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Foreign Pulse: The importance of being Iran

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📷 Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi (Photo: AP)

On December 6, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared “complete victory” over the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and hailed the “total rout of the terrorists”. Parallely, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced on December 9 that “we have won with our unity and determination” and that IS had been decimated in his country. But even more consequential than these two figures was the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who proudly proclaimed on November 21 that IS had been vanquished in both Syria and Iraq. Terming IS an “evil”, which had been “lifted from the head of the people”, he thanked “thousands of martyrs” mobilised by Iran to fight in Syria and Iraq to “destroy the foundation and roots” of the terrorist movement. The congratulation and self-vindication in Iran at the fall of IS’ Caliphate were second to none and deservedly so. No other external power sacrificed so much blood and treasure as Iran to ensure that IS bit the dust in its bastions. The Western military coalition led by the United States attempted to downgrade, render invisible or hinder Iran’s contributions in the anti-IS war effort. Russia did work in tandem with Iran but sought to steal Tehran’s thunder and project itself as the main saviour from the IS demon.

However, no neutral historical account of how Syria and Iraq were liberated from the IS scourge can ignore Iran's centrality. Iran was the reason why these wars were fought and also the main organised force of resistance to the IS' savagery. Let us rewind to 2011, just before IS had emerged as a diabolical threat in West Asia. It was Iran, which pushed its friendly Shia-dominated government in Iraq of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to reject any lingering presence of the US military on Iraqi soil. The full withdrawal of American troops from Iraq was Tehran's goal as a necessary precondition for Iranian influence to be consolidated in Shia-majority Iraq. In hindsight, this was a mistake because the security vacuum created by the departing Americans could not be filled by the fledgling Iraqi military. IS suddenly shot to prominence courtesy generous funding and logistical support of Iran's regional rivals like the Gulf monarchies and Turkey. The notorious black banner of the hardline jihadists was spectacularly unfurled in Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, in 2014. From there, IS embarked on a devilish mission of extermination and conquest across both sides of the Euphrates river which straddles Iraq and Syria.

The moment IS began grabbing control of vast stretches of land, Iran realised that it had to intervene rapidly or risk facing a Sunni jihadist monster state right on its western border. The "Popular Mobilisation Forces" comprising 120,000 Shia militia fighters that Iran cobbled together to counter IS were pivotal in battlefields across Iraq. Iran's legendary military commander, Gen. Qasem Soleimani, spearheaded the anti-IS ground operation and so did several Iran-allied Lebanese Hezbollah leaders. It is true that many Kurds and Sunni Arabs also gave their lives in order to evict IS from their lands. But had there been no decisive Iranian hand in the campaigns, we would not be marking the absolute end of the IS Caliphate today. Strategically, the combined Syria-Iraq war to uproot IS in the last three years can be understood as Iran's great triumph against its bitter foes Saudi Arabia and Israel — both of which wished the wars had gone on indefinitely and sapped Iran.

Now that Iran has “won” over IS, it stands as the tallest power centre in West Asia. Western and Israeli intelligence agencies are agog with fears that Iran will cash in its victory by concretising a “land corridor” stretching from Tehran all the way up to Beirut, passing via the IS-disinfected Iraqi and Syrian deserts and linking up to the Mediterranean Sea. If Iran is able to dispatch its Revolutionary Guard units without hindrance as far as Lebanon, then it would become an even more existential threat for Israeli national security. Saudi Arabia’s recent bizarre attempt to take the Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri hostage and demand that future Lebanese governments heed more to Riyadh than to the Iranian-backed Hezbollah was a clear signal that phobia of Iran and its so-called “Shia Crescent” is now at its peak among Iran’s enemies. Incidents such as Iran-associated Houthi rebels in Yemen firing missiles that reached as far as Riyadh airport reconfirm to the anti-Iran brigade that apocalypse is nearing.

Alarm over Iran’s growing stature explains the brash Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s denunciation of Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as “the new Hitler of West Asia” who must never be appeased but aggressively countered. Even the controversy around US President Donald Trump recognising Jerusalem as Israel’s capital has an unspoken Iran angle. By aiming to diplomatically and militarily strengthen Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinians, the Trump administration believes it can halt Iran’s winning streak. After all, it is not Saudi Arabia which has the military wherewithal to check Iran. Only Israel has the strategic capabilities to push back the Iranian juggernaut. Mr Trump’s extreme pro-Israel bias against the Palestinians seeks to consolidate the informal but effective Israel-Saudi nexus to wrestle Iran down. Recent leaks showing how Crown Prince Salman tried to browbeat the weakened Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas into accepting a peace deal, which would leave Jerusalem in Israeli hands, reveal that Israel and Saudi Arabia are coordinating closely to roll back Iran.

