

Developments in West Asia: Their Impact on India

(Speaking Notes)

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Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for asking me to speak to such a distinguished audience of elders and betters at this AK Dave Memorial Seminar on developments in West Asia and North Africa and their impact on India. This is a topical and timely discussion of developments with great potential impact upon India.

I will speak frankly about what is happening in WANA, possible explanations, the prospect, and our responses. I do so confident that what we say here will stay among us in this room.

What is happening?

Since the beginning of this year Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, Iran and Libya have each seen protests of one kind or another. Not since the aftermath of the Suez crisis in 1956, when Arab rulers were shaken by a wave of Arab nationalist and populist movements over eighteen months, have we seen such a wave of turbulence in the region. That wave changed monarchical regimes and political structures across the region.

Today, however, there is no singular Arab movement or “Arab spring” discernible so far in the serial turbulence. In the Gulf and the Levant we see restive majorities, democratic urges, Al Qaeda and radicalism, religious divides and sectarianism. And added to these elements we see old-fashioned power politics which gets more and more extreme as you approach the geopolitical epicentre of regional instability, Israel-Palestine. The patterns and the demographics of the protests vary widely from country to country. Only two revolutions have succeeded so far, in Tunisia and Egypt.

And yet, since the human mind feels uncomfortable with what it cannot explain, and since major powers, states and groups have an interest in making us see events as they wish, we are being told several alternative narratives to explain what is happening in West Asia. None of them is fully convincing or capable of explaining the facts that we know:

- The West has portrayed these upheavals in a liberal manner as democratic movements for political reform, seeking free elections, independent legislatures and constitutional monarchies, a sort of 1848 of the Middle East. We are also told of an international “right to protect”. But this interpretation is itself selectively applied to those whom the West wishes to remove like Gaddafi and not to friends (like the ruler of Bahrain). This naturally arouses memories of an earlier era of colonialism and imperialism that Asia and Africa seemed to have left behind, of the “White Man’s Burden”. We now see the West working with local allies, whether democrats or autocrats of long standing, to gain legitimacy for their purposes and actions.
- Iran tells us that the Muslim world is finally reacting to dictators who are allied to the West and who do the US bidding. This version offers us a binary opposition between a status-quo system led by the USA and an anti-status quo alliance led by Iran.
- Saudi Arabia blames a radical extremist Shia Iran for fomenting trouble in the Gulf. While this may be true to some extent in certain cases today, after trouble has already erupted, it is hardly sufficient explanation when Iran’s friends like Syria also face revolts. Saudi

Arabia herself has strengthened the fundamentals of her policy recently, increasing funding and strengthening *Wahhabia* (and the monopoly on power of the House of Al Saud).

The facts do not entirely fit any one of these explanations, though there are some facts which support each of these narratives.

Why has this sequence of events erupted now? Systemic explanations citing popular dissatisfaction with political and economic stasis or other grievances do not explain the timing. These systemic factors have been in existence for years. Why do we see such widespread upheavals at this moment?

Two geopolitical factors suggest themselves. The two Gulf wars waged by the US destroyed the political balance in West Asia, and a new equilibrium favouring Iran emerged in the Gulf and the Levant. Iraq is the first Arab Shia state since Fatimid Egypt in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The last few years have seen a steady rise in Iranian power and influence, symbolised by her strategic gains in Iraq, Lebanon and Gaza, and Iran's seemingly unstoppable pursuit of the means to make nuclear weapons.

The other causal factor is the economic crisis in the West. It has constrained Western capacity to sustain the present order in the area by inserting her own troops to maintain the precarious balance in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Gulf. At the same time the crisis has aroused Western fears that a long and slow Western recovery will accelerate the relative rise of emerging powers. The economic situation makes it vital for the West to continue its control of the one essential ingredient for continued growth, energy. Some solutions to climate change suggested earlier this decade would have amounted to slow strangulation or a bonsai pattern of growth in emerging economies. The unrest and possible reordering of the Gulf and North Africa now threaten external shocks and much wider fluctuations in energy availability and prices with more drastic repercussions.

One has to turn to such factors to explain the West's reaction to events in Libya. The unilateral decision by the P-3 to support a ragtag bunch of

opponents of the Gaddafi regime of uncertain or dubious ideological provenance with the might of Western air power while targeting Gaddafi personally, without putting in place even the beginnings of a political dialogue or transition arrangements, is unlikely to end well. The last time we saw such a single-minded pursuit of one individual, Aided, under a no-fly-zone, was in Somalia in the nineties. We know how Somalia looks two decades later, and the security problems that it poses the world and Africa.

