responses within Middle Eastern dynamics carried some political salience. Anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, non-alignment, opposition to military alliances, and support for secular pan-Arabism were strong political statements. However, these responses remained merely political *statements*: India had words but not the capacity to influence the regional dynamics. The oil crisis severely dented its struggling economy. Shortly after the resolution of the Kuwait crisis, India found itself on the verge of defaulting on its international financial obligations. More than two decades later, in September 2004, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh recollected those testing times speaking on

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<sup>12</sup> “Address by Ambassador C.R. Gharekhan, Special Envoy of the Prime Minister for West Asia and Middle East Peace Process at the concluding session of the International Conference on West Asia convened by the Observer Research Foundation,” MEA website, 22 November 2007, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=100513374> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>13</sup> This is ironic given that Congress leader and former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was killed when he was in opposition and Hariri also faced a similar fate when he was out of office.

<sup>14</sup> “India recognized Israel decades ago,” *The Hindu* 28 October 2005.

<sup>15</sup> “Statement by Official Spokesperson on the situation in Gaza,” Press Briefings, MEA website, 27 December 2008, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530314593> (accessed 13 August 2011). For a discussion on the Indian response to the Gaza War see, P. R. Kumaraswamy, “Perceptions of the Middle East and Gaza War: Views from Key Countries, India,” *MERIA Journal* 13.1 (March 2009) <http://www.gloria-center.org/meria/2009/03/symposium2.html#india> (accessed 13 August 2011).

<sup>16</sup> “Statement of the Official Spokesperson on the tension at the Israel-Lebanon border,” Press Releases, MEA website, 13 July 2006, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530211541> (accessed 25 January 2012).

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the Charlie Rose Show: “When I became finance minister during this period [1991] India was in the midst of the worst possible crisis. Our foreign exchange reserves had literally exhausted. Even to raise a small loan of \$500 million, we had to physically send India’s gold reserves to the vaults of the Bank of England.”<sup>17</sup>

India was truly at a crossroads. It found itself on the losing side of the Cold War divide. The Soviet Union—upon whom it had depended for political support, economic cooperation and military hardware—had collapsed and disappeared. Iraq, the only country that was dependably friendly to India in the Middle East, was politically marginalized, economically and militarily ruined, and diplomatically isolated through a series of sanctions and military actions following its ill-fated August 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Thus, in the regional and global contexts, India was confronted with the necessity of making choices it was not used to.

India had to reinvent itself both politically and economically, re-examine its worldview, and re-organize its priorities. In short, it had to rise to the challenges posed by the sudden end of the Cold War, a war that had made life easier for many countries. Bloc politics and near-total compartmentalization had relieved many countries of making difficult foreign policy choices. Most of them, including those professing non-alignment, largely followed the tone set by Washington or Moscow. This comfort zone disappeared with the Berlin Wall, and the ensuing events proved that international politics had become unwieldy, even ungovernable. Choices had to be made nationally and with very little external guidance or precedence. These were uncharted waters for many countries—and India was one of them.

### **Post–Cold War Choices**

Though not known for swift decisions, India, under the leadership of Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao, made some political and economic choices to answer the new situation in which it found itself—within a US-dominated international order. At the political level, Rao needed to send a signal that India was willing to break from the past and ready to face the new post–Cold War order. Rao chose to convey India’s intent through Israel. In January 1992, he announced the normalization of relations with the Jewish State. Thus, he completed a process that had begun more than four decades earlier, when Jawaharlal Nehru granted recognition to Israel in September 1950. Rao, who was thrust into power after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at an election rally, successfully closed the non-relations phase of India-Israel relations.

A number of factors enabled Rao to accomplish what many of his stronger predecessors could not have attempted: the inauguration of the Madrid Middle East peace conference; a favorable international climate towards a negotiated political settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict; the end of ideology-based bloc politics; and the coalition situation within the country. By reversing a

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<sup>17</sup> "Interview with the Prime Minister on the Charlie Rose Show, 21 September 2004. The text of the interview is not available in the official homepage of the Indian prime minister but can be found in the Chinese site China forum, <http://bbs.chinadaily.com.cn/thread-202273-1-1.html>, (accessed 31 March 2012).

four-decades-old policy set by India's first prime minister, Rao signaled to the outside world that India was changing and was ready for change.

Normalization of relations with Israel reflected an accurate reading of the shifting political dynamics in the Middle East. During the pre-1947 years, the principal platform through which India and its leaders sought to further their national interests in the Middle East was through support of the Palestinians in their struggle against Jewish aspirations for a homeland. In the absence of other political or economic incentives, the Palestinian cause proved to be its major political instrument. Indian nationalists thus identified with the Arabs of Palestine in their struggle against the Jewish demands; and from the early 1920s, the Congress party and its two prominent leaders, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, sided with the Arabs. When the Palestine question was brought before the newly formed United Nations in 1947, India sided with the Arabs. While a majority of members of the UN committee recommended partition as the solution, supported by Iran and the then-Yugoslavia, India came out with a federal plan. Keeping with its traditional position, on November 29, 1947, India voted against the partition plan. It maintained this position in May 1950 when it voted against Israel's admission to the United Nations. While the Jewish State was granted recognition in September 1950, India did not establish normal diplomatic relations with it until 1992.

From 1950 to 1992, non-relations was not only the hallmark of India's Israel policy but its primary diplomatic instrument in the Middle East. Numerous Indian statements concerning the region were accompanied by support for the Palestinians, and the absence of normal diplomatic relations was often explained as Indian disapproval of Israel's policy towards the Arabs. On all instances of the Arab-Israeli conflict, India sided with the former. The limited Israeli presence in India was confined to a consulate in the port city of Mumbai, while the PLO, with which India established closer ties, was allowed to operate freely in the national capital. Even this limited Israeli presence was curtailed in 1982 when the consular-general was declared *persona non-grata* following a controversial media interview. This trend towards Israel seemed to culminate in 1975, when India joined other Third World countries in equating Zionism with racism. In retrospect, it is possible to suggest that nothing short of an international transformation would have altered India's position with regard to Israel. The end of the Cold War provided that opportunity.<sup>18</sup>

However, India's problem was much larger and more complex. The end of the Cold War also meant that India could not further its interest in the Middle East merely through its consistent support for the Palestinians. While such support still remained popular, the politico-diplomatic usefulness of the Palestinian cause diminished considerably. The reason for this can be traced to the Kuwait crisis, when Palestinian leaders sided with the occupier and endorsed Saddam Hussein—a position that was not well-received by the oil-rich Arab countries, especially Kuwait. It was in Kuwait that Yasser Arafat founded the al-Fatah movement in 1959, and a large number of Palestinians made their living there. The endorsement of Saddam Hussein infuriated many of

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion on Rajiv Gandhi's moves towards normalization see P. R. Kumaraswamy, "India and Israel: Prelude to Normalization," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 19.2 (Winter 1995): pp. 53-73.

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the Gulf rulers who had been supporting—politically and financially—the Palestinians and their leadership. This anger was manifested in the large-scale expulsion of Palestinians that followed the repulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait in February 1991 by a multinational US-led force. Arafat and the PLO accepted Israel's condition of negotiating with a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation without any PLO representation in the Middle East peace conference—a decision that must be understood within this context of the political and financial crisis of the Palestinians.

And so, while the Palestinian issue had not lost its relevance, it was limited in the extent to which it could further India's Middle Eastern interests. Normalization of relations with Israel and a more nuanced response to various developments in the region, especially the cycle of violence, were a reflection of this realization. Part of this process was India's recognition and accommodation of at least some Israeli concerns and a sense of balance in its reactions. Partisanship and harsh criticism of Israel have been conspicuously absent since 1992. This, however, does not indicate that India has abandoned or reversed its positions in an absolute sense. While in the past, disagreements with Israel over the peace process prevented India from normalizing relations, since 1992, and despite persisting disagreements over the peace process, bilateral relations have flourished. India's separation of bilateral interests from the larger Arab-Israeli conflict is thus the most definitive feature of normalization.

Furthermore, Indo-Israeli relations have not kept New Delhi from pursuing closer ties with other countries of the Middle East, including those with professed animosity towards the Jewish State. High-level visits and contact between India and the Arab and Islamic countries of the region have increased since Indo-Israel ties were established in 1992. Except for occasional observations, primarily from the Mubarak-ruled Egypt, the Middle East has remained indifferent towards India's friendship with Israel. Even the Islamic Republic of Iran has not made Israel an issue in its bilateral ties with New Delhi. Tensions in Indo-Iranian relations are more the result of the US and its interference than of Israel.

Since the normalization of Indo-Israeli ties, India has received more high-profile visits from the Middle East than before. Among others, India has hosted presidents Hashemi Rafsanjani (1993) and Mohammed Khatami (2003) of Iran, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia (2006), President Bashar al-Assad of Syria (June 2008), President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt (November 2008), the Emir of Kuwait (June 2006), the Crown Prince of Bahrain (March 2007), and President Abdelaziz Boutflika of Algeria (January 2001). Three of these leaders—Khatami, Abdullah, and Boutflika—were given the honor being chief guests at India's Republic Day celebrations. Similar reciprocal visits were made from India. Israel was not an impediment to any of these initiatives. The reasons for this increased contact between India and the Middle East can be located in the economic arena, which has played an important role in shaping India's response to the Arab Spring.

Thus, strong economic—rather than political—interests determine India's Middle East policy, interests that have become more visible following the Arab Spring. This lower ranking of political considerations was also due to India's traditional reluctance to make the promotion of democracy a principal foreign policy objective.

### **Economic interests**

While India has always had strong economic interests in, and interactions with, the Middle East, during the Cold War these interests and interactions were minimal. The size of the Indian economy and its international trade were too small to make an impact on the region. This has changed in the wake of the economic liberalization ushered in by the Narasimha Rao-Manmohan Singh duo in 1991. The results of these processes were first seen towards the end of 1990s, when India's foreign trade passed the US\$50 billion mark. Less than a decade later, in 2008-2009, it exceeded US\$300 billion. In 2006, India's was the fourth largest economy in the world, and it is poised to become the second largest in the world after China within the next couple of decades. This has been a staggering transformation for a country that in 1991 mortgaged its gold assets to pay for the import of essential commodities. Despite the unevenness of its growth and the limited trickledown effect, the economic advance has been steady and significant. This in real terms has meant a large emerging Indian market with potential political implications.

The growth in Indian foreign trade with the Middle East has also been significant. For example, during 1995-1996 its trade with the region stood at US\$6.2 billion and rose to US\$81.4 billion in 2009-2010; an increase of fourteen times in as many years. From about one-sixth in the mid-1990s, the share of the Middle East in the country's total foreign trade has gone up close to 30 percent by 2009-10 (see tables 1 and 2). During the past decade, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have constantly remained among India's top ten trading partners (see Table 3). Indeed, during 2009-2010, the UAE has emerged as India's largest trading partner, marginally overtaking the Chinese mainland. Its trade with the former stood at US\$67,102.26 billion and with the latter US\$63,095.61 billion. There are clear indications that India is eyeing the sovereign wealth funds from the Gulf for its infrastructure development plans. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), between 2006 and 2030, India will require US\$1.25 trillion in energy-related infrastructure investments.<sup>19</sup> During his visit to Saudi Arabia in April 2008, Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee met King Abdullah and "recalled his participation in the Indo-Arab Investment Projects Conclave and possibilities of private sector participation, particularly in petroleum, gas, petrochemicals. Indian economy requires huge investments, particularly in infrastructure and can absorb \$500-600 billion."<sup>20</sup>

Trade with the region is not entirely state-to-state but involves a wide range of companies, personnel, and beneficiaries. Most Indian conglomerates and emerging multinational corporations—such as Tata, Birla, Reliance, Mahindra and Mahindra, and L & T—are active in the Middle East. A huge network of medium and small companies, intermediaries, and above all individual families depend upon and benefit from this growing volume of trade with the region.

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<sup>19</sup> International Energy Agency, *World Energy Outlook, 2007* (Paris: IEA, 2007), p. 489.

<sup>20</sup> "Briefing points by Official Spokesperson on External Affairs Minister's visit to Saudi Arabia," Press Briefings, MEA website, 19 April 2008. <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530313820> (accessed 25 January 2012).

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### Energy security

The post–Cold War strategic importance of this region, especially the Persian Gulf, is due to the issue of energy security. Since the days of its independence, India has been an energy deficient state that relies heavily upon Middle Eastern oil. Domestic supplies did not adequately meet its galloping energy demands. This inadequacy became acute after 1991, as the growth spurred by economic liberalization accelerated the demand for oil and gas. Despite various efforts and exploration offers, domestic oil production has been static since the mid-1980s. Recent inroads into non-conventional and alternate energy resources—such as biogas, wind energy, solar energy, as well as nuclear energy—have not diluted the importance of oil. Fossilized fuel, including coal, accounts for the bulk of India’s energy basket, with oil accounting for a quarter.