Israel’s insistence that it would not negotiate with any Palestinian government unless the Hamas faction severs its ties with Iran proves that the entire Israel-Palestine dispute is now predicated on the Iran threat perception. Sections within

the US Congress who seek re-imposition of sanctions on Iran to bury the 2015 nuclear deal are also driven by the same motive of stopping Iran in its tracks. By dint of its anti-Western nationalism and fierce promotion of Shia causes, Iran evokes intense emotions in West Asia. You either love it to bits or hate its guts. The road to troubles and to solutions lies through this pivotal state. Ideally, it should be included rather than excluded from processes of peace, reconstruction and stability in the region. But the reverse is happening and it would be no surprise if successors to IS arise soon to once again reprise the game of containing Iran.

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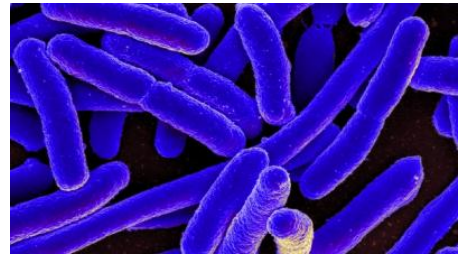
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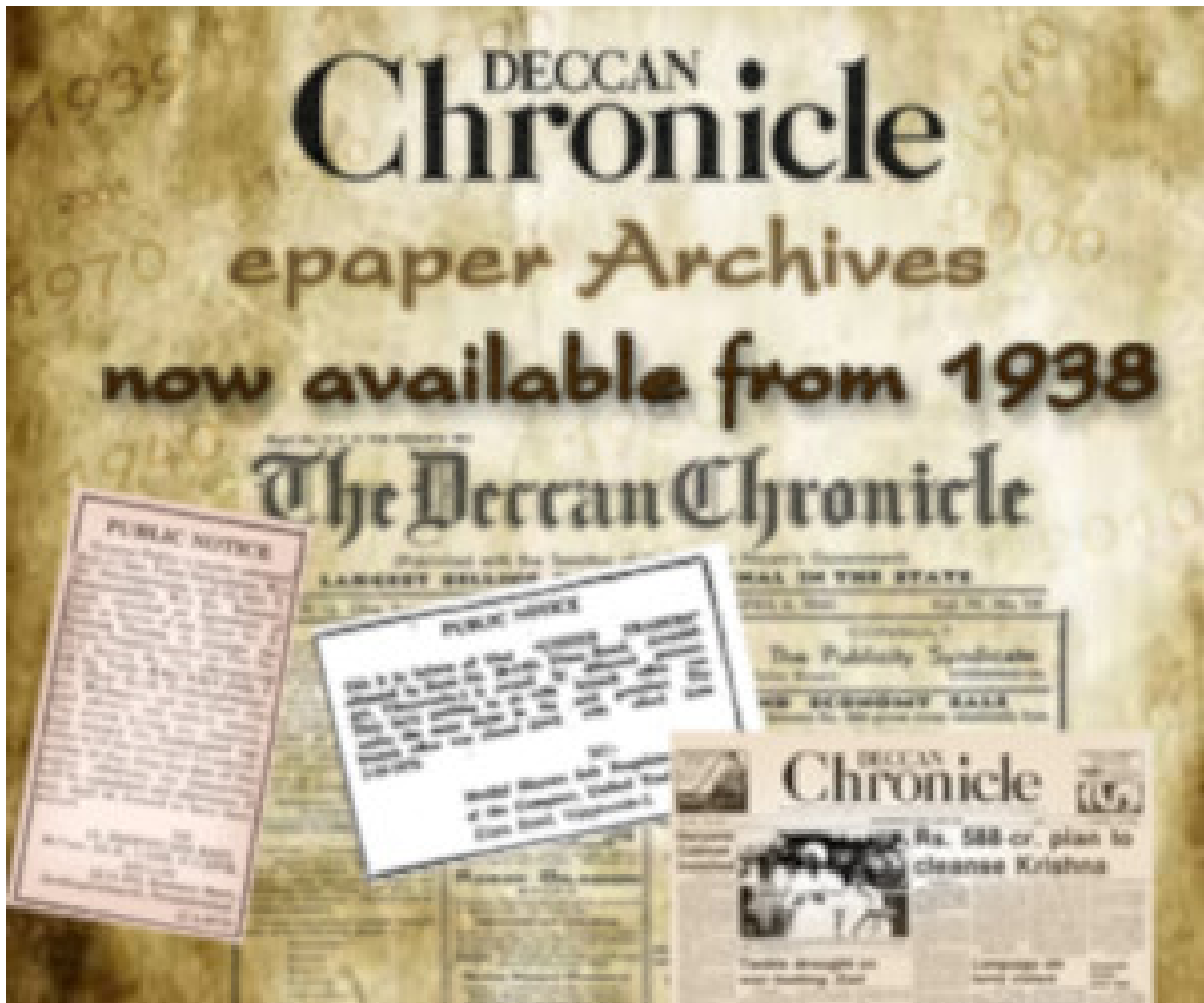
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