



Bahraini Abdulnabi Alsho'ala, the Chairman and founder of the Bahrain India Society is known for his energetic efforts to promote Indo-Bahraini dialogue and trade ties. The former minister of labour and prominent businessman was recently invited by the Indian Council of World Affairs in collaboration with the Association of Asia Scholars to speak at a key conference in New Delhi on India's relations with the Gulf countries (Security Perspectives). True to form, Alsho'ala delivered a meaningful speech that pointed out why Indo-GCC relations should move beyond "the prism of labour, energy and trade relations alone" and tackle meaningful political and defense issues.

Here are excerpts from this milestone speech:

“The fact is..political relations have not kept pace with the development of ties in other areas. There is a definite need for increased political discussions at all levels - from high-profile regular meetings to track-two dialogue - in order to better understand the nuances that define the bi-lateral relationship. Ties between modern India and Bahrain go back generations, with many of Bahrain's most prominent figures having close connections: to point out only one of them; poet and constitutionalist Ebrahim Al-Arrayedh, who grew in Mumbai,

“Time to change GCC-India political perspective”

Abdulnabi Alsho'ala

spoke Hindi fluently and wrote poetry in both Arabic and Urdu. My generation began its tryst with India in the 'sixties when we came here as students seeking higher education. We absorbed the culture and social values that fed the sprawling mosaic of Indian experience and were enriched by them. These lessons stood us in good stead when the GCC started attracting more Indian workers and professionals from the 'seventies onwards and we worked alongside our Indian brothers and sisters to build the modern infrastructure of the post-oil GCC world. I'm not talking here of just being able to understand the odd Hindi phrase or knowing the difference between Diwali and Onam. I think those of us who understood Indian values were able to appreciate the capacity of this great country to nurture world peace and cultural harmony, to contribute to the intellectual wealth of the world and ensure the diversity of humankind."

### Economic perspective

**T**"Today, the GCC Countries as a block is the largest trading partner of India. Annual bilateral trade between the two regions is expected to reach US\$ 120 billion by the end of this year. The GCC as a block is India's single largest origin of imports and second largest destination of export. India with a population in excess of 1.2 billion is a massive market with a huge consumer base within easy reach for the GCC Countries. Today the massive labour and

skills reservoir of India provides the entire GCC Countries with around 5 million people engaged on a daily basis in turning forward the wheels of their economies. India depends heavily on the GCC Countries for its energy supplies. 70 per cent of India's requirement of oil is imported from the Gulf."

### Security prerogative

Alsho'ala put forward a well-researched and thought out plan of action which was developed over 16 points ranging from economic co-operation to developing a joint plan of action to implement the United Nations Global Counter - Terrorism Strategy - this, he says would include bringing to justice persons and entities within Indian and GCC territory that knowingly and willfully provide or collect funds for the benefit of terrorists. He also recommended the Formation of a permanent dedicated joint committee of experts, similar to the India - US Joint Working Group On Counter-Terrorism formed in 2000. The scope of anti-terrorism activities should include continuous review of anti-terrorism systems between India and GCC, the immediate condemning of all terrorist activities and training programmes and joint exercises to enhance the capabilities to counter terrorism and upgrade the skills of the special forces.

Alsho'ala also sought to stress the need for developing a shared vision to new technologies through the preparation of researches, publications and studies on the subject and scholarships to develop this thinking.

"The time has come for India to be actively engaged with the security issues of the Gulf region. India should realize that it carries a responsibility towards its extended neighborhood - the countries on its western flank - the GCC Countries."

### Ramping up economic co-operation

But his most forceful argument was

**"Confidence-building through co-operation in the area of countering organized crime and counter-terrorism have received particular attention in the sphere of Indo-Bahraini ties and in 2004, during the visit of our Prime Minister HRH Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa to India, Bahrain and India initialed an extradition treaty as a joint initiative to fight terrorism and strengthen bilateral cooperation against crime."**

reserved for the ramping up of economic security between India and the GCC as a step towards security.