Although the 1973 oil crisis exposed its vulnerability, India’s domestic supplies made up over two-thirds of its oil needs until the 1980s. The situation has been reversed since 1991. From about 1.2 million barrels per day (mbd) in 1990, its consumption reached 2.1 mbd in 2000 and stands at 3.58 mbd in 2012. According to *International Energy Outlook*, this will reach 5.2 mbd in 2025. Similar growth can be seen in gas consumption. From an annual consumption of 0.4 trillion cubic feet (tct) in 1990, it doubled to 0.8 tct in 2000 and is expected to reach 2.5 tct by 2025. In case of a higher growth rate, the report concludes that by 2025 India’s demand for natural gas will reach 2.9 tct and for oil about 6.5 mbd. Another estimate suggests that crude oil demand will reach 7.7 mbd by 2030.<sup>21</sup>

India’s demand for oil stood at 3.34 mbd in 2010, 3.46 mbd in 2011, and 3.58 mbd in 2012. Corresponding domestic production during the same period stood at 0.86, 0.9, and 0.92 mbd respectively.<sup>22</sup> There is a widespread consensus both within and outside the country that India’s dependency upon imports for its hydrocarbon needs will only increase in the coming years. According to *India Hydrocarbon Vision 2025*, a document published by the Indian Planning Commission, the demand for petroleum product will increase rapidly from 69 million metric tons (MMT) in 1999 to 354 MMT in 2025. During the same period, the demand for natural gas will grow from 110 million standard cubic meters per day (MMSCMD) to 391 MMSCMD.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, *India Hydrocarbon Vision 2025* candidly admits, “The gap between supply and availability of crude oil, petroleum products as well as gas from indigenous sources is likely to increase over the years.”<sup>24</sup> The international assessment of the situation has made a similar prognosis. According to Paris-based IEA, India’s overall dependency on net energy needs will rise from 70 percent in 2007 to 90 percent by 2030.<sup>25</sup> This dependency is more acute in the oil sector, where it is

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<sup>21</sup> International Energy Agency, *World Energy Outlook, 2007* (Paris: IEA, 2007), p. 559.

<sup>22</sup> “Oil Market Report—December 2011,” International Energy Agency, <http://omrpublic.iea.org/> (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>23</sup> The complete text of the report of the Group on India Hydrocarbon Vision 2025 can be found in Jasjit Singh, Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, *Oil and Gas in India’s Security* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2001), pp. 131-230.

<sup>24</sup> *Hydrocarbon Vision 2025*, p. 132.

<sup>25</sup> International Energy Agency, *World Energy Outlook, 2007* (Paris: IEA, 2007), p. 495.

estimated at 94 per cent. By 2024, India is estimated to overtake Japan to emerge as the world's third largest oil importer after the US and China.<sup>26</sup>

This growing dependency upon imports for its hydrocarbon needs is reflected in India's highly skewed trade pattern. The petroleum bill accounts for a major portion of India's imports and largely accounts for its trade deficit. As Table 4 indicates, in some years the oil bill was larger than India's trade deficits, and in others, it was close to that figure.

India's efforts to diversify supplies have had only limited success. According to the Economic Survey of India, the total investment by state-owned oil and gas companies of India in overseas energy assets is more than US\$13 billion.<sup>27</sup> Except for Sudan and Syria, most of these investments are in Africa and Latin America. India is yet to make headway into oil assets in other parts of the Middle East, primarily due to state policies. The Iranian constitution, for example, explicitly prohibits foreign ownership of its energy assets.<sup>28</sup> The bitter experience of colonialism and the manipulation of the Seven Sisters<sup>29</sup> have made national oil companies in the Middle East wary of foreign ownership.

Much of India's oil and gas trade happens with the Middle East. The region as a whole accounts for over three-quarters of India's oil trade (Table 5). Most of this comes from the Persian Gulf region. While the Gulf's overall share has declined in recent years, it still accounts for nearly 60 percent of India's overall oil imports (Table 6). During the past decade, countries of the Gulf have been among the three principal suppliers of oil and gas to India (Table 7), accounting for the bulk of the Middle Eastern supply of energy resources. Energy supplies also account for a majority of India's imports from the Middle East. Nearly three-quarters of India's imports are energy related (Table 5) and the share is higher in some cases. During 2008-2009, for example, 92 percent of India's imports from Saudi Arabia were energy related. This was true for Kuwait (96 percent during 2006-2007), Qatar (88 during 2009-2010), Egypt (89 percent during 2006-2007), and Yemen (99 percent during 2009-2010). Only the UAE has more diversified trade with India, where energy imports constitute less than 50 percent of India's imports.

The growth in India's energy imports is not exclusively driven by increasing domestic consumption. A significant portion of the imported crude oil is processed into petroleum products and exported. According to IEA, India "is geographically well placed, close to both Middle

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 496.

<sup>27</sup> These companies are: ONGC Videsh (OVL), with over 40 projects in 15 countries; Indian Oil Corporation, with 9 projects in 6 countries; Oil India Limited, with 12 projects in 8 countries; Bharat Petroleum Corporation, with 12 projects in 7 countries; Gas Authority of India, with 4 projects in 2 countries and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation, with 2 projects in 2 countries. "Economic Survey of India, 2010-11" (New Delhi: Ministry of Finance), p. 268, <http://indiabudget.nic.in/budget2011-2012/survey.asp> (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Article 153 states: "Any form of agreement resulting in foreign control over the natural resources, economy, army, or culture of the country, as well as other aspects of the national life, is forbidden."

<sup>29</sup> Coined in the 1950s, the term referred to the seven Western oil companies that controlled ownership, production, distribution, and pricing of Middle East oil. They were Standard Oil of New Jersey (Esso) and Standard Oil Company of New York (Socony), now ExxonMobil; Standard Oil of California (Socal); Gulf Oil and Texaco (now Chevron); Royal Dutch Shell; and Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (now BP).

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Eastern crude oil suppliers and to rapidly expanding refined products markets in Asia and the Middle East.”<sup>30</sup> The privatization of the oil sector and resultant mega projects have contributed to the rapid increase of crude oil imports. The Reliance-run Jamnagar refinery, which became operational in July 1999, is today the largest in the world in the installed capacity of 1.24 mbd.<sup>31</sup> As a result, oil products have emerged as an important component of India’s exports. This trend is more noticeable since 2000-2001 when oil products became one of the country’s top five export commodities, and their share has been increasing since then. In 2000-2001, India exported US\$1.9 billion worth of oil products and this accounted for about 4.3 percent of its total exports. During 2009-2010, it exported over US\$29 billion worth of oil products, which made up about 16 percent of its overall exports (Table 8). Until India buckled under American pressure in 2009, Iran was its principal market (Table 9).

In other words, oil accounts for a major portion of India’s imports as well as exports. During 2009-2010, it imported US\$96.32 billion worth of oil; during the same period, it exported US\$29.04 billion worth of petroleum products. As Table 10 indicates, out of its US\$467 billion foreign trade, as much as US\$125 billion, or a substantial 26 percent, is oil related. No country with such a dense energy-linked foreign trade could be casual in its approach towards the Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf region.

Despite economic liberalization, strengthening market forces, and globalization, energy trade and commerce are still governed by inter-state relations. The same holds true for India and the Gulf. Major oil companies on both sides are either state-controlled or heavily dependent upon the state. As can be seen in the payment controversy over oil imports from Iran due to American pressure, state policies play an important role in shaping energy ties.<sup>32</sup> A modicum of correct political relations is thus a pre-condition for an uninterrupted flow of energy supplies.

State backing has become a pre-condition for critical energy deals. The success of Chinese energy companies in securing lucrative energy assets in different parts of the world, for example, has been largely attributed to active state support. Correspondingly, the absence of similar support by the Indian government for its oil companies has been cited as the primary reason for their failure to make inroads into an attractive energy market. For instance, the much talked about Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline is having difficulties more because of political issues than economic concerns.

Moreover, non-state actors are disrupting energy supplies. Since the fall of the Mubarak regime in February 2011, Egypt’s gas pipelines to Israel and Jordan have been periodically sabotaged. Due

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<sup>30</sup> International Energy Agency, *World Energy Outlook, 2007* (Paris: IEA, 2007), p. 496.

<sup>31</sup> “Reliance commissions world’s biggest refinery,” *Indian Express* (New Delhi) 26 December 2008, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/reliance-commissions-worlds-biggest-refiner/402999/> (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>32</sup> P. R. Kumaraswamy, “India’s Slippery Iran Policy,” *New Indian Express* (Chennai) 20 July 2011, <http://expressbuzz.com/biography/India%E2%80%99s-slippery-Iran-Policy/295860.html> (accessed 31 March 2012); and Atul Aneja, “Oil Payment Row and India-Iran Ties,” *The Hindu* (Chennai) 2 August 2011, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/article2314031.ece?homepage=true> (accessed 31 March 2012).

to a series of attacks during the year, Egypt's gas supplies to the two countries fell from 220 million cubic feet (mcf) in 2010 to an average of 80 mcf in 2011,<sup>33</sup> with the cost of loss to Jordan alone estimated at US\$2.4 billion by 2012.<sup>34</sup> Fears of similar attacks have contributed to prolonged Indian reluctance to expose its IPI energy pipelines to various armed groups operating in Pakistan. While non-state players can disrupt supplies, only the state and its agencies can ensure smooth and uninterrupted energy supply. Political discord with the supplying state would thus have unprecedented consequences on the energy front.

Indeed, some of India's critical foreign policy shifts also have been influenced by its energy-security concerns. During the Cold War period, India was in the forefront of anti-apartheid struggles; but in recent years, its response to similar human rights violations has been muted and circumspect. Its reluctance to rally around the pro-democracy movement of Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar was partly influenced by energy security concerns.<sup>35</sup> Similar interests partly explain India's silence on the ethnic cleansing in Sudan and its opposition to trying Sudanese ruler Omar al-Bashir for war crimes. Prolonged international criticism over the Darfur crisis was accompanied by growing Indian interest, involvement, and investment in the Sudanese oil sector. For India, energy took precedence over high-moral politics.

### **Expatriate laborers**

The Persian Gulf has become a major destination for large-scale labor migrating from India. For centuries, Indian communities have been seeking fortunes in different corners of the world. During the British rule, thousands were sent to far-off lands as indentured laborers, and their successors can be found from the Caribbean to the South Pacific. Migration to the Gulf region, however, has been different in the sense that it has been voluntary and driven by economic incentives and opportunities. Since the oil boom of the early 1970s, there has been a massive movement of Indian laborers to the Gulf. While over the years a significant number of professionals and managerial class workers have emigrated, the vast majority of the migrants are categorized as unskilled and semi-skilled.

The actual numbers of migrant laborers and their professional/educational background, skills, and presence in specific Gulf countries are not available. Although official figures of the Indian workers are not accurate, estimates range from four<sup>36</sup> to six million. In March 2011, answering a question in the *Rajya Sabha*, the government put the number of Indians in the region at “nearly 5

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<sup>33</sup> Khatam Malkawi, “Jordan-Egypt Trade Weathers Turmoil, Continues to Grow—Envoy,” *The Jordan Times*, 25 January 2012, <http://jordantimes.com/jordan-egypt-trade-weather-turmoil-continues-to-grow---envoy> (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Taylor Luck, “Egyptian gas cuts to cost Jordan \$2.4 billion,” *The Jordan Times* 18 January 2012, <http://jordantimes.com/egyptian-gas-cuts-to-cost-jordan-24-billion> (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>35</sup> While geo-strategic interests and proximity of the military junta with China are important, energy concerns also played a role in India's policy towards Yangon.

<sup>36</sup> *Annual Report, 2009-10*, Ministry of Overseas Affairs, p. 28. <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=500415660> (accessed 31 March 2012).

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million.”<sup>37</sup> Foreign Minister Krishna changed this to six million when he released the *National Security Annual Review* in New Delhi in April.<sup>38</sup> Speaking in the *Lok Sabha* a few days later, the Prime Minister observed that there were “six million citizens of our country based in these countries.”<sup>39</sup> Singh repeated the same figure when the head of the Saudi National Security Council, Prince Bandar bin-Sultan bin-Abdul Aziz al-Saud, met him in New Delhi in March.<sup>40</sup>

It is generally agreed that over five million Indians live in the Gulf. The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs refers to over five million overseas workers “with a net outflow of about a million each year, excluding returnees.” It adds, “90 percent of them work in the Gulf.”<sup>41</sup> A vast majority of them have limited or no education and belong to the semi-skilled and unskilled category.

