

FROM TREES TO FORESTS

The Evolution of India-Middle East Ties Post 2014



The Middle East comprises the region between Iran in the West and Egypt in the East, including the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, and Turkey. For India, the terms "Middle East" and "West Asia" are often used interchangeably to refer to the same region. This report's arguments are drawn from India's ties with several key states in this region: the Gulf monarchies, Iran, Israel, Syria, Iraq, and Turkey.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report examines the evolution of India-Middle East relations from 2014 to 2025, highlighting how these ties have transformed through distinct phases: establishing independent bilateral relationships (by 2014), strengthening these connections (by 2019), creating new regional cooperative frameworks based on mutual trust (by 2024), and safeguarding these gains amid renewed regional conflict.

The report analyzes how India's Middle East policy has been shaped less by strategic intentions and more by available strategic space in the changing regional landscape. It examines how traditional limitations to India-Middle East relations—namely, Pakistan's influence and ideological constraints—have receded over time, allowing India to pursue "de-hyphenated" relationships across previously divided lines, such as Israel-Palestine, Arab-Iran, and Arab-Israel.

The analysis concludes that while recent conflicts have complicated initiatives like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC), India's strategic foundation of strong bilateral relationships allows it to maintain engagement while awaiting regional stabilization.

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Executive Summary

- India's Middle East policy has been driven less by India's strategic intentions (which have always existed), and more by the strategic space available. This space has in turn increased or decreased based on regional geopolitical developments. The India-Middle East relationship has evolved through distinct phases: a new emphasis on independent bilateral relationships by 2014; a strengthening of these relationships by 2019; a proactive initiative to establish a new regional cooperative framework based on trust from these bilateral relationships by 2024; and, since then, an emphasis on safeguarding these gains while fresh conflict grips the region.
- The *evolution* in the Middle East has been evident in leadership, strategic and economic priorities, the security landscape, and the ideological outlook of major states. The evolution in New Delhi has been its ability to leverage the new openings available in the Middle East by the end of 2023, to initiate and participate in new regional frameworks for connectivity and trade, with a focus on aiding India's developmental objectives.
- Pakistan's closeness to the Gulf Arab states has historically hindered India's ability to cultivate substantial relationships in the Gulf. This hindrance was supplemented by India's non-alignment priorities, which disabled strategic partnerships with Arab monarchies, while nurturing ties with secular Arab regimes. By 2014, both these variables had receded as driving factors for the India-Middle East relationship. By 2025, they had receded significantly further – the Gulf Arab states' new focus on economic diversification and need to engage one of the largest economies of the world substantially did two things. It enabled a greater Arab recognition of India's sensitivities vis-à-vis Kashmir, while India's proactiveness to engage the Arab world increased, without being burdened by historical ideological constraints. In any case, the last Ba'athist regime of the Middle East (Syria) fell by December 2024.
- India's new Middle East policy, since the early 2010s, has also evolved across 'three' hyphenations – Israel-Palestine, Arab-Iran, and Arab-Israel. Even before 2014, India had already begun to 'de-hyphenate' these pairs and cultivate meaningful relations with each. For instance, this meant a deeper relationship with Israel, while India's principled position on Palestinian sovereignty remained unchanged and consistent. By 2020, the Abraham Accords also brought unprecedented economic and strategic opportunities for India, which had been steadily advancing relations with both Arab states and Israel.
- Even though India has not classified elements of Iran's 'Axis of Resistance' (Hezbollah, Houthis, Hamas, Hashd-al-Sha'abi) as terrorist groups, the overall anti-terror focus of both Arab states and Israel has aligned well with New Delhi's advocacy against terrorism.
- Israel's ongoing large-scale violence in Gaza after Hamas' October 7th terror attacks, its expansion of settlements in illegally occupied Palestinian territory, and its refusal to recognize Palestinian sovereignty have complicated (but not eliminated) the Arab-Israel rapprochement. On the other hand, the Gulf Arab states' new economic priorities and the need for regional stability have also led to unprecedented diplomatic and military contact between Gulf Arab states and Iran. While the Arab-Israel challenge complicates India-led initiatives such as the IMEC, the Arab-Iran rapprochement has largely vindicated India's investment in its relations with both Arab states and Iran, even before their rapprochement.

- Presently, Israel's war on Gaza continues, while the risk of escalation between Israel and Iran remains. Both these lines of conflict run deep and will take time to resolve. India, in the meantime, will continue focusing on deepening its bilateral relationships with Middle Eastern states and advancing strategic ties, while it waits for a sustainable resolution of the fresh conflicts in the region, to substantially advance its larger regional connectivity projects such as the IMEC.

