

India's Balancing Act: Navigating Relations with Israel and Arab States Amidst Regional Tensions

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Abstract

India's foreign policy in the Middle East represents a careful balancing act, showcasing its ability to manage long-standing relations with the Arab world alongside a growing partnership with Israel. India's ties with Arab nations are grounded in shared historical, cultural, and anti-colonial links, especially in areas like trade and energy. Following independence, oil trade with the Gulf became vital for India's energy needs, with strategic projects like the India-Middle East- Europe Economic Corridor further strengthening Indo-Arab cooperation. At the same time, since formally recognizing Israel in 1992, India has developed robust defence and technological exchanges with Israel, achieving key gains in agriculture and innovation. India's diplomatic difficulty in preserving neutrality while protecting its interests on both sides has been highlighted by navigating regional disputes like the Israel-Palestine and Israel-Iran confrontations. In order to foster communication and create bridges between opposing groups, India has also worked with international organizations like the Abraham Accords and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). This study examines India's practical strategy for strengthening its position as a regional stabilizer by utilizing Israel's technological and defense breakthroughs while coordinating with Arab nations for economic and energy growth. The report examines how India's well-balanced diplomacy advances its strategic objectives and maintains its sway in a changing geopolitical environment, supporting its larger ambitions to become a major world power.

Keywords: India's foreign policy, diplomatic neutrality, geopolitical strategy, energy trade, middle east

INTRODUCTION

India's relationships with the Arab world and Israel reflect its ability to balance historical ties, economic interests, and strategic partnerships amidst a complex regional landscape. India and the Arab states have shared long-standing connections in trade, culture, and diplomacy, strengthened by their common opposition to colonial rule and mutual support on issues like Palestine. Following independence, oil trade with the Gulf became central to India's economic stability, while new collaborative projects, like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, aim to further enhance Indo-Arab cooperation. Meanwhile, India's relationship with Israel, which began cautiously, has grown

since formal recognition in 1992. With Israel, India has established deep ties in defence, agriculture, and technology, even as it carefully maintains its alliances with Arab nations.

India's foreign policy thus shows a delicate balancing act between securing energy needs from Arab partners and benefiting from Israel's technological support [1]. However, rising regional tensions—such as the Israel-Palestine and Israel-Iran conflicts—add pressure on India's diplomacy as it seeks to protect its interests on both sides. This paper examines how India navigates its

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relationships with Israel and the Arab world, reflecting a pragmatic approach to national security and regional influence.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

India-Arab Relations

India and the Arab world share long and ancient ties in almost every field including culture, trade, and diplomacy. Trade occurs maximally in textiles, spices, and precious stones. In addition, the advent of Islam in the Indian Peninsula deepened these ties during the 712A. The city of Mansoura in Sindh became the center of Islamic learning, and because of this, many Islamic merchants and scholars started visiting India.

These ancient links and ties also continued during the colonial period; India and the Arab world both fought against colonial rule and the Western colonial powers, especially Portuguese, because these Western powers had disrupted the old link trade between these parts of the world. In addition, they both shared the same anti-colonial sentiment, which led to a non-aligned movement in the future.

After India's independence, economic factors, mostly in the oil sector, became the key area of Indo-Arab relations. Today, approximately 60% of India's oil comes from Arab nations. Members of the Gulf Cooperation Council such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE have become key energy partners in India [2]. In addition, many Arab nations are part of different projects with India like the IMEC (India Middle East European Economic Corridor), which will strengthen the ties between India and the Arab world and also help to increase the economic cooperation between these two by cutting the logistics cost.

India has always supported Arab nations in many multinational forums, especially on the issue of Palestine in the UN. India has always supported the existence of Palestine as an independent state.

India-Israel Relations

India's pro-Arab stance and long-term ties with the Arab world make it very difficult for India to establish ties immediately with the newly formed Zionist state of Israel. India has always been vocal about its stand as an independent state of Palestine. In the starting stage after the independence of India, the leadership of India saw this whole problem through the strategic lens and that was one of the reasons why India only granted de jure recognition to Israel in 1950 [3]. Not a proper diplomatic relation was established until 1992, when the then Prime Minister of India PV Narasimha Rao established full diplomatic relations with Israel, but in this process, India has made sure that during this transaction its long-term links with the Arab world should not be hindered. In addition, the Arab support of Pakistan in the 1962 UN Resolution on the Kashmir issue, the neutral stand taken by Egypt in the 1962 Indo-China War, and the Arab indifference towards India during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 all led to the leadership of India to make its foreign policies more dynamic and establish new relations in the world.