The migration of unskilled, semi-skilled, and professional laborers to the Gulf brings significant financial gain to India. The oil-rich Arab countries and their economy offer productive employment to over five million workers, providing benefits to their immediate families back in India. The migration partly mitigates the unemployment situation in India. Furthermore, emigrants repatriate large amounts of foreign exchange earnings to their family. Such transfers take place through legal as well as illegal *hawala* channels. According to official Indian estimates, in 2001-2002, overseas workers remitted US\$15.8 billion to India, and during 2009-2010 that figure rose to US\$53.9 billion.<sup>42</sup> As the Indian government admits, “a significant proportion of remittances is contributed by the increasing number of unskilled and semi-skilled Indian workers employed in the Gulf countries.”<sup>43</sup>

Vast communities of expatriate Indian workers live in designated zones away from the native Arabs. Their preference for native cuisine and cultural items accounts for a significant portion of India’s exports to the region. The easy availability of Indian spices, cultural artifacts, clothes, vernacular magazines, and other merchandize is the result of this commercial relationship between India and its expatriate community in the Gulf. The celebration of cultural events and even religious festivals such as Onam and Diwali by the Indian communities is an indication of this two-way movement of goods. While it is impossible to quantifying the share of the contribution of the Indian migrants to the overall trade with the Gulf, it is possible to suggest that that contribution would be significant. In certain countries, the Indian migrants also constitute the largest expatriate community. For example, official estimates suggest that Indian expatriate

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<sup>37</sup> “Q.822 Recent uprisings in Arab countries,” Rajya Sabha, Parliament Q&A, MEA website, 3 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=220117334> (accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>38</sup> “EAM’s Remarks at the release of India’s National Security Annual Review, 2010,” Speeches/Statements, MEA website, 19 April 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530117561> (accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>39</sup> “PM’s Statement in the Lok Sabha,” Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Prime Minister’s Office, 23 March 2011, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=71285> (accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>40</sup> “Visit of Secretary-General of the National Security Council of Saudi Arabia,” Press Releases, MEA website, 29 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217476> (accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>41</sup> *Annual Report, 2009-10*, Ministry of Overseas Affairs, p. 28. <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=500415660> (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-29.

laborers constitute about 30 percent of the total resident population of the UAE, vastly outnumbering the native Emirate citizens.<sup>44</sup> With a population of 1.6 million, the Indian expatriate community is the largest in Saudi Arabia.<sup>45</sup>

Besides the economic pull, there are other factors that have facilitated such a huge influx. Because these are contract laborers, most of them return home after the completion of their tenure. This means that the host countries do not incur any additional social burden. Moreover, despite the length of their employment and stay, Indian expatriates do not seek citizenship rights—unlike laborers from other countries who seek citizenship and other social rights in name of their common Arab identity. Above all, the Indian expatriate community remains aloof and segregated from the citizens, and hence their involvement in internal domestic issues is minimal. Pakistani workers, for example, have at times been accused of meddling in local political and Shi'a-Sunni disputes. The presence of a significant number of non-Muslims (although no official estimates exist) also signals that the Indians' being in the Arab countries is largely driven by economic—not political or religious—considerations.

### **Democracy promotion**

Partly because of India's own experiences in the South Asian neighborhood and partly because of its historic experience, democracy promotion is not an article of faith for India and its leaders. Its 1971 military intervention in Bangladesh notwithstanding, India has refrained from actively promoting democracy even in its neighborhood. Its prolonged support for anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism was not accompanied by a struggle to promote democratic values. Indian leaders have repeatedly argued that the nature of government must be left to the people of the respective countries. Opposition to apartheid in South Africa was the only notable exception to this stand. During the Cold War, the authoritarian USSR, and not the liberal US, was the closest friend of democratic India. The trend has not been very different since the end of the Cold War. The policy choices of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) personified this. Its pro-American orientation did not cause the NDA government to embrace the "concert of democracy" idea promoted by President George W. Bush.

Driven by national interest calculations, Indian leaders have not hesitated to sidestep issues such as absence of democracy or suppression of human rights violations. Since the days of the Hungarian crisis of 1956, Nehru and his successors have settled for political realism over idealism; and India has been following this since the end of the Cold War. Its policy of engagement with the military junta in Myanmar and forces that are not necessarily democratic elsewhere illustrates this pragmatic approach to foreign policy. The same pragmatism inspires its ignoring of human rights concerns in Sudan's Darfur region. Exploiting the opportunity provided

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<sup>44</sup> *Report of the Higher Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora*, Indian Diaspora website (Ministry of External Affairs, India), p. 33, <http://indiandiaspora.nic.in/diasporapdf/chapter4.pdf> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>45</sup> "Briefing points by Official Spokesperson on External Affairs Minister's visit to Saudi Arabia," Press Briefings, MEA website, 19 April 2008, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530313820> (accessed 25 January 2012).

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by the sudden exit of Western oil companies, it has engaged and invested in the Sudanese oil sector.

Indeed, unless conditions have made it absolutely necessary and inevitable, India has refrained from interfering in the internal affairs of other countries and their political systems. Regime change has not been a foreign policy interest, let alone a priority, for India. Much to the anger and displeasure of its Tamil citizens, for example, India was unenthusiastic about interfering in the prolonged ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. In the same way, it stayed out of the decade-long Maoist insurgency in neighboring Nepal. Given this cautious attitude towards its immediate neighborhood, it would be unrealistic to expect India to be more vocal and interventionist towards internal strife and protests in distant lands.

Furthermore, India has never voiced its concerns or expressed its opinion on the condition of marginalized groups in the Middle East. The plight of minorities and women do not feature in its foreign policy discourses. In India's view, the nature of the government, political system, and content and extent of political rights and freedoms have to be negotiated, demarcated, and established between the rulers and citizens of these countries without any external role, interference, or dictates. The demand of the Baha'is in India is a case in point. The largest Baha'i community in the world has long been demanding that India discuss the plight of its religious brethren under the Islamic Republic during India's bilateral discussions with Tehran. New Delhi has pointedly refused to raise the issue because of its opposition to similar Iranian intervention on behalf of the Kashmiris in India. Expression of empathy with Arab protesters and their demands for political reforms would not be in sync with traditional Indian foreign policy. The belated urging upon President Hosni Mubarak "to listen" to the voice of the Egyptian people has to be read within this wider context.

Indian reluctance to pronounce judgments on governance in other parts of the world is not entirely due to a moralistic recognition of state sovereignty non-interference. It also partly emanates from the country's own deficiency on human rights violations. India has faced severe domestic and international criticism over its handling of various political issues, such as Kashmir—an issue that Pakistan has attempted to raise (to India's strong displeasure) in various international forums, such as the Organization of Islamic Conference (now renamed as Organization of Islamic Cooperation, OIC). India's treatment of caste-based discrimination was also raised during the Durban Conference 2001 against racism. India's silence on human rights violations in different parts of the world was accompanied by a hope for similar "non-interference" policy from the outside world. It is largely due to such fears that India has refused to sign the International Criminal Code. Hence, Indian silence on issues such as democratization, human rights, and governance brought into open by the Arab Spring should also be viewed within the context of its domestic situation—that is, its fear of encouraging similar interventionist policy by the world body. Like many other Third World countries and vulnerable countries such as China and Russia, New Delhi takes refuge in sovereignty and non-interference.

Within this broader context of strong economic interests and political realism, then, how did India and its leaders read, react to, and respond to the unfolding crisis in the Middle East following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi?

### **Indian Responses to the Arab Spring**

Official Indian responses to the Arab Spring reveal certain clear and basic traits. Mostly, India has been extremely cautious in responding to the unfolding international developments, especially those accompanied by violence and turbulence. Since the days of its independence, “caution” has been India’s watchword on internal developments in other countries. India’s characteristic restraint in taking any stand on international developments (unless it is necessary and unavoidable) explains why the country has rarely responded immediately or forcefully to Middle Eastern developments. In addition, commenting on foreign policy issues remains the prerogative of the prime minister, foreign minister or diplomatic representatives of the government; other functionaries of the government refrain from airing their views, at least in public.

The Arab Spring put the Middle East in the thick of media and public discussions. Until then, Pakistan’s monopolizing of the world’s interest and attention relegated this area of considerable importance to the sidelines. But the successful popular protests against once-unquestionable rulers began drawing considerable attention from the media, academics, and, above all, policy-oriented think tanks. The Jasmine Revolution, the initial name given to the events in Tunisia, became the flavor of the season. Editorials, seminars, conferences, and special public events on the upsurge proliferated. The Arab Spring became the theme of many media columnists and pundits even when foreign policy was not their field. A diversity of views and suggestions thus emerged that were often at variance with the official positions and reactions.

For some, the root cause of the Arab Spring was simple: Israel. Writing in May 2011, Anwar Alam, an academic in the Jamia Millia Islamia observed:

The anger burst out in Egypt for three reasons: first, the closure of Rafa (sic) border by Mubarak government in 2010—in view of Israeli blockade of Gaza—that used to provide the only outlet to the people of Gaza to bring food and other necessary commodity for day to day life.<sup>46</sup>

Further, he suggested that the deeper implications of the Arab Spring would be a “realignment of political forces at regional level that will strengthen the forces of ‘pan-Arabism’ against Israel. Under the convulsion of people’s pressure the issue of ‘Arab pride’ with ‘liberation of Palestine’ at its center is bound to resurface at the regional level in near future.” Following this, he advised India to avoid “a close identification with Israel.” He then warned that the goodwill India enjoys in the region would be lost if India “continues to ally itself too closely with United States and

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<sup>46</sup> Anwar Alam, “The discontent in West Asia: Implications for India,” Issue Brief No. 166, May 2011 (New Delhi: IPCS), p. 3, [http://www.ipcs.org/pdf\\_file/issue/IB166-Anwar-WestAsia.pdf](http://www.ipcs.org/pdf_file/issue/IB166-Anwar-WestAsia.pdf) (accessed 25 January 2012).

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Israel.”<sup>47</sup> Similar Israel-centric assessments of the Arab Spring can be found in the writings of others.<sup>48</sup> While some, like Alam, directly link Israel to the unfolding Arab Spring, others are more nuanced and suggest resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict as the panacea for the restless region.

India’s silence evoked some of the harshest criticism within the country. Castigating the lack of response, for example, Satish Chandra and Sushant Sareen argue,

At a time when there is great tumult in the entire Arab world, India’s continuing silence on the developments in a region of critical strategic and political importance is not just inexplicable but also deafening. Whether this is borne out of abundant caution or a natural proclivity for fence sitting until the situation crystallizes, or even the result of an increasing tendency in Indian diplomacy to wait for a cue from the Western world [read USA], is not quite clear.

They continue, “Being a mealy mouthed fence sitter is not an option for a country aspiring to play a major role on the world stage,” and add, “India will have to identify with the popular aspirations of the peoples, but without burning its bridges with the rulers and establishments of these countries.”<sup>49</sup> Harmony between the two would not be possible if India were to make rash and public statements.

Suggestions have also been made for India to be more proactive in articulating its position, especially over Libya. The Arab endorsement of the no-fly zone (NFZ) and the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 in March were used by critics to argue for a more assertive Indian stand. Some were not happy with the Indian decision to abstain during the UNSC vote; others advocated for a more vocal stand from India. One observer went a step further and suggested that India should join the NATO-led air campaign against Libya. Positing that the Indian abstention was “debatable,” this critic argued for India to “raise its political capital” with the West by participating in the implementation of the NFZ. While India would not have to send combat troops, it “may get to ‘practice compatible operations’ on the new AWACS [Airborne Early Warning and Control System].” By shouldering “more responsibility,” the critic continued, India could assume “more clout and power” in the international arena. In her assessment, “for India it is not about Libya” but about the “opportunity to buy influence at a very low cost.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> For example see, M. K. Bhadrakumar, “Israel inherits the Arab Spring,” *Asia Times* 29 July 2011, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/middle\\_east/mg29ak02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/middle_east/mg29ak02.html) (accessed 14 February 2012); and “The Arab Spring is in a great distress,” *Rediff News*, 15 February 2012, <http://www.rediff.com/news/report/the-arab-spring-is-in-great-distress/20120215.htm> (accessed 22 February 2012).

<sup>49</sup> Satish Chandra and Sushant Sareen, “India’s Deafening Silence on the Tumult in the Arab World,” Vivekananda International Foundation (New Delhi) website, 27 February 2011, <http://www.vifindia.org/article/2011/february/25/Indias-Deafening-Silence-On-The-Tumult-In-The-Arab-World> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>50</sup> Rajeshwari Pillai Rajagopalan, “Libya NFZ: An Opportunity for India,” *Analysis* 19 March 2011 (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation).

Similar arguments forcefully suggesting Indian intervention and participation can be found in other writings as well. Such arguments are invariably linked to India's great power aspirations.<sup>51</sup>

The initial Indian reactions to events in the Tahrir Square were also criticized. The government was accused of dithering in its response, especially where there was overwhelming popular protest and revulsion against Hosni Mubarak and its rule.

As will be discussed below, the official Indian response, though sparing at times, was balanced and nuanced. With minor exceptions, it was cold, calculated, and uncompromising. Foreign Minister S. M. Krishna eloquently summed up India's position: While expressing the country's willingness to be "very positive" to any Arab request for help in ushering in democracy and building institutions to sustain it, he categorically stated, "India does not believe in interfering in the affairs of another country. We will take the cue at an appropriate time depending on how they want India to help. India will be willing to be of some assistance to them. But let the situation arise."<sup>52</sup>

### **Internal politics vs. moral concerns**

The events that have engulfed the Middle East since January 2011 are primarily internal. The interventions, however, were external, and, in some cases, beleaguered regimes suspected external conspiracies. But the roles of external actors were primarily reactive in nature. Outside powers, both regional and extra-regional, exploited the crisis to further their respective national interests, but they could not be accused of causing the problem. At best, they were responsible for flaming the conflict, not for the original fire. The root causes of the Arab Spring were domestic and internal.

However, any counsel, even well-intended, would be construed as interference. India's preferred option has always been to allow different societies to determine their individual destinies. The type of government, choice of leaders, and means of selection are to be left to the citizens of the concerned countries. Hence, Indian leaders and officials have refrained from advocating any particular ideology, system, or individual. Even on South Asian issues, the country's responses have been slow and cautious.<sup>53</sup> India's reactions to developments in its own neighborhood have sometimes followed—not preceded—American responses.

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<http://www.observerindia.com/cms/sites/orfonline/modules/analysis/AnalysisDetail.html?cmaid=21949&mmacmaid=21950> (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>51</sup> For example see, Harsh Pant, "Libya Exposes New Faultlines in Indian Foreign Policy," *ISN Insights*, 21 April 2011, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/ISN-Insights/Detail?lng=en&id=128633&contextid734=128633&contextid735=128595&tabid=128595128633> {accessed 31 January 2012}.