Of course there is also always the explanation that has unfortunately proved correct so often in the past, namely, the all too human folly of those who think they know what they are doing. But irrationality, while sadly common, is also unpredictable and therefore not much use for our purpose of understanding what is occurring in WANA.

My own feeling is that no mono-causal explanation is sufficient to explain what we see in the region. What we have is a mix of traditional great power rivalry, religious and ethnic differences, popular urges for empowerment, and outside interference in a region rich in oil and geopolitical significance. Each major power is now reacting to expected actions by its rivals. We are therefore in an escalating spiral of actions and reactions with ever greater consequences.

### Linkages and trends

So instead of a single explanation, what we have is a series of events, many of them specific to individual countries. Let us look at some of them.

- Saudi Arabia has sent troops into Bahrain, making an internal political issue into a Shia-Sunni one; it has supplied armoured vehicles and weapons to President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen; it worked actively to mobilise the Arab League against Gaddafi in Libya, seeking regime change there; and, it has mobilised the GCC to work as a guarantor of the status quo in the Gulf.
- Iran has sent at least 1000 IRGC troops to Syria to assist in putting down the uprising in Dara'a; supplied weaponry to Hamas which has

resumed rocket attacks on southern Israel; it has worked to strengthen the Houthi rebels in northern (Shia) Yemen; and it is widely suspected of having engineered the protests in Bahrain, which is 70% Shia, though there is little proof that she did anything but express modest verbal support in the initial stages.

- The West, on the other hand has chosen to use the turmoil to attempt a political reordering, rapidly abandoning old friends like Mubarak in favour of the Egyptian Army. It is now removing those like Gaddafi whom it finds hard to manage, and possibly attempting to create in Eastern Libya an autonomous zone around the oilfields as she has done in the Kurdish areas around Kirkuk in Iraq. In doing so the US has found willing and able collaborators and proxies in the UN and certain Arab countries.
- Interestingly, developments over the last two months have also revealed the limits of Chinese and Russian capability to influence events outside their immediate peripheries.
- [A brief comment on the so-called social media revolution supposedly brought on by Twitter, Facebook and other internet media. There is no doubt that these have been used, possibly by the West, to amplify and ignite mass protests, particularly in Egypt. But there must be some doubt about how spontaneous these manifestations were. Much is made of their role in the demonstrations in Iran after the June 2009 Presidential elections. Secretary Clinton asked Twitter to postpone maintenance to stay open. But at that time there were only about sixty Twitter accounts in Iran and only six of them were active! My point is not that social media are useless. Precisely the opposite is true. But they are an instrument of power, as BBC and Al Jazeera are. They are not an expression of the popular will.]

### The Prospect and our Response

If this analysis is true, it will be years before a stable order emerges in WANA. We are likely to face an extended period of instability in the Muslim

world, the Gulf, Levant and North Africa. It will be extended because the fundamental geopolitical causes of the present unrest are unlikely to change or be changed soon. Some of the consequences would be:

- Energy supplies will get tighter, and almost certainly more expensive. We must ensure that we implement our hedging strategy, maximising our sources of supply, and build long term energy alternatives in nuclear and other renewable energy. Our interest lies in an uninterrupted flow of oil at stable and reasonable prices, and we will work with all those who contribute to this outcome.
- We are stockpiling crude, diversifying and hedging our holdings, and should probably adopt the same strategy of building up strategic reserves for other strategic raw materials as well. Our strategic stockpile of crude oil will reach 95 days requirements in a few months. There would also be a buyer's market in some of our imports for a while, as there seems to be for Uranium post-Fukushima. We need systems which enable us to identify and exploit such opportunities and risks.
- The political prospect is one of increasing polarisation, whether between regional powers like Iran and Saudi Arabia, or between Shia and Sunni, or Israel and her Arab neighbours. So far there has been little sign of the pan-Arab nationalism that characterised earlier eras, but increased foreign interference risks arousing populist and nationalist sentiment again.
- We are likely to find that pursuing our interest in countering terrorism and religious extremism is likely to get more complicated in the near term. There are real risks of counter-revolutions by military conservatives, which would only strengthen the appeal of radical groups that has been diminished by the emergence of real democratic alternatives on the street.
- We also face the prospect of a continuing radicalisation of Islamic politics as the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia for leadership of the Muslim world intensifies. Secular regimes in

the region are falling one by one, like Saddam's Iraq and Gaddafi's Libya, or are under attack as is Baathist Syria today. There will be new fields for Al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood to plough.