After the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of India's biggest arms exporter, the USSR lost its former tag of superpower, which led to a situation in which there was only one superpower left that was the USA, so it was very necessary for India to improve its relations with the West and, more specifically, the USA. Because India was looking to an alternative option for diversifying its trade and arms export, India took a new way to penetrate the West through the Israel [4]. Although it is not only one way it is a two-way benefit for both countries, but Israel's economy also would get an outlet for the rich markets of East and Southeast Asia through India. Similarly, India would also benefit from Israel's technology and expertise not only in the field of defence but also in many fields such as agriculture, research, and development [5]. Of course, defence is also one of the sectors of cooperation. Israel introduced dry land farming and drip irrigation system into India, there is a very large trade between both countries in diamonds, also in Feb. 2008, India successfully launched an Israeli satellite into orbit,

and By 2009, Israel had become the second largest arms supplier of to India after Russia, and Israel helped India to build missile defence.

This shift in India's foreign policy from bitter opposition in the initial phase to the phenomenal growth and diversity in the later phase of India's foreign policy. India's good and unbelievable balance between relations with both the Arab world and Israel is one of the most controversial parts of India's foreign policy, and India is currently balancing them all very diplomatically and gaining strategic advantages from both of them [6]. The Arab world is helping India meet its energy demands, and Israel is helping India develop and modernize its technology.

Strategic Importance of Arab States for India

Trade and energy cooperation are key areas in India's relations with the Arab world, with bilateral ties growing steadily. In 2023-24, India's total foreign trade amounted to \$1.11 trillion, out of which \$208.48 billion, or 18.17%, came from the Gulf and West Asia region [7, 8]. India is also working on a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which is expected to boost trade and business between them. In 2022, India and the UAE signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), further strengthening these economic ties [9]. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows from the Gulf region have also increased significantly, rising from \$326.48 million in 2014 to \$6.99 billion in 2020.

The relationship between India and the Arab world has been the relation of buyer and seller for a very long time; India completes two-thirds of its energy needs from countries such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are the major countries for exporting crude oil to India, while Qatar has been the major source of LNG. GCC countries also help India with its strategic petroleum reserves (SPR). Many Indian companies, such as Reliance Petroleum and ONGC Videsh, are involved in oil exploration in the Arab region. Thus, India is shifting its buyer-seller relationship towards a strategic partnership in energy cooperation.

Currently, India and the arab world are shifting their traditional domain of interaction from energy cooperation to defence and strategic cooperation. India is doing many military exercises with many countries of the arab world like SADA Tanseeq with Saudi Arabia, Desert.

Eagle-II with the UAE, and many more. In addition, India is interacting with the arab world in many different fields of national security such as terrorism, extremism, and maritime piracy, and intelligence sharing between countries strengthens ties and helps fight common national security threats.

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF ISRAEL FOR INDIA

Defence Cooperation

Defence cooperation between India and Israel is a key area of the relationship between the two countries. Just after the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1992, both countries engaged in arms trade and defence cooperation. After the disintegration of the USSR, India's largest and most important partner in the defence sector, Israel, became the most important option for India. India and Israel faced the same problem of hostile neighbour, and because of this, Israel developed the most advanced technologies for border security and national security. Israel produces a wide range of products, from conventional weapons and ammunition to artillery shells and anti-missile systems.

India imported many weapons and defence-related equipment from Israel like Super Dvora Mk II fast patrol boats in the mid-1990s it was the first purchase of India from Israel, missiles like Barak 1 and Barak 8 were also procured from Israel, and Phalcon Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS), Heron and Searcher Drone, Spike Anti-Tank Guided Missile, IAI Harop Drone, Litening Pods, EL/M-2080 Green Pine Radar, Crystal Maze Missile, SPYDER Missile System, These are some defence procurements by India from Israel [10, 11].

Agriculture Cooperation

In addition to defence, cooperation between India and Israel is very high in the agricultural sector. India has also imported many technologies from Israel, because Israel has developed technologies that are far superior to those of any other country. For example, they have developed technologies, such as drip irrigation, water conservation, and precision farming, which are very useful, especially in arid regions.

The cooperation between India and Israel in the agriculture sector was very old; the first stage was started in 2008, and later extended to the years 2012-2025. These programs include three stages. According to these programs, agricultural centers of excellence were established. These centers work on the triangular formula; the first step is applied research, then SMS (Subject Matter Specialist) Field Extension, and the last is Progressive Farmer. In these centers, the transfer of technologies directly to the farmer was examined. Moreover, after the abrogation of Article 370, Israel is now all set to open its two centers of excellence in Kashmir for the transfer of technologies to the farmers of Kashmir, which also gives the message that Israel is supporting the claim of India on Kashmir and when many nations are opposing the abrogation of Article 370, Israel comes in direct support to India, which shows that the ties between the countries are very deep.