<sup>52</sup> Sandeep Dixit, "India Can Help Build democracy in Arab World," *The Hindu* 27 February 2011 <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article1493338.ece> (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>53</sup> In recent years, however, Bangladesh has been a notable exception. Indian leaders, officials, and intellectuals often display their preference for the Awami League party and its leader and current Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina. Some have openly exhibited their disdain for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its leader Khaleda Zia, even when she was in power.

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Some of this caution has come from experience. In August 1991, for example, within hours of the coup against President Mikhail Gorbachev, Indian leaders, especially Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, welcomed and hailed the “deposition” of the Soviet leader. But the Indian happiness at the demise of the reform-minded *perestroika* leader proved to be premature and short-lived. When Boris Yeltsin led the counter move and restored the *status quo ante*, India faced a diplomatic embarrassment. Having thus experienced the folly of hasty reactions to domestic developments elsewhere, India’s response to rapid changes in the Middle East was not swift and forthcoming. Caution, consensus, and circumspection are the hallmarks of India’s response to domestic developments in other parts of the world; the Middle East could not be an exception.

The way the world views internal developments of countries has undergone a paradigm shift. In the past, the outside world could ignore questionably moral events and issues in favor of vital national interest and security. The Cold War bipolarity enabled many countries, including India, to side with the USSR rather than with the people of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, or Afghanistan. National interest won over moral concerns. The unbridled primacy of national interest, however, is becoming less acceptable and feasible since the end of the Cold War. Issues such as democracy, human rights, empowerment of individuals, rights of women and minorities, and good governance can no longer be buried under the all-encompassing carpet of national interest. Globalization has diffused the coherence of national interests and fractured the monopoly enjoyed by the elite. Competing economic interests within countries are being supplanted by civil society groups. The Arab Spring has been the most visible manifestation of these changing ideas about collective political existence.

The preceding discussion allows us to outline specific Indian responses to the Arab Spring.

### **Welfare and evacuation alarms**

The level of Indian response to events in particular countries depends largely upon the presence of its nationals there. This became apparent in the case of Tunisia, where Indian nationals are either not present or, if present, insignificant in numbers. Hence, the popular upheaval that saw the hasty departure of President Ben-Ali and set off wider uprisings in the region did not evoke any Indian response—until the Arab Spring shifted to the Tahrir Square. However, this logic of response was only partly valid in the case of Syria, where the size of Indian community is very small. India’s membership in the UN Security Council and pressure from Western countries prevented India’s indifference towards the unrest in Syria—despite the small Indian presence there—especially in the UN. Indeed, the first official Indian statement on political protests against President Bashar al-Assad was not made in New Delhi but came during the UNSC deliberations on Syria.

The 2010-2011 *Annual Report* of India’s Ministry of External Affairs, which is otherwise silent on the Arab Spring, does provide an idea of the Indian expatriate population presence in some of these troubled places. According to its estimates, there are 400,000 Indians in Bahrain, 573,000 in

Oman, 500,000 in Qatar, and 1.75 million in Saudi Arabia.<sup>54</sup> Even though there may be discrepancies in these numbers, they indicate the magnitude of the problem potentially confronting India should things go terribly wrong in these countries.

The immediate attention of the Indian government was focused on the safety and welfare of its citizens in the troubled region. The first official Indian reaction to popular protests in Tahrir Square came on January 29, 2011: officials at the embassy in Cairo were reported to be “in touch with the members of Indian community, who are reported to be safe.” The statement put the number of Indians in Egypt at 3,600 including 2,200 residents in Cairo. It also announced the setting up of “a round-the-clock” control room in the Egyptian capital to monitor the situation. Keeping in tune with the prevailing norm, it also advised its citizens “to avoid non-essential travel to Egypt for the present.”<sup>55</sup> Then, journalists and media persons were attacked in Tahrir Square, ostensibly by supporters of the regime. As a result, on February 3, India issued a travel advisory for journalists. As repatriation got underway, India faced severe logistical and operational difficulties. Moreover, not all of its nationals were ready to leave for home. In addition to a travel advisory, the Indian government cautioned its citizens to exercise extra care when venturing out.

Similar concerns for the welfare of its citizens dominated India’s official positions on Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen, all countries with sizeable Indian communities. As the sectarian violence engulfed Bahrain, on February 18 India declared that it was “closely following” the developments and that its embassy was “in touch with the representatives of the Indian community,” putting the number of its citizens at 350,000.<sup>56</sup> Though evacuation was not being considered, India advised its citizens in Bahrain “to keep a low profile, stay indoors and to avoid all non-essential travel within the country.”<sup>57</sup> Repeating this message a few days later, its ambassador in Manama advised “the Indian associations that those family members and others whose presence in Bahrain is not necessary should consider leaving the country, if so inclined.”<sup>58</sup> Despite the violence and political turmoil, India did not issue any advisory against travel to Bahrain.

India’s position regarding Libya was similar to that in Egypt. Assuring the safety and welfare of 18,000 Indians in Libya, on February 20, the Ministry announced the establishment of a control

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<sup>54</sup> *Annual Report 2010-11*, Ministry of External Affairs, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=500417371> (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>55</sup> “Indians are safe in Egypt—Control room at Embassy of India,” Press Releases, MEA website, 29 January 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217119> (accessed 14 August 2011).

<sup>56</sup> “Indians in Bahrain Safe,” Press Briefings, MEA website, 18 February 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530317196> (accessed 14 August 2011).

<sup>57</sup> “Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahamed on safety of Indians in Bahrain,” Speeches/Statements, MEA website, 14 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530117386> (accessed 22 August 2011). This advisory was repeated a few days later (“Ambassador calls on Prime Minister of Bahrain—assured of safety of Indian Nationals,” Press Releases, MEA website, 17 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217429> accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>58</sup> “Ambassador Calls on Prime Minister of Bahrain—assured of safety of Indian Nationals,” Press Releases, MEA website, 17 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217429> (accessed 22 August 2011).

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room and issued an advisory against “non-essential travel to Libya.”<sup>59</sup> On the same day, it issued a similar statement regarding Yemen that put the number of Indians in that country at “around 14,000.”<sup>60</sup> As the public protests spread, on February 21 a “Situation Room” was set up at the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi “to provide necessary facilitation” to Indians living in the Middle Eastern region.<sup>61</sup>

The situation in Yemen proved difficult. Three weeks after its initial statement on March 11, the government urged its citizens “whose presence is not essential, particularly families” to consider leaving the country “by the commercial means available” and to avoid “non-essential travel” until the situation improves.<sup>62</sup> A third round of travel advisories regarding Yemen were issued on May 27<sup>63</sup> and June 5.<sup>64</sup> In view of escalating violence, these advisories called on “all Indian nationals” living in that country to leave. The frequency of these advisories not only highlighted the deteriorating situation in Yemen but also the Indian government’s inability to convince its citizens to leave the troubled area.

Thus, the immediate Indian response to popular protests in other countries had four essential components: concern over the welfare of its citizens; estimates of the number of its nationals in that country; the establishment of a control room in the concerned embassy; and a travel advisory against non-essential travel. With the exception of Yemen, India did not issue any travel advisories for other Gulf countries, including Bahrain, that witnessed periodic clashes.

Furthermore, India resorted to evacuation of its citizens wherever it was necessary and possible. A successful evacuation operation depended upon India reaching a *modus vivendi* with those still in power. This was apparent in the cases of Egypt and Libya, where India had to negotiate with regimes that were despised by a vast majority of their people. The situation severely curtailed India’s ability to be critical of the rulers, because it could not articulate an independent position until after the evacuation of its citizens.

Evacuation mode, however, was applied only in the case of Libya, where the escalation of violence resulted in India opting to bring home its nationals. Between February 26 and March 12, about 16,200 of its citizens were evacuated under Operation Safe Homecoming (a figure that was

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<sup>59</sup> “Indians Safe in Libya—avoid non-essential travel,” Press Releases, MEA website, 20 February 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217201> (accessed 14 August 2011).

<sup>60</sup> “Helpline of Indian Embassy in Yemen and travel advisory,” Press Releases, MEA website, 20 February 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217202> (accessed 14 August 2011).

<sup>61</sup> “Situation Room Established in MEA,” Press Releases, MEA website, 21 February 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217205> (accessed 14 August 2011).

<sup>62</sup> “Indian Nationals, Whose Presence Is Not Essential, Advised To Leave Yemen,” Press Releases, MEA website, 11 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217376> (accessed 14 August 2011).

<sup>63</sup> “Advisory to Indian Nationals in Yemen,” Press Releases, MEA website, 27 May 2011, <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=530217676> (accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>64</sup> “Help lines in MEA and Sana’a on Yemen Situation,” Press Releases, MEA website, 5 June 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217703> (accessed 22 August 2011).

revised to 17,927<sup>65</sup>). The majority of them came from Tripoli and Sabha in Libya, but some were moved out of Egypt and Tunisia, which they had reached over land.<sup>66</sup> In August 2011, the government informed parliament that the remaining Indians in Libya could use the arrangements being made by the International Organization of Migration (IOM) to leave that country, and that “Indian nationals still in Libya have been informed about the initiative.” It also assured that they would be provided assistance “to the extent possible, despite the very difficult ground situation and extremely limited resources with our Mission at Tripoli.”<sup>67</sup> This was an indirect reference to the Indian embassy being manned only by local staff since late February.<sup>68</sup> The government declared that this was a humanitarian operation and that “no payment or charge of any kind is being levied by the government, for the evacuation/assisted departure of any Indian national in Libya.”<sup>69</sup>

The Egyptian case was slightly different. The government was clear that the 670 Indians brought home from Cairo was not an evacuation.<sup>70</sup> On March 3, Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahamed told the *Rajya Sabha* (Upper House of the Indian Parliament),

Upon request of the Indian community in Egypt, three special flights were arranged by Air India, which carried around 670 Indians from Cairo to Mumbai. These three special flights operated by Air India for bringing back Indians desirous of returning to India, were non-scheduled, commercial flights. This was not “evacuation” and Government only facilitated arrangement of special flights of Air India to Cairo. As mentioned by Air India and Ministry of Civil Aviation, the fare charged was only to cover the direct cost of operating the flight on a “no profit” basis.<sup>71</sup>

The insistence that this was not an evacuation was partly aimed at dissuading similar demands from nationals living in other countries, which were also facing popular protests against rulers. The Indian advisory regarding Yemen also urged its citizens to make their own arrangements should they want to leave that country. Its travel advisory issued on March 11 was accompanied

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<sup>65</sup> “Indian Nurses in Libya,” Lok Sabha website, Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, 3 August 2011, <http://164.100.47.132/LssNew/psearch/QResult15.aspx?qref=106413>, (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>66</sup> “Statement by Minister of State for External Affairs Mrs. Preneet Kaur in Rajya Sabha on the Evacuation of Indian Nationals from Libya,” Speeches/Statements, MEA website, 4 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530117338> (accessed 14 August 2011); and “Q.\*297 Security of Indians in Arab countries,” Lok Sabha, Parliament Q&A, MEA website, 16 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=220217420> (accessed 14 August 2011).

<sup>67</sup> “Situation in Libya Should be Normalized Peacefully by its People,” Press Release, MEA website, 23 August 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=100518094> (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>68</sup> “Q.1783 Evacuation of Indians,” Lok Sabha, Parliament Q&A, MEA website, 11 August 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=220218087> (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>69</sup> “No Charges or Payment for Evacuation from Libya,” Press Releases, MEA website, 25 February 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217252> (accessed 14 August 2011).

<sup>70</sup> “Q.342 Political Development in Egypt,” Rajya Sabha, Parliament Q&A, MEA website, 24 February 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=220117256> (accessed 14 August 2011).

<sup>71</sup> “Protection of Indians in Egypt,” Rajya Sabha, Parliament Q&A, MEA website, 3 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=220117326> (accessed 14 August 2011).

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by a plea that Indians “whose presence is not essential, particularly families, may consider leaving the country *by the commercial means available*” [emphasis added].<sup>72</sup> As the violence escalated in late May 2011, India urged all its citizens to leave Yemen but advised them, again, “to exit the country through whatever commercial means available.”<sup>73</sup> This was repeated on June 7<sup>74</sup> and on June 10.<sup>75</sup>

### Evacuation

The question of evacuation is a delicate issue for the Indian government. When it comes to nationals caught in warlike situations, indifference cannot be an option. Quite apart from humanitarian concerns, it is a political imperative for the Indian government to do or to be seen doing something to mitigate the plight of its citizens in war-torn countries.

