



# POTENTIAL FOR LONG-TERM EUROPEAN-INDIAN COOPERATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Europe and India should exploit the potential for cooperation in the Middle East and utilise the opportunities provided by some Middle East countries.

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### *The Middle East*

At the outset, let me define how the term “Middle East” may be understood.

A narrower definition of "Middle East" includes just Egypt, Syria, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar. A wider definition encompasses Turkey, Iran, Somalia and Djibouti. Given the much-frequented shipping route between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean (in Turkey), the Suez Canal which connects the Mediterranean and the Red Sea (in Egypt), the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait (between Djibouti and Yemen), and the gateway to the Persian Gulf (between Oman and Iran), the whole area assumes great importance for global trade.

Fleets of tankers frequently ply these straits, transporting oil and gas from the Arabian peninsula and Iran to Europe and all of Asia. Commercial ships carry goods between Europe, India, China, Japan, Australia, Indochina, Indonesia and Australia. Port Sultan Qaboos in Muscat and, in particular, the ports of Salala und Duqm on the coast of Oman are designed to become major centres of trade between Europe and Asia.

For hundreds of years, the Ottoman and British empires exerted their influence over the entire area with France as their rival; this was followed for the most part by strong US influence. As long as the East-West-conflict dominated international relations, the Soviet Union served – rather effectively – as a counterweight to US influence. Today, Russia is attempting the same role again.

The traditional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has triggered many a conflict in the neighbouring countries and has to be carefully observed, not least given the destruction being wrought in Iraq and Syria. Today, Saudi Arabia and some of the Arab Emirates bomb Yemen back to the stone age.

### *European engagement in the area*

Europe is primarily interested in establishing and protecting unhindered maritime trade with Asia and East Africa; accordingly, European governments accord prime importance to good relations with both democratic and authoritarian states in the region. Likewise, trouble-free relations with the oil and gas-producing countries of the Middle East are considered to be in the best interest of Europe.

This means

- non-intervention in the intra-societal conflicts of the Arab countries and Iran
- engaging in diplomatic efforts to settle conflicts between Saudi-Arabia and Iran
- supplying weapons to achieve military balance between the two rivals
- supporting the industrial and infrastructural efforts of the various countries in order to improve the standard of living and the capacity to buy more European goods.

Europeans also hope that a higher standard of living in the Arab world and Iran will

- overcome any obstacles posed by Islam

- narrow the dangerous gap between the large mass of the uneducated poor and the extremely small numbers of the educated rich
- curb US tendency to gain economic and political control over countries enfeebled by unresolved social conflicts
- help Europe and Russia to find a common way in their fight against Arab radical Islamic groups.

### *Indian engagement in the Middle East*

As long as there is a sizable increase in India's population, there will be a need for large-scale imports of goods, raw material and energy for India's industry. India's rising export industry also needs new markets. Hence, India has a growing interest in the trouble-free passage of goods through the straits of the Middle East.

Indian immigrants live in nearly in all the Arab countries and Iran. In some of them – for instance Bahrain – Indians even constitute a substantial proportion of the population.

India's need for oil and gas resources calls for close relations with all the Middle East countries, irrespective of whether they are more democratic or authoritarian in their political structure. Presently, nearly two-thirds of India's total oil imports come from the Middle East.

Given India's growing Muslim population, every Indian government is concerned with maintaining good relations with the Islamic countries and their ruling elites. By the end of the present century, India's Muslim population is expected to reach about 20% of the country's total projected population. After Indonesia, this constitutes - equal with Pakistan - the largest number of Muslims in any other single country in the world.

The antagonism shown by India's Hindu radical groups towards Islam resonates negatively with the Middle Eastern countries. That apart, the unresolved conflict over Kashmir serves as an obstacle to India's efforts for good relations with the Arab countries. India has to also reckon with hostile actions on the part of Pakistan to undermine her efforts to strengthen relations with most of the Middle East.

### *European-Indian Potential for Cooperation in the Middle East*

Europe and India should exploit the potential for cooperation in the Middle East and utilise the opportunities provided by some Middle East countries.

#### 1. Capacity for enhanced trade between Europe and India in Oman's ports

As already mentioned, Oman's three great ports are designed to become major trade centres. The port of Khasab in Musandam on the Strait of Hormuz is mainly used by fleets of smaller vessels to transport goods between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Arab Emirates) via Oman.

Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said considers Oman a trading power at the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula. At present, Oman's harbours serve as the most important ports of call in the Indian Ocean,

and for trade between Asia and Europe through the Suez Canal, which was expanded in 2015 for ships with a width of 22 meters and a length of 50 meters. Recently constructed large storehouses provide the infrastructure for transshipment en route to European or Indian destinations, offering intermediate storage facilities for merchandise, oil and gas. It is for this

reason that Sultan Qaboosbin Said Al Said pursues a strictly neutral policy. Indian and European shipping companies have been invited to make more intensive use of available capacities. The Sultan has also invited Indian and European construction companies to improve Oman's infrastructure and develop the country's tourism.

2. Potential for a combined role for India and Europe for resolving the conflict between the Arab countries and Iran.

Unfortunately, India's present government tilts towards the USA, which bombs the ISIS and provides financial support to some of the opposition forces. The US especially backs Saudi Arabia in its efforts to topple the Assad regime.

The European Union is for unconditional war against ISIS but not for unconditional support for segments of the opposition forces fighting the Assad regime, for it has to keep in mind that eliminating the Assad regime once and for all may unleash a bitter conflict among the various opposition groups and prolong the devastation in Syria. Who is the lesser evil: the Assad regime or a victorious opposition group which eventually reveals itself to be just as radical as the IS? Combining forces with Russia would mean backing Assad, keeping US influence at bay and opening up the possibility of Assad being replaced in the long run by another president.

If India joins forces with the European Union to influence the EU's trading partners in the Middle East, their combined pressure on Saudi Arabia and Iran could help put an end to the devastation of Syria and Iraq. Both European and

Indian governments should remember that it was the Bush administration which, together with Tony Blair's Great Britain, mindlessly unleashed turmoil on the Middle East, when their combined army ousted Iraq's dictator, Saddam Hussein. Every US government can live with prolonged turmoil in the Middle East. But the fact that the Middle East is so close to the doors of both Europe and India almost inevitably points to the potential for long-term European-Indian cooperation.