Introduction

The strong positive trajectory of the India-Middle East relationship, since 2014, has been one of the most notable aspects of Indian foreign policy over the last decade. This region has been a key destination for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who, since taking office in 2014, has made seven visits to the UAE; two each to Qatar and Saudi Arabia (with a third to Riyadh in April 2025); and one each to Kuwait, Oman, Turkey, Iran, Israel, Palestine, Bahrain, and Egypt. Throughout the 2014-2025 diplomatic calendar, several of Modi's visits marked the first in many decades by an Indian PM to these countries: the first in 30 years to the UAE in 2015; the first in 43 years to Kuwait in 2025; and the first-ever visits to Israel and Palestine in 2017 and 2018, respectively. Considering this increased high-level diplomatic contact alone, two questions arise: What factors enabled this development post-2014? Did India's own Middle East policy 'evolve'? This paper will show that the seeds of change in India's Middle East strategy were already sown in the years leading up to the 2014 change of guard in New Delhi. Between 2014 and 2025, new alignments emerged between India and Middle Eastern states regarding their core geopolitical interests.

The core thesis of this paper is that India's Middle East policy has been driven less by India's strategic intentions and more by the strategic space available, which in turn has increased or decreased based on regional developments. The paper shows that the India-Middle East relationship has evolved through distinct phases: a new emphasis on independent bilateral relationships by 2014; a strengthening of these relationships by 2019; a proactive initiative to establish a new regional cooperative framework based on trust from these bilateral relationships by 2024; and, since then, an emphasis on safeguarding these gains. The annual volume of India's bilateral trade with prominent Middle Eastern states has remained largely steady across the decade, with expected gains or losses based on pulls and pushes of the market, even as efforts towards Free Trade Agreements continue. The *evolution* in the Middle East has been evident in leadership, strategic and economic priorities, its security landscape, and ideological outlook. The evolution in New Delhi has been its ability to leverage the new openings available in the Middle East by the end of 2023, to initiate and participate in new regional frameworks for connectivity and trade, with a focus on aiding India's developmental objectives. This has occurred alongside a new exploration of greater defense partnerships.

1. From Apprehensive Linkages to Building Bilaterals

1.1 The Two Variables

Two factors have consistently ensured India's steady relationship with the Middle East. First is India's energy needs. In 2013, India's top oil suppliers included Saudi Arabia (19% of total supply), Iraq (13%), the UAE, and Iran (6%). By 2012, post-occupation Iraq's oil production had surged to over 3.4 million barrels per day (MBD), surpassing Iran, which was then the second-largest OPEC oil producer.

Second, by 2013, India had the world's second-largest diasporic population, estimated at around 20 million. Among these, the largest concentration, approximately 6 million, was in the Gulf, with the UAE hosting the largest number, at 1.5 million. Although India invested considerable diplomatic effort to address numerous human rights issues for the migrant workers who formed a large part of the Gulf diaspora, the general welfare and security of this diaspora became one of the core pillars of India's ties with the Gulf Arab states.

Naturally, these two factors necessitated ongoing engagement between India and the Gulf, as well as the broader Middle East, whether to ensure energy security or address intermittent crises concerning migrant workers. However, two factors have historically influenced India's perspective on the Middle East: Pakistan and India's ideological outlook. By 2013, both factors had evolved, creating more space for India's strategic relationships with the Middle East. Yet progress was difficult amid the turmoil in the Arab world.

1.1.1 Pakistan

In India's relationship with Middle Eastern states, Pakistan has historically been a key intervening variable. Since its inception as a state, Pakistan has framed the Kashmir dispute with India in religious and ideological terms, just as it has with its relationships with Middle Eastern states, to which it is geographically closer. Furthermore, Pakistan ensured that its early diplomatic outreach in the early 1940s to the Gulf and the broader Middle East solidified the new Islamic Republic as a natural partner to the Arab and Iranian monarchies and the larger Muslim world. The consolidation of post-colonial Arab nation-states occurred concurrently with Pakistan's growth as a military power, which also served as a key staging ground for the United States during the Cold War. As a result, Arab states viewed Pakistan's military strength, rooted in its alliance with Washington, as a reliable external source of military support. After Pakistan tested its nuclear weapons in 1998, it secured additional status in the Arab world as the only 'Islamic' nuclear power globally.