This was most clearly seen during the Kuwait crisis of 1990-1991. Some of the Indian actions following the Iraqi invasion, occupation, and annexation of Kuwait were hasty and unnecessary. The visit of Foreign Minister (and a future prime minister) I. K. Gujral to Baghdad in August 1990 and his public hugging of President Saddam Hussein proved to be politically costly later on.<sup>76</sup> The immediate closure of the Indian embassy in Kuwait and the moving of its staff to Baghdad generated considerable resentment among the Kuwaitis. It took New Delhi more than a decade of painstaking diplomatic efforts to overcome the negative feelings and restore friendship—which only happened when the Emir Shaikh Sabha al-Ahamd al-Jaber al-Sabah (Foreign Minister during the 1990-1991 crisis) made a state visit to India in June 2006.<sup>77</sup>

However, a large number of Indians were caught in Kuwait following the Iraqi invasion and this created a humanitarian crisis for India. Ensuring their safety and orderly repatriation became its urgent priority. Out of 172,000 Indians stranded in Kuwait, between 50 and 70 percent were from the south Indian state of Kerala. Eleven law makers from that state went on a hunger strike in front of the parliament, protesting the “inaction of the government.” In the words of one academic, the Indian response to the Kuwait crisis “assumed the shape of a domestic rather than a foreign policy issue.”<sup>78</sup> Similar public pressure upon the government can be seen in the July 2004 events that followed the kidnapping of three Indian truck drivers in Iraq. As soon as the event

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<sup>72</sup> “Indian Nationals, Whose Presence is not Essential, Advised to Leave Yemen,” Press Releases, MEA website, 11 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217376> (accessed 14 August 2011).

<sup>73</sup> “Advisory to Indian Nationals in Yemen,” Press Releases, MEA website, 27 May 2011, <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=530217676> (accessed 14 August 2011).

<sup>74</sup> “Indian national advised again to leave Yemen—Indian Embassy in Sana’a to review arrangements after 11 June 2011,” Press Releases, MEA website, 7 June 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217718> (accessed 14 August 2011).

<sup>75</sup> “Travel assistance to Indian nationals needing help in Yemen,” Press Briefings, MEA website, 10 June 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530317733> (accessed 14 August 2011).

<sup>76</sup> It was a costly hug and none of the Gulf countries was prepared to host Gujral when he was India’s Prime Minister from April 1997 to March 1998.

<sup>77</sup> P. R. Kumaraswamy, “Re-energizing the Gulf bilateral,” *Indian Express* 13 June 2006, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/reenergising-the-gulf-bilaterals/6327/0> (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>78</sup> Prakash C Jain, “The Social implications of the Gulf crisis: Refugees, returnees and peripheral changes,” in *The Gulf Crisis*, edited by A.H.H. Abidi and K. R. Singh (New Delhi: Lancer Books, 1991), p. 162.

became a high-profile media soap opera, securing their release became a top foreign policy priority for the government.<sup>79</sup> This resulted in the imposition of a travel ban to Iraq that remained in force until June 2010.<sup>80</sup>

The problem of evacuating nationals from a war zone resurfaced during the Second Lebanon war of 2006. Following the outbreak of hostilities, India issued a travel advisory, which put the number of its citizens in that country at about 12,000.<sup>81</sup> In its assessment, most of them were “unskilled or semi-skilled laborers working in factories, farms and industrial units. Some of them have been in Lebanon for over two decades and they continued to live there even in the time of the earlier crisis in 1980s.” Their evacuation became a serious challenge for the government, as evacuation efforts had to be organized during the lulls in the conflict and coordinated with different parties and groups.

The safety and welfare of its nationals was the prime factor motivating India’s reactions to the Arab Spring. However, when it came to actually moving them out of the troubled countries, the response was uneven; this highlighted some larger but unstated concerns. With the exception of Libya, India was not ready to organize the evacuation of its citizens. The situation of civil war in that country largely influenced the government’s evacuation decision. However, a similar situation in Yemen did not yield similar activism—primarily because Indians living in Yemen were not prepared to leave, despite repeated warnings and India’s offer to provide assistance for travel back home. As late as June, an official statement reported that “the Control Room set up by the Ministry of External Affairs at New Delhi did not receive a single call for information or help.” Hence, it had no option but to “wind down” the arrangement.<sup>82</sup>

This was not the first time the government’s offer of evacuation from a troubled region was declined by a large number of Indian nationals. During the Second Lebanon War only a small portion of Indian citizens accepted its offer for repatriation home. The government had organized their evacuation with great difficulty through its national carrier and naval vessels, bringing 1,496, people including 1,383 Indian nationals, out of Lebanon.<sup>83</sup> However, these numbers represented just over ten percent of the Indian nationals in Lebanon. In May 2011, and following a similar trend, India admitted that despite its evacuation of 17,000 people from Libya, “we still

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<sup>79</sup> A detailed description of this drama can be found in V. Sudarshan, *Anatomy of an Abduction: How the Indian Hostages in Iraq were Freed* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008).

<sup>80</sup> “Ban on Indians Travelling to Iraq Lifted,” *The Times of India*, 9 June 2010, [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-06-09/india/28275516\\_1\\_indian-workers-overseas-indian-affairs-iraq](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-06-09/india/28275516_1_indian-workers-overseas-indian-affairs-iraq) (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>81</sup> “Press briefing by Secretary (East) Rajiv Sikri on Advisory to Indians in Lebanon,” Press Briefings, MEA website, 17 July 2006, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530311552> (accessed 14 August 2011).

<sup>82</sup> “Assistance to Indian nationals in Yemen,” Press Briefings, MEA website, 17 June 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530317753> (accessed 14 August 2011).

<sup>83</sup> “On the evacuation of Indian citizens from Lebanon,” Press Briefings, MEA website, 25 July 2006, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530311579> (accessed 14 August 2011).

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have 2,000 Indians who elected to stay back.”<sup>84</sup> And the story was no different in Yemen, where most nationals chose to ignore the official travel advisory or the offer of assistance for returning home.

The willingness of a large section of Indians to stay back in the region, right in the middle of the conflict, has to be understood within the wider socio-economic context of their emigration. Lebanon is a small country of about four million people with limited resources. The presence of such a large number of Indians in that country and their refusal to return home during the Second Lebanon war strongly suggests that Lebanon is their transit point either for war-torn Iraq or to countries of the European Union. Furthermore, most of them would have paid large sums of money to travel agents and others towards securing their work permits, visa, ticket, etc. If they accepted the official offer, most would have returned home to the poverty, debt, and joblessness that drove them to seek employment elsewhere in the first place.

This other side of the evacuation was even admitted by the government. In March 2011, the *Lok Sabha* was told that at present “there is no rehabilitation scheme in operation in the Government of India for the emigrant Indian workers returning to the country.”<sup>85</sup> If evacuation had become the official response to the Arab Spring, then India would have had a far more serious problem to manage. Its leaders were repeatedly highlighting the presence of millions of its citizens in the Middle East. Was India politically, economically, and logistically ready to organize a mass evacuation of these citizens, particularly from the Persian Gulf region? Such a move not only would have reduced large-scale annual remittances from the region, but would have posed serious social problems in terms of absorbing the returnees. Having urged its citizens to leave Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, India did not make similar demands on its citizens in Bahrain. Indeed, it did not even issue a travel advisory to that country. Moreover, both the Indian government and the legislators have been extremely circumspect with regard to similar popular protests in other countries, especially in the Gulf region.

These cases are relevant for evaluating some of the Indian responses—actions and statements—concerning its nationals caught in the Arab Spring. The popular protests in Tunisia were a low-key affair for India as the Indian community in that country is very small. When President Pratibha Patil spoke of “momentous developments” in the Middle East, she was not referring to Tunisia but to Egypt, with whom India had close ties.<sup>86</sup> Tunisia, however, became pivotal during India’s evacuations from Libya, as some of its nationals crossed over to Tunisia by road. Indeed India had largely abandoned its diplomatic presence in Libya once the evacuation was complete. Give the scale of violence in and around Tripoli, the Indian ambassador in Libya moved to Tunis,

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<sup>84</sup> “Transcript of Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao’s speech at the French Institute of International Relations (IFFI), Paris,” Speeches/Statements, MEA website, 5 May 2011, <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=530117612> (accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>85</sup> “Q\*297 Security of Indians in Arab countries,” Lok Sabha, Parliament Q&A, MEA website, 16 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=220217420> (accessed 14 August 2011).

<sup>86</sup> “Address by the Hon’ble President of India Shrimati Pratibha Devisingh Patil, to Parliament,” President of India website, 21 February 2011, <http://presidentofindia.nic.in/sp210211.html> (accessed 22 August 2011).

which became her temporary residence, until her appointment as Ambassador to Romania in August 2011.<sup>87</sup> In contrast, and despite the civil war, the Indian embassy in Yemen continued to function, with its ambassador's continued residence in Sana'a. This committed act allowed the government to inform the parliament in August that "698 Indian nationals have so far been evacuated from Yemen in view of civil disturbances during last six months."<sup>88</sup>

India responded differently to the situation in Egypt and Libya partly because of the presence of its nationals in these countries. After some initial hesitation, it organized a rescue operation and brought home 3,600 of its nationals from Egypt and 17,927 from Libya. These actions were accompanied by the usual criticisms of inefficiency and cost and the inevitable comparison with China.<sup>89</sup> The interesting point here is not just the safe arrival of the nationals but also how the government chose to depict its response. It deliberately avoided using the term "evacuation" for its operation in Egypt and formally described its operation in Libya as "homecoming."

As mentioned above, if these actions were called "evacuations" then the government would have had to consider conducting similar exercises in other crisis-ridden countries as well. As of July 2011, over 10,000 Indians remained in Yemen, another trouble spot, and a much larger Indian community in Bahrain. If violence were to escalate in Saudi Arabia, India would have to consider the safety and well-being of over 1.75 million of its nationals. This would pose severe logistical, financial, and material challenges. Indeed, the evacuation from war zones, even if accomplished, could only provide a temporary solution, as it does not address, let alone answer, the reasons that led to the migration of such large numbers of semi-skilled and unskilled Indians to the Middle East. As India found out during the Kuwait crisis, the major problem was not evacuation but the "employment and re-employment of these returnees."<sup>90</sup> It has not been easy for the Kuwait returnees to find suitable employment and rebuild their lives. They have had to restart their lives with little official support or even guidance.

Thus, the presence of its nationals in Egypt and Libya compelled India to be cautious and reluctant in criticizing these countries' rulers—despite their widespread and increasing unpopularity. The first indirect Indian urging of President Mubarak to "listen" to the voice of the people came on February 1, 2011,<sup>91</sup> when the airlifting was well on its way and a tentative timeframe for the completion of the operation was in sight. By the time India abstained in UN

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<sup>87</sup> "Ms. Manimekalai Murugesan appointed as the next Ambassador of India to Romania," 5 August 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=100517938> (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>88</sup> "Q.2590 Impact of turmoil in Gulf, New Delhi," Lok Sabha, Parliament Q&A, MEA website, 17 August 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=220218049> (accessed 31 March 2012)

<sup>89</sup> Smita Aggarwal, "Out of Libya: India crawls, the rest are safe at home," *Indian Express*, 2 March 2011, <http://www.indianexpress.com/story-print/756607/> (accessed 15 August 2011). Irritated at this parallel, Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao observed that it was an "unfortunate comparison game with China." (Interview, *The Hindu*, 3 March 2011, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/article1507046.ece>, accessed 15 August 2011).

<sup>90</sup> Prakash C. Jain, "The Social Implications of the Gulf Crisis: Refugees, Returnees and Peripheral Changes," in *The Gulf Crisis*, edited by A.H.H. Abidi and K. R. Singh (New Delhi: Lancer Books, 1991), p. 163.

<sup>91</sup> Jyoti Malhotra, "Finally, India supports Egypt's reform desires," *Business Standards*, 2 February 2011, <http://www.business-standard.com/india/news/finally-india-supports-egypt%5Cs-reform-desires/423784/> (accessed 14 February 2012).

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Security Council Resolution 1973 against Libya<sup>92</sup> on March 17, 2011, the evacuation was almost complete. The evacuation from Libya was also accompanied by the relocation of its ambassador from Tripoli to Tunis. In other words, as long as the safety and welfare of its nationals were at stake, India was extremely reluctant to offer any public or private responses to the Arab Spring.

### **Restraint**

Once the issue of its nationals was taken care of, India began publicly articulating its positions—expressing its views freely, and sometimes more freely than it could afford to. Extra caution and nuance marked the delayed official responses. India did not make its first statement on Egypt until January 30, more than a week after protesters began gathering in Tahrir Square. In this statement, India reiterated its traditionally “close and friendly” relations with Egypt and hoped “for an early and peaceful resolution of the situation without further violence and loss of lives.”<sup>93</sup> Similarly, its first statement on Bahrain issued on February 18 expressed the hope that “calm soon return[ed] and prevail[ed] in Bahrain.”<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, optimism and hope were not forthcoming in its responses to other troubled spots in the Middle East, especially Libya, Yemen, and Syria. The statements by Indian leaders made passing references to Oman and Jordan but without being specific. Indeed, except for the situations in Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and eventually Syria, New Delhi refrained from making any direct official remarks about popular protests in other Arab countries. Moreover, until January 2012 its responses on Syria came within the context of Security Council debates instead of through any direct statement from the government in New Delhi. Periodically, India made passing references to “recent political developments” in “Tunisia, Algeria, Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan and Libya.”<sup>95</sup> It carefully avoided adding Syria into this list.