- But we must not make the mistake of failing to distinguish between Islamists like the Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood and extreme jihadists like Al Qaeda. In case after case, whether in Gaza, Egypt or Iraq, we have seen that the rivalry between these two is strong and only overcome by an even stronger antipathy to the West and its local clients. Now that democratic space is opening up in these societies, we should see clearly and explore the possibility of working with those Islamist parties and groups who seek to move to the centre and join the political mainstream.
- It would be prudent for us to strengthen our security ties to those with whom we can work in the area and who may share our disquiet at the strengthening of radical and extreme elements. This would require more than traditional counter-terrorism cooperation and intelligence liaison as it has been practiced so far.
- Our stakes in the region are at increased risk. These stakes include 6 million Indians, 63% of our crude oil imports, over \$ 35 billion in annual remittances, and 93 billion worth of trade with the Gulf last year. We are putting in place a set of contingency plans, creating capabilities and seeking partners to secure and protect our stakes in the region, namely, our citizens, investments, supplies and trade.
- With instability in the Gulf, opportunities will open up for Pakistan to resume her role of the seventies as gendarmerie to Gulf monarchs, if she can convince Saudi Arabia of her reliability and utility. Already the UAE Army contains a large number of Pakistani troops and security functions in Bahrain, (including guarding our Ambassador), are performed by Pakistanis. For Pakistanis to act as bodyguards is less of an issue than the very real prospect that we face a prolonged and major foreign military

presence in our extended neighbourhood. This could take the direct form of foreign armies and navies, or be outsourced to Blackwater-type mercenary extensions of the great powers.

- It is my feeling that the geopolitical key to WANA's political future is success or failure in integrating Iran into the new structures in the region. Iran has interests in being a factor of stability in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and the Gulf, but it remains to be seen whether there is enough wisdom in the region and the world to achieve this outcome.
- Interestingly, by bombing Libya the West have probably made it inevitable that Iran will build a nuclear weapon when she can. We are already living in the most heavily nuclearised neighbourhood in the world. We must now prepare mentally and in other ways for the region to our west being even more so, with several consequences for our security.
- In this situation of turmoil it is even more important that we concentrate on building our own capabilities in the maritime domain. The importance of maritime security will increase considerably. I personally believe there is room for an international initiative to deal with piracy from Somalia, where we have a real interest, when 11% of the world's merchant seamen are Indian by one count. The only place that piracy will be solved is on land, in its havens in Somalia. Now that so many of us have our navies in the area, and are unlikely to leave given the high geopolitical stakes, it should be our attempt to strengthen the AU force, AMISOM, which is in Somalia, enabling them to act on land while we do so in concert on the sea to eliminate the menace of piracy from Somalia.

In terms of declaratory policy on the turmoil in WANA India continues to declare support for the territorial integrity and unity of the countries concerned, to say that it is for their people to make decisions about their own futures, and to stress the need for multilateral, peaceful and non-military solutions to be found through dialogue, negotiation and the UN.



Realistically speaking, however, it is unlikely that the great powers will allow the people of these countries to make their own choices without outside interference. Our attempt must be to support the processes of democracy when asked, refraining from democracy promotion as practiced by the West as an instrument of state policy. Our distinction must lie in our willingness to work with lawfully constituted authorities while accepting all groups which play by democratic rules. We would also respond positively to requests for technical assistance in institution building. Only if stable political institutions and arrangements result will the region enjoy the development that is the only real shield against radicalisation, extremism and polarisation.

We have entered a period of great uncertainty which will test our skill to the utmost. Realistically speaking we cannot predict how this new struggle and reordering will turn out. We will have to walk a fine line between various sides in this evolving situation. For instance, both Iran and Saudi Arabia are important to our energy security and to our broader interests, and we must therefore avoid being forced to choose between them. We could attempt to work in coalitions of the like-minded wherever possible, such as the BRICS or the AU.

What this means in practice is evident in our choices on Libya. We abstained on UNSC resolution 1973, the resolution that is now being used to justify the bombing of Libya. We have also worked with IBSA, and BRIC, supporting the AU's efforts for a cease-fire, international monitoring of an arms embargo and cessation of hostilities, AU mediation between the parties, and dialogue to construct a political solution including a transition that maintains Libya's unity and territorial integrity and permits the Libyan people to freely and democratically choose their future leaders and political order. Do we expect this result to be achieved soon? No, but the effort must be made, if the world is to avoid a return to the outright law of the jungle, to the anarchy and power insecurities of a Hobbesian international system, (or the lack of one).

In this complicated situation, no matter how strong our sympathies and feelings, more often than not the less said the better. So I shall stop here, having probably said too much already.