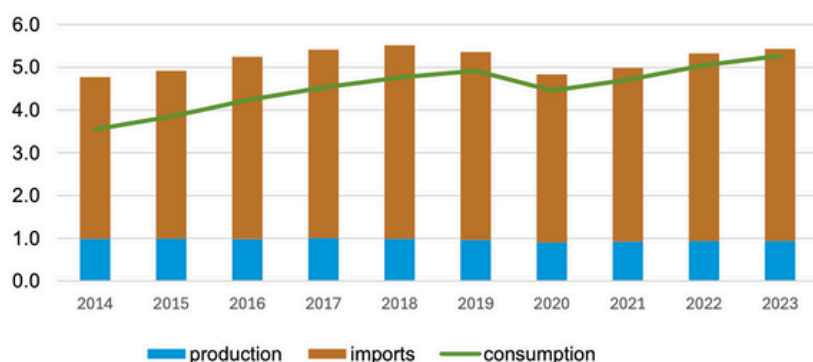
Consequently, in India's three wars with Pakistan over the last century, the prevailing stance of the Middle East favored Islamabad, which reciprocated by offering military support to Arab states. For instance, while Riyadh labeled India's 1971 humanitarian intervention in Bangladesh as "treacherous"¹ and ensured military support for Rawalpindi, Pakistani pilots played a crucial role in training the Royal Saudi Air Force, even flying RSAF jets on offensive missions, including those over Yemen in 1969.² Both states also signed a security pact in 1982³ that effectively made Pakistan a guarantor of Saudi security. Even non-Arab

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India's petroleum and other liquids production, consumption, and imports, 2014-2023

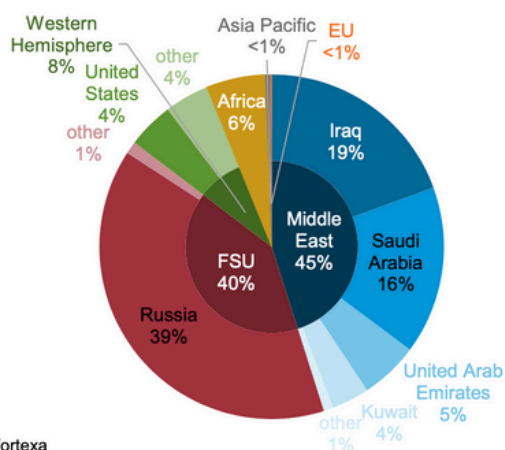
million barrels per day



Data source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, International Energy Statistics and the Short-Term Energy Outlook, September 2024; and Vortexa

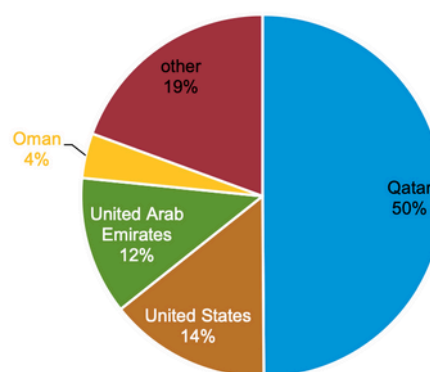


India's crude oil and condensate imports by origin, 2023



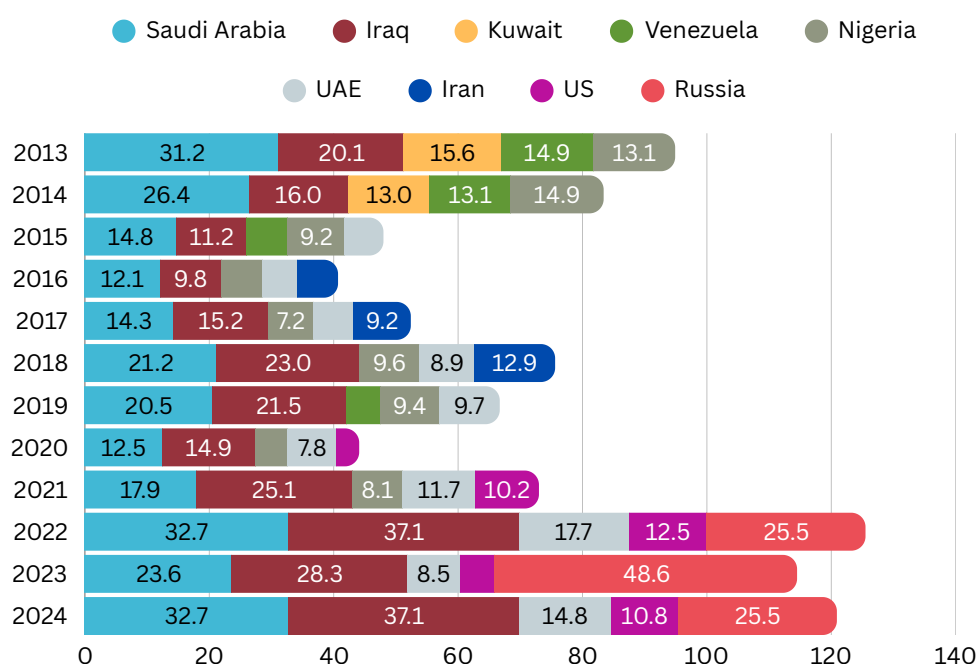
Data source: Vortexa
Note: FSU=Former Soviet Union