After the evacuation, the second criteria for India’s responses were the relative popularity of the ruler and the stability of the regime. Wherever the tide was decisively against the ruler, India had no hesitation in embracing, albeit gradually, the popular demand for change. Where the situation was unclear, stalemated, or if the regime showed stronger resilience, India hedged its position. As the tide in Tahrir Square was decisively turning against Mubarak, India became more vocal in adopting a nuanced position in favor of the popular mood. Recognizing the “articulation of the aspirations of the Egyptian people for reform,” it hoped for a peaceful resolution of the problem that would ensure Egypt remain “a strong and stable nation.”<sup>96</sup> At the same time, it took exception to attacks on journalists in Tahrir Square and called on the Egyptian government to

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<sup>92</sup> For the complete text of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 see Official Documents System of the United Nations, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/268/39/PDF/N1126839.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>93</sup> “India concerned at developments in Egypt—Hopes for peaceful resolution,” Press Releases, MEA website 30 January 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530211541> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>94</sup> “Indians in Bahrain safe,” Press Briefings, MEA website, 18 February 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530317196> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>95</sup> “Q.\*33 Political developments in Egypt/Arab countries,” Lok Sabha, Parliament Q&A, MEA website, 23 February 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=220217215> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>96</sup> “India hopes for peaceful resolution of Egypt situation,” Press Releases, MEA website, 1 February 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217128> (accessed 25 January 2012).

“ensure their safety and security.”<sup>97</sup> This was followed by an advisory against the travel of journalists to Egypt.<sup>98</sup> Hence, when Mubarak announced his resignation, India was quick to welcome the move and hoped that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces would “ensure a peaceful transition of power in a time bound manner to establish an open and democratic framework of governance.”<sup>99</sup>

On Libya, however, India was more forthcoming. Since the mid-1980s, India could not pursue closer trade relations with Libya due to US-led sanctions against Qaddafi, and by the time the sanctions were removed, following the resolution of the Lockerbie bombing, India had limited political or economic ties with Tripoli. Hence, it was quick to “deplore the use of force which is totally unacceptable and must be not resorted to.”<sup>100</sup> Interestingly this remark came about when evacuation of its nationals was still under way. But because the condemnation was vague and avoided blaming the regime for the violence, it could be interpreted as more balanced.

There were also concerns that the unrest in Egypt and its possible impact upon the Suez Canal might affect fertilizer production, as Egypt supplies about 900,000 tons of rock phosphate annually to India.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, due to the early departure of its nationals, the “lack of raw materials and . . . fear of labor unrest,” some Indian companies “temporarily” shut down their operations in Egypt. The concerns of the companies “about their security or unreasonable demands from disgruntled local elements” were taken up with the Egyptian authorities.<sup>102</sup>

While these were the general features of the Indian response to the Arab Spring, some particular situations needed special and country-specific responses. In order to address these, we need to ask the following question: How did India respond to popular protests in individual countries, especially those in the Gulf, that had significant Indian expatriate population?

India was largely quiet over Tunisia because it had no serious stakes there. It was equally quiet over Bahrain because its stakes there were higher. The estimated 350,000 to 450,000 Indians in Bahrain make up a significant portion of the total resident population. Interestingly, Bahraini figures report a much lower Indian presence. According to the *Report of the Bahrain Independent*

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<sup>97</sup> ‘EAM S.M. Krishna shocked by attack on journalists in Egypt,’ Speeches/Statements, MEA website, 3 February 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530117140> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>98</sup> “Advisory on travel of journalists to Egypt,” Press Releases, MEA website, 3 February 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217139> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>99</sup> “EAM’s statement on stepping down of President Mubarak,” Press Releases, MEA website, 11 February 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217167> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>100</sup> “India deplores use of force in Libya,” Press Releases, MEA website, 22 February 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217211> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>101</sup> “Impact of agitation in Egypt on fertilizer output,” Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers, 3 March 2011, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=70459> (accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>102</sup> “Indian Companies in Egypt,” unstarred question in Lok Sabha, 14 March 2011, <http://164.100.47.132/questionslist/MyFolder/14032011.pdf,p.800> (accessed 31 March 2012).

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*Commission of Inquiry*, there are only 197,084 Indians in the island kingdom<sup>103</sup>—less than half the number claimed in official Indian estimates. Some media reports suggested that the Indian community was openly siding with the regime and was organizing and participating in pro-Hamad rallies in some parts of the capital.<sup>104</sup> Citing Indian sources, the *Bahrain Independent Commission* stated that “starting March 14, 2011 major civil disorder hit the Kingdom of Bahrain, roads were blocked by rioters and a state of emergency was declared causing many casualties to the Indian community in Bahrain with one Indian killed and a further seven injured.”<sup>105</sup>

For its part, the Indian media was equally restrictive in its coverage of events in the island kingdom. The widespread international reporting of Shia mosques being destroyed by the regime was suppressed in India.<sup>106</sup> Even the Urdu press in India, which largely caters to the Muslim readership, was cautious in commenting on developments in Bahrain.

The concerns for the welfare of India’s substantial population galvanized the Indian government to establish contacts with the Bahraini leadership towards ensuring their safety and well-being. On 17 March, a few hours after the major protests in the Pearl Square in Manama, the Indian ambassador met Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa and secured a pledge that the Bahraini authorities would “do everything in their power to ensure the safety and security of Indians living” there.<sup>107</sup> A few days later, Foreign Minister Khalid bin-Ahmed bin-Mohamed al-Khalifa met leaders of the Indian community and reiterated the government’s commitments. On March 30, the Bahraini Foreign Minister visited India and conveyed his government’s “firm assurance” in this regard. He also “appreciated” the contribution of the Indian community “to the progress and development of Bahrain.”<sup>108</sup>

Both countries wanted to keep things at an even-keel and under control. A panicked reaction would have serious implications for both countries; for India it could mean the urgent organization of a massive evacuation of its expatriate nationals, and for Bahrain it could mean the flight of its largest expatriate population, leading to the flight of capital and the possible downfall not only of its economy but also of the ruling al-Khalifa family. Indeed, the New Delhi visit of the Bahraini Foreign Minister took place a couple of weeks after Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation

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<sup>103</sup> “Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry,” November 2011 (Manama: BICI, 2011), p. 367, <http://files.bici.org.bh/BIClreportEN.pdf> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>104</sup> P.T. Thufail, “Indians in Bahrain fear instability will cost them their jobs,” *Tehelka* (New Delhi) 22 February 2011, [http://www.tehelka.com/story\\_main48.asp?filename=Ws220211BAHRAIN.asp](http://www.tehelka.com/story_main48.asp?filename=Ws220211BAHRAIN.asp)

<sup>105</sup> “Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry,” November 2011, (Manama: BICI, 2011), p. 369n, <http://files.bici.org.bh/BIClreportEN.pdf> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>106</sup> Even the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry admitted that a number of mosques and Shrines were demolished between March 1 and May 11, 2011. “Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry,” November 2011, (Manama: BICI, 2011), p. 319, <http://files.bici.org.bh/BIClreportEN.pdf> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>107</sup> “Ambassador calls on Prime Minister of Bahrain—Assured of safety of Indians nationals,” Press Releases, MEA website, 17 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217429> (accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>108</sup> “Visit of Foreign Minister of Bahrain to India,” Press Releases, MEA website, 30 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217486> (accessed 22 August 2011); see also, “Opening remarks by EAM during visit of Foreign Minister of Bahrain,” Speeches/Statements, MEA website, 30 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530117485> (accessed 22 August 2011).

Council (GCC) troops entered Bahrain to shore up support for the beleaguered ruling al-Khalifa family.

India's responses to violence in Syria were mostly made in its capacity as a non-permanent member of the UNSC. There were two exceptions, however. Addressing the joint session of parliament in February 2011, President Pratibha Patil made a glowing reference to her visit to Syria in November 2010, which "significantly consolidated our relations."<sup>109</sup> The official statement after the visit of Syrian Vice-Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad mentioned that junior Minister Ahamed had expressed India's "concern on the recent escalation of violence. He urged the Government of Syria to exercise restraint, abjure violence and expedite the implementation of political reforms taking into account the aspirations of the people of Syria."<sup>110</sup>

India did not make its first official response to developments in Syria until April 27, and the statement was made not in New Delhi but during the UNSC deliberations in New York. Reiterating the historic importance of Syria, India expressed its feeling that "prolonged instability or unrest in Syria" would have ramifications for the Middle East and beyond. Such an argument in favor of "stability" however was not made with regard to developments in Egypt or Yemen. Expressing its concern over the reports of "deaths of several demonstrators," India took refuge within the "apparent lack of information." In other words, the fact that the Syrian government prevented the international media from operating freely worked in India's favor. Furthermore, India embraced and endorsed the official Syrian line on the unrest, and noted Syrian actions regarding the institution of a commission of inquiry, lifting of emergency, abolition of State Security Courts, transfer of investigative powers, and inclusive process of political dialogue. India expressed the hope that these measures would "initiate the process of meeting the aspirations of all sections of Syrian society."<sup>111</sup>

In the cases of both Syria and Bahrain, India sided with the regimes. With regard to Bahrain, India's position was conveyed through its silence. But India's membership in the UNSC made public pronouncements on Syria inevitable. On April 27, just a month after the unrest began in Syria, the Indian ambassador drew attention to the "reports of armed extremist elements mingling with the demonstrators and using the demonstrations to attack security personnel and damage government property."<sup>112</sup> Deploring "any violence from any quarter," it told the Council that "it is the responsibility of sovereign states to respond to the aspirations of their people through administrative, political, economic and other measures"; it is for the states "to decide on the best course of action to maintain internal law and order and to prevent violence." However, India

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<sup>109</sup> "Address by the Hon'ble President of India, Shrimati Pratibha Devisingh Patil, to parliament," Speeches, President of India website, 21 February 2011, <http://presidentofindia.nic.in/sp210211.html> (accessed 31 January 2012).

<sup>110</sup> "Syrian Vice Foreign Minister Visiting India," Press Releases, MEA website, 1 August 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217893> (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>111</sup> "Statement of the Ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri, Permanent Representative at the UN Security Council open briefing on the situation in Syria," 27 April 2011, <http://www.un.int/india/2011/ind1851.pdf> (accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.,

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balanced this state-centric argument by impressing that the Security Council must “urge all sides to abjure violence in any form and to seek a resolution of grievances through peaceful means.” Making a tacit reference to the Arab League, it stated, “regional and sub-regional organizations have an important role to play in resolving the crisis in the region.”<sup>113</sup>

Following the failure of the Security Council to adopt a resolution on Syria in August, a three-member team comprising India, Brazil, and South Africa (IBSA) visited Damascus “to discuss the current situation in Syria and the way forward.” This visit took place while India was holding the presidency of the Security Council. During the visit, the IBSA delegation met President Assad, Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem, and other senior officials. The delegation reaffirmed its commitment “to the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria” and expressed its “grave concern” at the current situation in the country and “condemned violence from all sides.” Welcoming the “establishment of an independent judicial committee to investigate the violence” the delegation stressed the importance of its “credibility and impartiality.”<sup>114</sup> In August 2011, the delegation abstained from voting in the UN Human Right Council Resolution on Syria because of its belief that “spotlighting and finger-pointing at a country for human right violations was unhelpful.” In its view, engagement and “collaborative and constructive dialogue and partnership is a more pragmatic and productive way forward.”<sup>115</sup>

The April reference to regional and subregional organizations subsequently came back to trouble India when the League referred the matter to the Security Council in January 2012. The failure of the Arab mission resulted in India issuing a belated travel advisory on January 7, 2012, whereby it advised its citizens “to avoid all non-essential” travel to Syria.<sup>116</sup>

A few possible explanations of the Indian response can be attributed to the crisis in Syria. Like many countries, India was aware of the possible ramifications of a potential collapse of the Syrian regime. The determination of countries like China and Russia to stand by the Assad regime and the prolonged reluctance of the West, especially the US, to call for a regime change in Damascus has to be located within the context of Syria’s geo-strategic importance and influence. The fall of Assad would have graver and more far-reaching consequences for the Middle East than Mubarak’s fall. The stability of Lebanon, the Middle East peace process, and relative tranquility along Israel’s northern borders are all intrinsically linked to stability in Syria. Moreover, as was made clear in October 2011, China and Russia were determined to stay with the Assad regime

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<sup>113</sup> Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations, New York, <http://www.un.int/india/2011/ind1851.pdf> (accessed 25 January 2012). This line of argument was reiterated again in October when India voted against the draft UN resolution on Syria. Since it was vetoed by China and Russia, it could not be accepted. “Explanation of Vote delivered by Ambassador Hardeep Puri on draft Resolution on Syria at UNSC on 4 October 2011,” Press Releases, MEA website, <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=530218347> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>114</sup> “IBSA Delegation Visit to Syria,” Press Statement, Embassy of India, Damascus, website, 10 August 2011, <http://www.indianembassyria.com/english/whats-new/327.html> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>115</sup> “India’s Explanation of Vote in the Human Rights Council on the Resolution on Syria,” Speeches/Statements, MEA Website, 23 August 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530118097> (accessed 31 January 2012).

<sup>116</sup> “Travel Advisory on Syria,” Press Releases, MEA website, 7 January 2012, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530218871> (accessed 25 January 2012).

and veto any sanctions against it. Despite the unrest, Assad enjoys considerable domestic support, especially in the urban areas. India would not be able to ignore these objective realities. So long as there was no regional consensus, the opportunity costs of siding with the current regime were less than those of siding with the protesters. However, as Arab pressures on Syria intensified, India abandoned its silence and voted with the Arabs. When the veto by China and Russia prevented the UNSC from adopting a resolution on Syria on February 4, India moved away and began calibrating a pro-reform policy.<sup>117</sup> The decision of the Arab League in January 2012 to refer the matter to the UN could change the tide against the regime, which in turn would influence India's reading and response to the ongoing violence in that country.