**W**e all know that terrorists are, sometimes, victims of exploitation and misguidance or are the product of frustration and despair which in turn are results of economic disparity or political repression or sometimes even social and cultural issues. Terrorist groups harness popular grievances to their use. Economic exploitation, social injustice and political repression are being used as excuses to justify terrorism. By making economic stability and progress a key factor in the security mix, we make action against terrorism accessible to every single person, man and woman, adult or child. The GCC is full of inspiring stories of Indians who came to the region with just their meagre life savings and parlayed this into stunning business empires and vast fortunes, generating economic success and



employment for GCC nationals and Indians alike. Indian professionals run our hospitals and schools; entrepreneurs have built factories and your engineers have built our roads and bridges.

"Indians in the Gulf create a vital economic, cultural and human links between the people of the two regions. They ensure close cultural interaction and bonds between the two nations, they also build bridges of understanding which create goodwill and appreciation on a daily basis."

#### GCC-India FTA overdue

**I**ndia and the GCC should finalize the signing of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between them in order to accelerate the process of their economic integration and be in line with the current global environment. The FTA is expected to remove restrictive duties, push down tariffs on goods and pave the way for more intensive economic engagement between the two blocs which will result in boosting the bilateral trade by at least 30 per cent.

The governments of both the GCC and India have already demonstrated clear commitment towards this objective through the signing of the Framework Agreement of Economic Cooperation in New Delhi back in 25 August 2004. This was then, and is still, considered another significant milestone in the Indo-GCC scenario."

#### Kashmir resolution

In his concluding remarks, Alsho'ala touched upon India's consistent support of the Palestinian cause and India's supportive stance in the past during the Suez Canal and the Algerian independence movement crises and said India should use the GCC's Islamic closeness with Pakistan to bring about a resolution to the Kashmir question.

"The Final Report of the third session of the GCC-India Joint Study Group held recently in Riyadh stated that "On the economic front, one conclusion was that while trade volumes had increased, trade complementarity between India and the GCC had not been optimized. A more thorough and integrated business approach was needed that could work out a master plan for well-connected joint ventures. There is further a need for dedicated joint investment funds that can provide the overall context to expanded economic ties. For

the moment, one or several large joint projects covered by such a fund do not exist".

The Report further recommended that "A task force should be set up to identify sector specific business opportunities and prepare a blueprint for interlinked investment in both the GCC and India. There is also a greater need for the involvement of the private sector as the last meeting of the industrial businessmen took place in 2007. Such avenues of contact need to be brought to life."

**I**The dispute over Kashmir between India and Pakistan is being used as a tool for instigating and fueling terrorism in the Indian subcontinent," he said, "(Reconciliation) can be achieved best through direct negotiations between the two countries. The derailed dialogue between India and Pakistan should be revived. (In this context) GCC countries may have a role to play.. Sometimes nations feel sensitive towards involving third party or other countries in resolving border or bilateral disputes for fear of internationalizing such issues, the Kashmir issue between India and Pakistan is suffering from such sensitivity.

India, however, should take advantages and use the good offices of the GCC Countries with Pakistan. The GCC Countries enjoy

good relations with Pakistan also. The Islamic bonds between the GCC Countries and Pakistan could be a comfort factor and could generate that very much needed element of trust for a direct negotiation between the two countries. Once the Kashmir dispute is resolved, perpetrators and instigators of terrorism in the Indian subcontinent will lose a very effective tool."

In an effort to draw GCC-India ties within the 21st century context, Alsho'ala said, "The time has come and the current global challenges require the two regions to strengthen their centuries-old relationship by entering into security arrangements ...India should be actively engaged with the security issues of the Gulf region. It carries a responsibility towards its extended neighborhood; the countries on its western flank. It needs to take more pro-active stand in this regard which should reflect its new role, new strength and power and employ them as instruments of good will and peace."