India's LNG imports by source, 2023



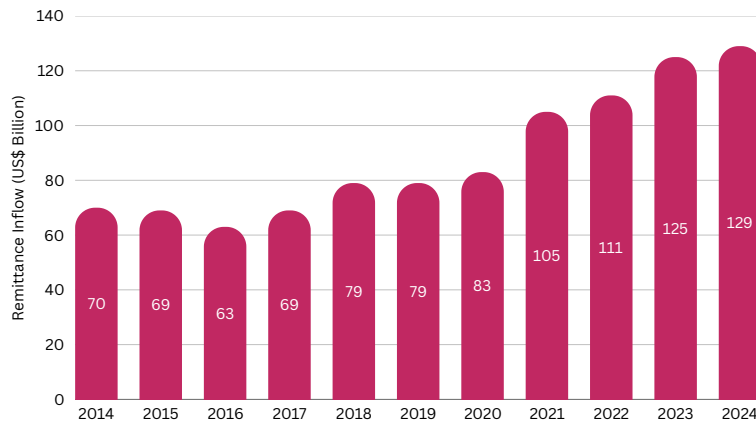
Data source: Vortexa
Note: Numbers may not equal 100% due to independent rounding. LNG=liquefied natural gas

India's top five oil suppliers between 2013 and 2024 (USD billion)

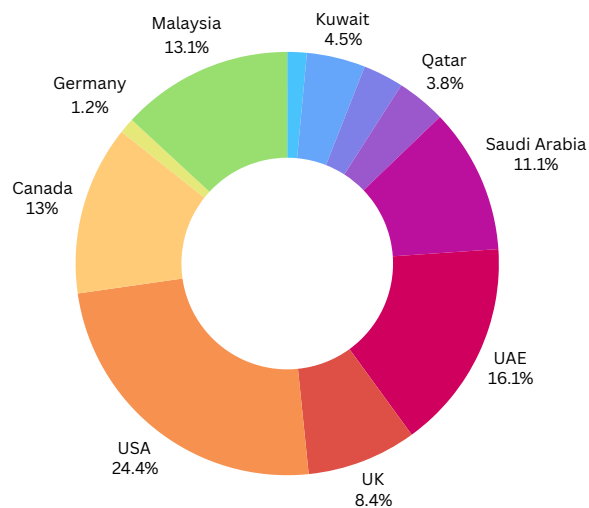


Source: OEC World
Data (as of April, 2025; FY 2025-2026)

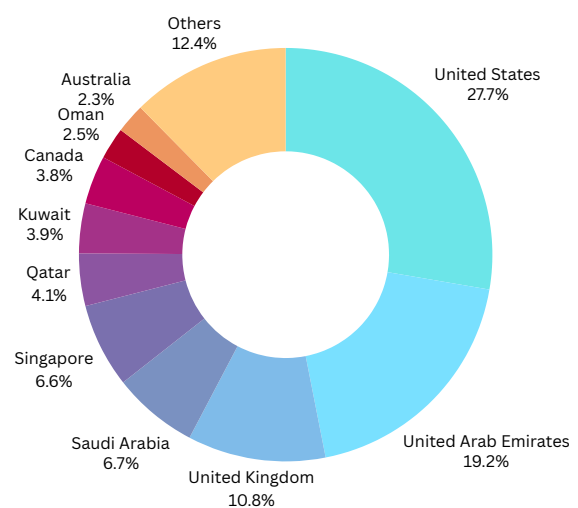
Remittance Inflow to India 2014-2024. Source World Bank



