
India

Mrs. Gandhi opens new ties with Saudis

by Ramtanu Maitra

Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's four-day trip to Saudi Arabia in late April, the first visit ever by an Indian leader to that Arab state, was watched with a great deal of interest throughout the region. Until recently, Saudi Arabia's traditional ties to the South Asian subcontinent have been to the Muslim states of Pakistan and Bangladesh, and include Saudi funding for the large-scale arms purchases by Pakistan from the United States, an arms deal which has created heightened tension between India and Pakistan.

Mrs. Gandhi's visit was generally seen as a successful effort to establish new bridges between this leader of the Arab world and Hindu India, a nation which has the third largest (numbering some 80 million) Muslim population in the world. Mrs. Gandhi clearly conveyed Indian concerns over the U.S.-Pakistan arms deals, and the bases for deployment of the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force which are rumored to be established in Pakistan. While Saudi leaders avoided any criticism of Pakistan, the final communiqué contained an expression of agreement that the security of the Indian subcontinent and the Gulf region are "closely interlinked," a formulation interpreted by many observers as evidence of a shift in Saudi views resulting from Mrs. Gandhi's visit.

Mrs. Gandhi's government has made concerted efforts to develop closer ties to the Arab world, including visits last year to various other Gulf states. While this is partly motivated by a desire to outflank Arab support for the Pakistani military junta, it is also a reflection of the extensive economic and cultural ties that have developed between India and the Gulf region. More than a quarter million Indian workers are employed in the Gulf—100,000 in Saudi Arabia alone—and Indian companies are major contractors and traders in that area. Indian petroleum supplies come mainly from that region, and India has been encouraging, with some results, greater Arab investment and flow of funds into Indian economic development.

Exchange of strategic views

The Indian view conveyed by Mrs. Gandhi is that the entire region from the Gulf to the Indian Ocean must be neutralized as an arena for superpower conflicts. It is this view which underlies Indian concerns

about Pakistan, which is edging into a full-scale military axis with the United States and with Khomeini's Iran. This has also motivated the Indian position that the Afghanistan issue has been exploited on all sides and must be defused through political negotiations.

There is evidence that the Indian views were understood by the Saudis, who share concerns about instability in the region, particularly from Iran, and agree that the superpowers should be kept out of conflicts. Mrs. Gandhi urged the revival of the eight-point Saudi peace plan, the so-called Fahd Plan for the Middle East, which acknowledges for the first time the right of all nations in the area, including Israel, to live in peace.

The joint communiqué, which followed meetings by Mrs. Gandhi with all the Saudi leaders including King Khalid, contained in turn a Saudi acknowledgement for the first time of India's role in the region as a factor for peace. In effect, the Saudis have disassociated themselves from possible Pakistani military aggression against India.

A more obscure but not insignificant factor in these Saudi openings to India is the large Muslim population inside India. Certain Saudi elements have been proved to be involved in funding extreme Islamic fundamentalist groups within India, groups which have pushed communal tensions and riots against Hindus. The pictures of Mrs. Gandhi being greeted by the Saudi leadership printed in Indian papers are a valuable counterweight against such destabilization operations.

The economic agreement

The last, and not least, importance of the visit is in the area of economic cooperation between the two countries. A joint economic commission was formed. The commission will hold its initial meeting in October, and the Indians have already set up a task force of top government officials from the Finance, Commerce, and External Affairs ministries.

According to reports from Indian government officials, India will among other things help Saudi agronomists. The Saudis are especially interested in collaborating with the Indian Arid Zone Research Institute to develop dry agricultural methods suitable for the Saudi Arabian climate. India, according to official sources, will set up a modern fertilizer complex in Saudi Arabia and then buy back substantial quantities of fertilizer from the proposed complex.

The Indians will also build a large cement plant, financed by Saudi Arabia, whose output will help overcome Saudi Arabia's scarcity of cement.

The joint communiqué calls for Indian firms to provide consultation on various technical services, mining and manufacturing, utilities, and construction. Prospects also exist for cooperation in the fields of trade, transport, finance, and other services.