### Reaching out

Conscious of the ramifications of change, India was quick to establish contacts with the new leadership in Egypt. Junior Minister E. Ahamed paid a two-day visit in late March and met both government and opposition figures, including El Baradei and Amr Musa as well as the Grand Mufti of Al Azhar mosque, Ahmed Mohammed Ahmed el-Tayeb.<sup>118</sup> During his meetings, he offered the use of electronic voting machines for the scheduled elections in late 2011. This was followed by the visit of Foreign Minister Nabil el-Arabi in May, just weeks before he assumed the office of Secretary-General of the Arab League.<sup>119</sup> During his interaction, Foreign Minister Krishna also conveyed his "appreciation" and thanks to Egypt for "its assistance" in the evacuation of its nationals from Libya.<sup>120</sup>

During the visit of the Libyan Foreign Minister in July, India called for an immediate cessation of hostilities and reiterated its traditional position of the need to "maintain unity and territorial integrity of Libya."<sup>121</sup> The following month, Syrian Vice-Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad made a brief visit to India, during which he met Ahamed. The latter expressed India's "concern" at the escalation of violence. The low-level nature of the visit also indicated India's desire to keep safe distance from an increasingly unpopular regime.<sup>122</sup> Though India has been in contact with Libya's National Transition Council (NTC) for quite some time—especially following the resignation

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<sup>117</sup> P. R. Kumaraswamy, "Silence on Syria is No Option", *IDSA Web Commentary*, 21 February 2012, [http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/SilenceonSyriaIsNoOption\\_PRKumaraswamy\\_210212](http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/SilenceonSyriaIsNoOption_PRKumaraswamy_210212), (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>118</sup> "Minister of State for External Affairs E Ahamed arrives Egypt for a two-day visit," Press Releases, MEA website, 29 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217484> (accessed 22 August 2011); and "Minister of State for External Affairs E Ahamed visits Egypt—Meets PM and other leaders," Press Releases, MEA website, 31 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217492> (accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>119</sup> In the 1980s, al-Arabi served as Egyptian ambassador in New Delhi. "Opening remarks by EAM at the joint press conference following talks with Foreign Minister of Egypt," Speeches/Statements, MEA website, 30 May 2011, <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=530117690> (accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> "Libyan FM visits Delhi to brief about latest developments," Press Releases, MEA website, 22 July 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217863> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>122</sup> "Syrian Vice Foreign Minister visiting India, New Delhi," Press Releases, MEA website, 1 August 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217893> (accessed 25 January 2012).

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from his position of Libyan ambassador in New Delhi, Ali al-Essawi, on February 21<sup>123</sup>—a formal official admission was not forthcoming until very late.<sup>124</sup>

At the same time, India's relations with other equally troubled spots were on the rise. As the region was witnessing some of the most violent tensions in its history, India's defense minister paid an official visit to Saudi Arabia in April 2011 and to Qatar in early May. Similarly, a four-day joint military exercise with the Omani Air force was conducted in October 2011.<sup>125</sup>

Its position at the UNSC with regard to Libya illustrates India's diplomatic maneuvers. On February 26, India voted in favor when the UN Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1970 to recommend Muammar Qaddafi to the ICC for war crimes trials.<sup>126</sup> This happened despite India's refusal to join the ICC and when the evacuation of its nationals was just getting under way.<sup>127</sup> The prevailing consensus in favor of the referral in the African Union and Arab League (of which Libya is a member) swung the Indian decision. At the same time, India could not bring itself to support UNSC Resolution 1973 adopted on March 17.<sup>128</sup> While it continued to deplore the use of force by the Qaddafi regime against its civilian population, India was wary of the potential misuse of a vague UN resolution, fearing would become a *carte blanche* for a full-fledged military campaign, as had happened in the case of Iraq in March 2003. Moreover, in its view, the UNSC did not have the benefit of first-hand information when it deliberated the text of the resolution. India was also aware of the prevailing reluctance among some of the non-Western members of the UNSC, especially China and Russia. Hence, along with Brazil, China, Germany and Russia, it chose to abstain.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> "Libyan envoy to India quits in protest," *The Times of India*, 22 February 2011, [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-02-22/india/28624711\\_1\\_libya-permanent-representative-protest](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-02-22/india/28624711_1_libya-permanent-representative-protest) (accessed 31 March 2012).

<sup>124</sup> For example, see, "Address by the Hon'ble Vice President of India Shri M. Hamid Ansari at the conferment of Honorary Doctorate for International Relations by Mevlana University at Konya, Turkey," Vice President of India website, 12 October 2011, <http://vicepresidentofindia.nic.in/printable.asp?id=349> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>125</sup> "Indo Oman Air Exercise – Eastern Bridge – II Concludes at Jamnagar," Government of India, Ministry of Defence, 21 October 2011, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=76806> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>126</sup> For the full text of UNSC Resolution 1970 see, <http://www.icc-cpi.int/NR/rdonlyres/2B57BBA2-07D9-4C35-B45E-EED275080E87/0/N1124558.pdf> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>127</sup> India justified its stand by arguing that it was not a signatory to the Rome Statute nor a member of the ICC for reasons that were well known. Ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri at the UN Security Council Briefing stated, "In our Explanation of Vote on Resolution 1970 on 26th February, I had noted that of the 192 members of the United Nations, only 114 are members of the ICC. Five of the 15 members of the Council, including three Permanent Members, are not parties to the Rome Statute. But we had voted in favor of Resolution 1970 because several members of the Council, including our colleagues from Africa and the Middle East, believed that referral of the situation in Libya to the ICC would have the effect of immediate cessation of violence and restoration of calm and stability." (Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations, Libya (ICC), New York, 4 May 2011, <http://www.un.int/india/2011/ind1853.pdf>, accessed 25 January 2012.)

<sup>128</sup> For the text of the UNSC Resolution 1973 see, Official Documents System of the United Nations, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/268/39/PDF/N1126839.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>129</sup> "UNSC resolution on Libya—India's explanation of vote," Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations, 17 March 2011, <http://www.un.int/india/2011/ind1838.pdf> (accessed 22 August 2011).

When the US-led NATO offensive against Libya began two days later on March 19, it became easier for India to disassociate itself from the action. Expressing its “regret” over the airstrikes, it reiterated its desire for measures that “should mitigate and not exacerbate an already difficult situation.”<sup>130</sup> At the same time, galvanized by growing international criticism, in May 2011 India supported the move by the UNSC to refer the issue of Libya and its war crimes to the ICC, in tune with its support for UNSC Resolution 1970 adopted in February.<sup>131</sup>

The death of Qaddafi was received with some degree of relief in New Delhi, which expressed the hope that “peace and stability would soon return.” Reiterating that its “relations with the people of Libya are deep and long standing,” India expressed its readiness “to extend all possible assistance to the people of Libya in their political transition and rebuilding of the country.”<sup>132</sup>

The tone was somewhat different in other cases. India carefully avoided referring to small protests in Saudi Arabia or widespread unrest in Bahrain. Even passing references to developments in “Tunisia, Algeria, Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan and Libya”<sup>133</sup> did not include Saudi Arabia. The seriousness of the situation came to the fore when the head of the Saudi National Security Council, Prince Bandar bin-Sultan bin-Abdul Aziz al-Saud, visited India in late March. He briefed the Indian leaders of the “recent developments” in the region and “in particular the efforts being made by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries to bring peace, stability and prosperity for the people of the region.” In his meeting with Prince Bandar, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh “emphasized that differences should be resolved through peaceful dialogue and discussion.” Conscious of the Saudi sensitivities, he also highlighted that “countries should be free to determine their own pathways to national development.”<sup>134</sup> India was more vocal on this line of argument vis-à-vis Syria, when the Indian representative told the UNSC, “It is for states to decide on the best course of action to maintain internal law and order and to prevent violence.”<sup>135</sup>

The importance of the Gulf region has periodically been emphasized by the Indian leaders. In his meeting with Prince Bandar, Prime Minister Singh reiterated that the Middle East and Gulf regions were “of great interest” because of the “presence of almost six million Indians” and the

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<sup>130</sup> “India gravely concerned at violence in Libya, calls for peaceful resolution of differences,” Press Releases, MEA website, 20 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217435> (accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>131</sup> “Statement by Ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri at the UN Security Council briefing on Libya (ICC),” 4 May 2011, <http://www.un.int/india/2011/ind1853.pdf> (accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>132</sup> “India hopes peace will return to Libya soon, reiterates offer of assistance,” Press Briefings, MEA website, 20 October 2011, <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=530318428> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>133</sup> “Q.\*33 Political developments in Egypt/Arab countries,” Lok Sabha, Parliament Q&A, MEA website, February 23, 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=220217215> (accessed 25 January 2012).

<sup>134</sup> “Visit of Secretary-General of the National Security Council of Saudi Arabia,” Press Releases, MEA website, 29 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217476> (accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>135</sup> “Statement of the Ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri, Permanent Representative at the UN Security Council open briefing on the situation in Syria,” 27 April 2011, <http://www.un.int/india/2011/ind1851.pdf> (accessed 22 August 2011).

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region being “a major economic partner and source for energy.”<sup>136</sup> The energy component of India’s interests in the region figured in Prime Minister Singh’s meetings with the Russian and Chinese leaders during the BRIC Summit in Sanya in April 2011.<sup>137</sup> Interestingly, Syria did figure in Foreign Secretary Rao’s discussions with the French officials during her visit to France in May 2011. In July, India also hosted brief visits by Libyan Foreign Minister Abdel Aati al-Obeidi in July, who met junior Minister Ahamed.<sup>138</sup> While India called for an “immediate cessation of all hostilities,” the visit indicated Indian reluctance to follow the example of some Western countries and openly negotiate with the rebels.

## **Conclusion**

High political, economic, and energy stakes conditioned India’s nuanced response to the Arab Spring. Proud of its diversity, India’s foreign policy agenda has never been democracy promotion. This was true both during and after the Cold War. In the same manner, India was prepared to accept the choice of the Arab people to determine their leaders and political system within the norms of their respective societies. The non-democratic neighborhood of South Asia prevented India from entertaining high hopes of a democratic transformation in the Middle East. This traditional position also has a strong economic rationale. The geographically proximate region, especially the Persian Gulf, is vital for India.

Hence, other than evacuation of its nationals, India’s reactions and responses to the Arab Spring have been few and far between. And even those pronouncements have been measured, thereby underscoring Indian reluctance to take any stand. India’s suggestions for President Mubarak “to listen” to the voice of the people did not come until it was clear that he had lost the trust and the confidence of the vast majority of Egyptians. India made no public or even semi-public pronouncements about other beleaguered leaders. Its prolonged silence on Syria primarily reflected its concerns over violence and the ramifications of a sudden collapse of the Assad regime. As a result, for over ten months India sided with the regime and its narratives before joining the Arab League in the UN in criticizing Assad.

A subtle difference can also be seen in India’s position towards popular protests in the Persian Gulf and in other parts of the Middle East. India was extremely cautious about the developments in the Gulf and hoped that the ruling regimes would survive and weather the storm. The presence of about six million Indian expatriate workers in the Gulf countries has been a major consideration. Hence, India was quick to establish political contacts with countries such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and exchanged visitors to manage the crises. The first ever visit of an

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<sup>136</sup> “Visit of Secretary-General of the National Security Council of Saudi Arabia,” Press Releases, MEA website, 29 March 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217476> (accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>137</sup> “Briefing by NSA on Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s meetings with Chinese and Russian Presidents,” Press Briefings, MEA website, 13 April 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530317539> (accessed 22 August 2011).

<sup>138</sup> “Libyan FM visits Delhi to brief about latest development,” Press Releases, MEA website, 22 July 2011, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217863> (accessed 22 August 2011).

Indian Defense Minister to Saudi Arabia, for example, took place in February 2012, amid strong protests in the Shi'a-dominated Eastern region.

In operational terms, the immediate Indian response to the popular protests in each of these countries had two essential components: concern over the welfare of its citizens and evacuation action where needed. The former meant sensitizing the expatriate community in the country and issuing advisories against non-essential travel. With the exception of Yemen, India did not issue travel advisories against other Gulf countries that witnessed periodic clashes, including Bahrain. Evacuation was the specific measure India adopted in Egypt and Libya; while large-scale public protests led to anxiety among Indians in Egypt, the civil war situation in Libya resulted in the evacuation of expatriate laborers. However, India avoided a similar move in Yemen when it recognized that its travel advisories and helpline assistance went unheeded.

Studied silence, then, was the only option available for India. It was not a sign of indifference and apathy towards the popular sentiments. Nor was it an endorsement of the authoritarian nature of most of the regimes. It was a reflection both of its crucial interests in the region and of its preference for stable and internally viable political states in the region. Civil wars of the type evidenced in Iraq and Libya do not serve its interests. At the same time, as highlighted by its vote in the UNSC over Syria, its silence does not continue *ad infinitum*.

Thus, economic interests, more than political calculations, have determined India's post-Cold War Middle East policies—a fact visibly demonstrated following the Arab Spring. Moreover, India's traditional reluctance to make democracy promotion a principal foreign policy objective also played into this relegation of political considerations.