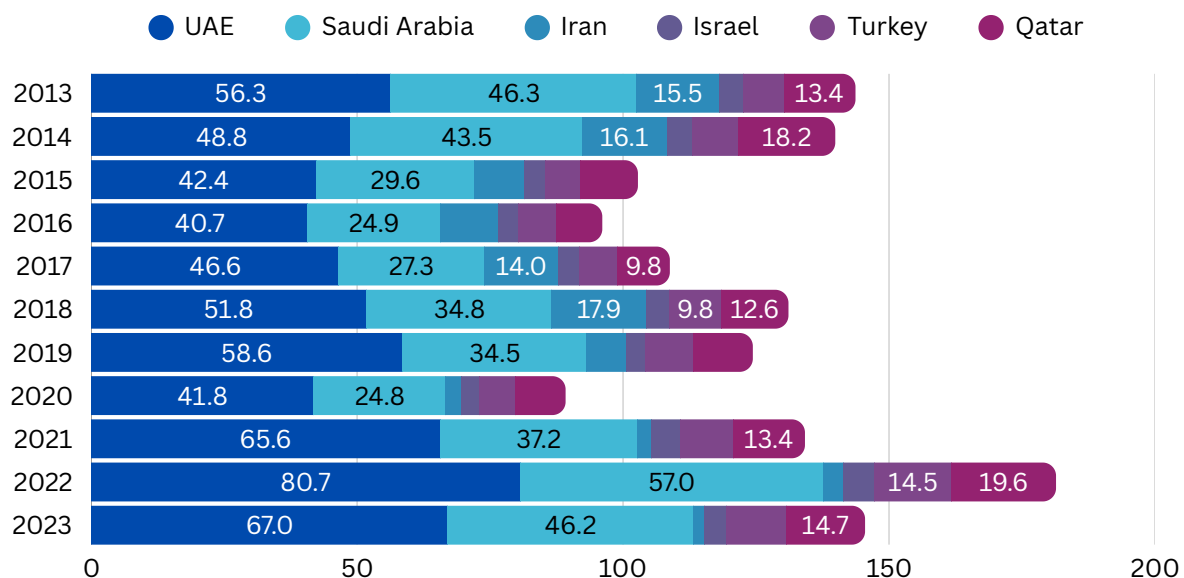
**Share of Overseas Indians by country in 2025
Source MEA**



**Share of remittance inflow by Country, 2025
Source RBI's India's Remittances Survey**



**Bilateral trade volume between India and UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, Turkey, and Qatar (USD billion)
Source OEC World Data**



states in the Middle East, such as Iran⁴ and Turkey,⁵ generally leaned toward Pakistan in their South Asia policies and explicitly supported Pakistan's stance on Kashmir.

The Shia revolution in Iran in 1979 perturbed Pakistan (then under President Zia-ul-Haq's military rule), but despite occasional sectarian friction and both states backing opposing camps in Afghanistan,⁶ Pakistan's ties with Iran remained steady. Moreover, Pakistan successfully lobbied members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to prevent India from becoming a full OIC member, despite the latter attending the OIC's inaugural 1969 summit and hosting the world's third-largest Muslim population. Since then, the OIC's statements against India on the Kashmir issue have been consistently negative.⁷

1.1.1 Ideology

For most of its post-independence history, India's view of the Middle East and its core issues was heavily tinted with the ideology of decolonization and non-alignment. This led to two principal characteristics.

First, India's post-independence support for other nations fighting colonial occupation resulted in a deep-rooted and principled stand in support of full Palestinian statehood, against Israeli occupation. Driven by the strong pro-Palestine views of Indian stalwarts such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi, India even joined the Arab world (and Pakistan) to vote against the UN Partition Plan for Palestine in 1947. India's consistent stand against Israel's illegal occupation of more Palestinian territory since 1967 was a continuation of the same policy, at a time when Arab states were virulently opposed to the State of Israel. India even maintained a strong relationship with the Palestine Liberation Organization, whose ties with Pakistan were bitter ever since Zia-ul-Haq's personal involvement in killing PLO fighters in Jordan in 1970.⁸ India also refrained from establishing formal diplomatic relations with Israel until 1992.