REGIONAL TENSIONS: KEY CHALLENGES FOR INDIA'S DIPLOMACY

Israel-Palestine Conflict

Israel's Palestine conflict was as old as Israel's state. India was one of the few countries to recognize the authority of the PLO in 1974. The recent ongoing conflict which started with the attack of Hamas on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the retaliation of Israel led to a full-grown conflict in this conflict, the stand of India is very clear India's external affairs minister Dr. S. Jaishankar cleared the stand of India by stating "India's long-standing solidarity and support for the Palestinian movement have not been diluted over time" [12]. Apart from this, India has already cleared its position on this by saying that India is condemning the attack of Hamas on Israel on October 7 and referred to it as a terrorist act, although India has not declared Hamas a terrorist organization.

In 1947, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a partition plan for Palestine according to which there must be two countries: the Jewish state of Israel and the Arab state of Palestine, and Jerusalem would be international territory, and India was standing very firmly on this solution. India is following the balancing act between the two countries: India is in support of humanitarian aid for the common people of Gaza, while India is also in support of Israel, releasing all the hostages without any demands.

When the resolution came in the UNGA on October 27 for the immediate humanitarian cease-fire in Gaza, which Jordan proposed, but it had no mention of the hostages and it did not condemn the act of terror committed by Hamas on Israel, India abstained from voting.

Israel- Iran Conflict

After the attack of Hamas on Israel on October 7 under the operation named Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and in the retaliation of this Israel started the counter operation named Operation Iron Sword. After Israel hit Hamas very badly initially with airstrikes, and after some time, the ground invasion started, Israel destroyed the top leadership of Hamas, like the Hamas chief Yahya Sinwar, was killed by Israel. After some time, Lebanon-based Hezbollah joined the conflict backed by Iran and is the member and leader of the Axis of the resistance group, which was formed to stop the influence of Israel and the West in the Arab world. Hizbullah has attacked Israel many times and Israel also retaliated under Operation Northern Arrows, under this operation, Israel killed the Hezbollah Chief *Hassan Nasrallah*, in an air strike, also killed many top leaders of Hezbollah by different methods that are new to the world like the pager and walkie-talkie blast attack by Israel in Lebanon, after which Iran retaliated by firing hundreds of rockets on Israel, which is the official entry of Iran into the conflict; at this

moment, the stage is set for a full fledged war between two big countries in the Middle East and this is not at all good news for many countries, especially India, because India has good relations with both Iran and Israel. On the one hand, India has huge defence and agricultural ties with Arab world and Israel and great people-to-people contact between the populations of both countries; on the other hand, India is investing in Iran through many projects such as the development of *Chabahar port* and the collaboration of ONGC Videsh with Iran, and it resulted in 2008, when ONGC Videsh discovered the giant gas field in the 3,500 square kilometers Farsi offshore block. If these two countries come into conflict, India will face several diplomatic problems in the future.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

The Middle East is a very important region for the economic perspective that this region fulfills the need for crude oil and natural gas for the whole world. In the Indian perspective, nearly 55-60% of India's energy needs are fulfilled by the Middle East.

India's development projects in Iran, such as the development of the Chabhar port and the IMEC proposed in the G20 submit, are hugely impacted by these ongoing conflicts in this region. The cooperation between India and Israel may be hindered if this conflict continues and takes a full-fledged war because of India's balancing policies. Because of this conflict, there is a huge loss of humanitarian and civilian lives. India should interfere into the conflict and try to solve it as soon as possible because it has strong ties with both parties to the conflict. Also, India has good and strong diplomatic relations with other big powers of the region like Saudi Arabia and UAE with the help of these countries. They all should interfere and try to prevent this conflict by eliminating the violent attacks of groups like Hizbullah and Hamas; Western countries like USA and India should stop the aggression of Israel and stop the humanitarian crisis in that region.

CONCLUSION

India's approach to its relationships with the Arab world and Israel reveals a pragmatic blend of historical loyalty and strategic flexibility. By maintaining strong energy partnerships with Arab states and simultaneously deepening defense cooperation with Israel, India effectively secures its key national interests. Yet, ongoing conflicts, particularly the Israel-Palestine and Israel-Iran tensions, create challenges for India's balanced foreign policy.

India's success as a neutral mediator and a regional ally to both Arab states and Israel rests on its continued diplomatic engagements and balanced support. Looking forward, India's role as a peace promoter and stabilizing force could strengthen its influence and ensure its energy and economic security in a region crucial to its growth and stability.

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