The muted and calibrated Indian reactions to the Arab Spring challenge the hopes for an assertive India in the international scene. India has remained cautious, circumspect, and selective in its reactions, only clarifying its positions after events became clearer in the country concerned. In the cases of Egypt and Libya, for example, India did not side with the protestors until the unpopularity of the rulers became widespread. And its shift with regard to Syria was accompanied by Syria's suspension from the Arab League and its referral to the UN by other Arab countries. When India voted against the resolution on Syria in August 2011, international opinion was still divided: thus, its siding with China and Russia was not unusual. By February 2012, however, the violence had escalated and Syria was facing regional isolation. India then felt it prudent to side with the Arab countries rather than China and Russia, who remained committed to the survival of the Assad regime. Once again, India settled with going by regional consensus rather than taking a leadership position.

At a macro level, India's calculated and interest-driven positions during the Arab Spring are also a sign that its aspirations for great power status will be accompanied by rallying around consensus and accommodation rather than by taking a leadership role. Based on India's response to the Arab Spring, it is reasonably clear that this country's search for great power recognition will be accomplished through measured steps, not aggressive public statements. This is the irony of the "self-appointed front-runner for the UNSC."

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**Table 1: Middle East share in India's total imports**

Year	Total imports	Imports from Middle East	Share
1996-97	39,132.41	6,219.08	15.8924
1997-98	41,484.49	6,529.61	15.7399
1998-99	42,388.71	7,704.32	18.1754
1999-00	49,738.06	9,671.93	19.4457
2000-01	50,536.45	3,061.95	6.0589
2001-02	51,413.28	3,170.19	6.1661
2002-03	61,412.14	3,587.08	5.8410
2003-04	78,149.11	4,926.19	6.3036
2004-05	111,517.43	9,526.50	8.5426
2005-06	149,165.73	10,853.89	7.2764
2006-07	185,735.24	51,126.32	27.5264
2007-08	251,654.01	72,014.59	28.6165
2008-09	303,696.31	90,208.29	29.7035
2009-10	288,372.88	81,400.40	28.2275
2010-11	369,769.13	105,616.45	28.5628

Source: Adapted from Director-General of Foreign Trade, New Delhi, [www.dgft.gov.in](http://www.dgft.gov.in)

**Table 2: Middle East share in India's total exports**

Year	Total exports	Exports to Middle East	Share
1996-97	33,469.95	3,344.96	9.9939
1997-98	34,784.98	3,855.43	11.0836
1998-99	33,218.72	4,214.79	12.6880
1999-00	36,822.49	4,545.70	12.3449
2000-01	44,560.29	5,613.57	12.5977
2001-02	43,826.72	5,777.83	13.1834
2002-03	52,719.43	7,528.76	14.2808
2003-04	63,842.55	10,184.97	15.9533
2004-05	83,535.94	14,232.44	17.0375
2005-06	103,090.53	16,685.20	16.1850
2006-07	126,414.05	23,047.82	18.2320
2007-08	163,132.18	30,371.50	18.6177
2008-09	185,295.36	41,694.27	22.5015
2009-10	178,751.43	39,353.76	22.0159
2010-11	251,135.89	56,757.99	22.6005

Source: Adapted from Director-General of Foreign Trade, New Delhi, [www.dgft.gov.in](http://www.dgft.gov.in)

**Table 3: Top ten trading partners of India, 1996-97 to 2010-11**

Year	Countries
1997-98	UAE 7; Saudi Arabia 9
1998-99	UAE 6; Saudi Arabia 8
1999-00	UAE 5; Saudi Arabia 9
2000-01	UAE 9
2001-02	UAE 7
2002-03	UAE 7
2003-04	UAE 3
2004-05	UAE 4
2005-06	UAE 4
2006-07	UAE 3; Saudi Arabia 4; Iran 9
2007-08	UAE 3; Saudi Arabia 4; Iran 7
2008-09	UAE 1; Saudi Arabia 4; Iran 7;
2009-10	UAE 1; Saudi Arabia 4; Iran 9;
2010-11	UAE 1 Saudi Arabia 4

Source: Adapted from Director-General of Foreign Trade, New Delhi, [www.dgft.gov.in](http://www.dgft.gov.in)

**Table 4: Trade deficit-oil import linkage**

Year	Total imports	Total exports	Trade deficit	Oil import
1996-97	39,132.41	33,469.95	5,662.46	11,464.60
1997-98	41,484.49	34,784.98	6,699.51	10,067.75
1998-99	42,388.71	33,218.72	9,169.99	8,043.19
1999-00	49,738.06	36,822.49	12,915.57	14,350.19
2000-01	50,536.45	44,560.29	5,979.16	17,545.14
2001-02	51,413.28	43,826.72	7,586.56	15,771.75
2002-03	61,412.14	52,719.43	8,692.71	19,680.60
2003-04	78,149.11	63,842.55	14,306.56	22,700.20
2004-05	111,517.43	83,535.94	27,981.49	34,818.66
2005-06	149,165.73	103,090.53	46,075.20	50,310.06
2006-07	185,735.24	126,414.05	59,323.19	61,778.90
2007-08	251,654.01	163,132.18	88,521.83	86,384.07
2008-09	303,696.31	185,295.36	118,397.95	103,933.81
2009-10	288,372.88	178,751.43	109,621.45	96,321.16
2010-11	369,769.12	251,135.88	118,633.24	115,929.02

Source: Adapted from Director-General of Foreign Trade, New Delhi, [www.dgft.gov.in](http://www.dgft.gov.in)

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**Table 5: Energy share in imports from the Middle East**

Year	Total imports	Energy imports	Percentage
1996-97	6,219.08	3,984.28	64.07
1997-98	6,529.61	3,787.44	58.00
1998-99	7,704.32	4,972.77	64.54
1999-00	9,671.93	7,019.29	72.57
2000-01*	3,061.95	688.01	22.47
2001-02*	3,170.19	564.51	17.84
2002-03*	3,587.08	669.80	18.67
2003-04*	4,926.19	511.50	10.38
2004-05*	9,526.50	1,371.61	14.40
2005-06*	10,853.89	1,989.68	18.33
2006-07	51,126.32	41,602.00	81.37
2007-08	72,014.59	58,973.52	81.89
2008-09	90,208.29	66,134.12	73.31
2009-10	81,400.40	59,478.87	73.07
2010-11	105,616.45	71,107.68	67.33

Source: Adapted from Director-General of Foreign Trade, New Delhi, [www.dgft.gov.in](http://www.dgft.gov.in)

Note: During 2000-01 to 2005-06, the DGFT did not publish a country-wide breakdown of petroleum imports; the practice was renewed from 2006-07 onwards.

**Table 6: India's energy imports from the Persian Gulf region**

Country	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Bahrain	278.64	599.46	1,215.37	248.34	219.19
Iran	6,793.82	10,048.97	11,248.63	10,362.04	9,377.88
Iraq	5,511.93	6,834.57	7,660.78	6,981.32	8,954.66
Kuwait	5,753.54	7,289.51	9,193.78	7,909.80	9,729.09
Oman	157.98	688.68	624.70	2,904.41	3,293.14
Qatar	1,666.69	1,897.18	2,890.14	4,101.68	6,060.95
Saudi Arabia	12,264.67	17,755.00	18,386.52	15,390.04	17,932.31
UAE	4,671.75	7,806.25	10,317.90	6,443.36	9,398.23
Yemen	1,993.67	1,445.39	745.07	1,563.15	1,722.95
Total Gulf	39,092.69	54,365.01	62,282.89	55,904.14	66,688.4
Total imports	61,778.87	86,384.04	103,933.77	96,321.12	115,929.02
Percentage	63.2	62.93	59.93	58.04	57.53

Source: Adapted from Director-General of Foreign Trade, New Delhi, [www.dgft.gov.in](http://www.dgft.gov.in)

**Table 7: Top five energy suppliers, 2006-2011**

Year	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth
1996-97	Nigeria*	Saudi Arabia	UAE	Kuwait	Australia*
1997-98	Saudi Arabia	Nigeria*	Australia*	Kuwait	UAE
1998-99	Saudi Arabia	Kuwait	Nigeria*	UAE	Australia
1999-00	Nigeria*	Saudi Arabia	UAE	Kuwait	Iran
2006-07	Saudi Arabia	Nigeria	Iran	Kuwait	Iraq
2007-08	Saudi Arabia	Iran	UAE	Nigeria*	Kuwait
2008-09	Saudi Arabia	Iran	UAE	Kuwait	Nigeria*
2009-10	Saudi Arabia	Iran	Kuwait	Nigeria*	Iraq
2010-11	Saudi Arabia	Nigeria	Kuwait	UAE	Iran

Source: Director-General of Foreign Trade, New Delhi, [www.dgft.gov.in](http://www.dgft.gov.in)

Note: During 2000-01 to 2005-06 the DGFT did not publish a country-wide breakdown of petroleum imports; the practice was renewed from 2006-07 onwards.

\* Non-Gulf suppliers.

**Table 8: Share of oil in India's total exports**

Year	Ranking	Oil exports	Percentage of the total
2010-11	First	42,490.93	16.9195
2009-10	Second	29,036.29	16.24
2008-09	Second	28,437.14	15.35
2007-08	First	29,085.48	17.83
2006-07	First	18,859.48	14.92
2005-06	Second	11,866.60	11.51
2004-05	Second	7,140.39	8.55
2003-04	Second	3,734.32	5.85
2002-03	Third	2,707.24	5.14
2001-02	Third	2,182.94	4.98
2000-01	Fourth	1,930.99	4.33

Source: Adapted from Director-General of Foreign Trade, New Delhi, [www.dgft.gov.in](http://www.dgft.gov.in)

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**Table 9: Share of oil-related exports to Iran**

Year	Oil exports to Iran	Total oil exports	Iran share in oil total exports	Exports to Iran	Percent of oil in exports to Iran
2005-06	374.88	11,866.60	3.16	1,188.35	31.55
2006-07	535.61	18,859.48	2.84	1,446.48	37.03
2007-08	845.12	29,085.48	2.91	1,943.92	43.48
2008-09	1,056.17	28,437.14	3.71	2,534.01	41.68
2009-10	180.80	29,036.29	0.62	1,853.17	9.76
2010-11	31.23	42,490.93	0.07	2,742.26	1.13

Source: Compiled from Director-General of Foreign Trade, Kolkata, <http://www.dgft.gov.in>

**Table 10: Total oil trade**

Year	Oil import	Oil exports	Total oil	Total trade	Percentage of oil trade
1996-97	11,464.60	516.43	11,981.03	72602.35	6.06
1997-98	10,067.75	394.52	10,462.27	76,141.43	13.74
1998-99	8,043.19	141.08	8,184.27	75,448.63	10.85
1999-00	14,350.19	90.87	14,441.06	86,499.29	16.70
2000-01	17,545.14	1,930.99	19,476.13	95,016.43	20.50
2001-02	15,771.75	2,182.94	17,954.69	95,167.08	18.87
2002-03	19,680.60	2,707.24	22,387.84	114,040.40	19.63
2003-04	22,700.20	3,734.32	26,434.52	141,882.53	18.63
2004-05	34,818.66	7,140.39	41,959.05	190,646.40	22.00
2005-06	50,310.06	11,866.60	62,176.66	232,739.35	26.71
2006-07	61,778.90	18,859.48	80,638.38	312,140.55	25.83
2007-08	86,384.07	29,085.48	115,469.55	414,751.34	27.84
2008-09	103,933.81	28,437.14	132,370.95	488,981.25	27.07
2009-10	96,321.16	29,036.29	125,357.45	467,098.71	26.84
2010-11	115,929.02	42,490.93	158,419.95	620,905.02	25.51

Source: Adapted from Director-General of Foreign Trade, New Delhi, [www.dgft.gov.in](http://www.dgft.gov.in)

## ***P. R. Kumaraswamy***

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Among others, he has edited the following volumes: *Caught in Crossfire: Civilians in Conflicts in the Middle East* (Ithaca, 2008); *Israel and the Islamic World* (co-edited, Routledge, 2008); *Revisiting the Yom Kippur War* (Frank Cass, 2000), *The Fateful Triangle: Israel Hashemites and Palestinians* (co-edited, Frank Cass, 2000); and *China and the Middle East* (Sage, 1999). He has published research articles in a number of refereed and non-refereed international journals and regularly contributes to Indian as well as international media outlets. In February 2010 Prof. Kumaraswamy set up the virtual *Middle East Institute, New Delhi* ([www.mei.org.in](http://www.mei.org.in)) and serves as its honorary director.

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**המכון ליחסים בינלאומיים ע"ש לאונרד דיוויס** הוקם באוניברסיטה העברית בשנת 1972.

המכון שם לו למטרה לעודד מחקרים בתחום היחסים הבינלאומיים על כל ענפיו מתוך ראייה בין תחומית רחבה, לפתח שיטות של ייעוץ והערכה היכולות לסייע בקבלת החלטות בתחום המדיני, ולהביא סוגיות מרכזיות בפוליטיקה הבינלאומית ומדיניות החוץ של ישראל אל הציבור הרחב כדי לטפח את השיח בהן.

המכון מעניק מלגות מחקר לתלמידים לתארים מתקדמים ולסגל של האוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים, מנהל פרויקטים מחקריים ומקיים פעילות ציבורית מגוונת הכוללת כינוסים מדעיים, סדנאות וימי עיון בסוגיות מרכזיות העומדות על סדר היום הלאומי.

המכון מפרסם מאמרים וספרים בעברית ובאנגלית ומוציא לאור את כתב העת פוליטיקה.

רשימה מלאה של הפרסומים אפשר לראות באתר או להשיג ישירות מהמכון.

המכון ליחסים בינלאומיים ע"ש לאונרד דיוויס  
האוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים

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