Second, it enabled natural partnerships with moderate secular regimes in the Arab world, such as Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, and the Ba'ath parties in Syria (under the Assad family) and Iraq (under Saddam Hussein), while also impairing strong ties with Arab monarchies. The latter was further rationalized by Gulf support for Pakistan, whereas Nasser's founding role in the Non-Aligned Movement contrasted with the robust connections that states like Saudi Arabia were forging with the United States during the Cold War. For perspective, while the Pakistan Air Force played a crucial role in training Saudi fighter pilots, the Indian Air Force's flying instructors extensively trained Iraqi MiG-21 pilots in Tikrit from the 1960s through the 1990s.⁹

Several factors, including the decline of Nasserite Pan-Arabism, the emergence of OPEC states as a formidable geopolitical bloc led by Gulf monarchies, the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had maintained a Friendship Treaty with India since 1971, and India's market liberalization in the 1990s, resulted in fundamental shifts in India's outlook towards the Middle East. By 2013, Syria remained the only Ba'ath party-led state still surviving in the region.

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1.2 Change and Continuity in these Variables

On Pakistan – A retreat

The change vis-à-vis the Pakistan factor was as follows:

Previously, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states maintained a clear pro-Pakistan and anti-India political stance regarding the disputes in the subcontinent. This was bolstered by strong GCC-Pakistan ties and the lack of depth in India-GCC relations. Currently, the GCC's stance on Kashmir remains, particularly expressed through statements within the broader OIC framework. However, this support is no longer reflected in concrete policy. Instead, it is characterized by increasingly strengthened India-GCC relations, alongside continued political ties with Pakistan.

Essentially, Pakistan's influential role in India-Middle East relations has diminished. Turkey is the only country where Pakistan has retained significant influence. For instance, in May 2012, Turkey's Recep Erdogan addressed a joint session of the Pakistani parliament for the second time in four years, becoming the first international leader to do so.¹⁰ He received a commendation from Pakistani lawmakers for his position on Kashmir. In response, India's position on the Turkish foreign policy in general contained enough expressions of discontent. For instance, in a 2013 interview, the then External Affairs Minister articulated India's position on Turkey: "All we expect is this: don't make your friendships at India's expense. That's all we request, not at our cost. That's our message to Turkey."¹¹

On Ideology – The three de-hyphenations

While India established formal diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992 (having recognized it in 1950), the shifts in the Arab position towards Israel began almost two decades before the Abraham Accords of 2020, starting with the 2001 Arab Peace Initiative. It effectively conceded historical Palestine and offered Arab recognition of the State of Israel in exchange for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital, based on the post-1967 borders. Despite Israel's rejection of the plan, it laid the groundwork for greater contact between Arab states and the state they almost formally recognized. By 2013, India was asserting three distinct 'de-hyphenations' (though this terminology would only gain traction in subsequent years): Israel and Palestine, Israel and the Arab World, and the Arab World and Iran.ⁱ This is exemplified by three separate statements made by then-EAM Salman Khurshid that year in various addresses and press statements.

First, he asserted that India's "past commitment to Palestine was a commitment that came devoid of any relationship with Israel. Our present-day commitment to Palestine comes with a very meaningful relationship with Israel."¹²

Second, "Our relationship with Israel is independent of our ties with Islamic countries. India has strong and historic ties with the Arab world, the key Gulf allies understand that our relationship with Israel does not impact on their own relationship."¹³

Third, "We have a natural relationship with Saudi Arabia, and we have a natural friendship with Iran. We also have a commonality of energy security with Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iran is closer to India and, in a sense, Iran impacts a larger neighbourhood of India, whereas Saudi Arabia is a friend in an area where there is a huge presence of Indians. In that sense, Saudi Arabia is a distant neighbour whereas Iran is a closer neighbour."¹⁴

i. For the sake of analytical convenience, these three principal pairs (Arab-Iran, Arab-Israel, Israel-Palestine) are referred to as 'hyphenations' across the rest of this report.

Evidently, even before the general elections of 2014, New Delhi's strategic calculus regarding the Middle East had begun to shift towards an approach aimed at maximizing gains from each bilateral relationship in the region, independent of the others.

In any case, India had already attempted to establish a broader architecture for this through its "Look West" policy in 2005.¹⁵ This policy, similar to India's rationale for its Look East policy, was driven by the pursuit of a Free Trade Agreement, specifically with the GCC. However, negotiations did not progress beyond two rounds in 2006 and 2008.¹⁶ Even in specific bilateral relations, such as with Saudi Arabia (under King Abdullah), India expressed its desire to pursue "a new era of strategic partnership" at several summits (Delhi Declaration 2006,¹⁷ Riyadh Declaration 2010,¹⁸ among others).

1.3 The Churn in the Middle East

However, these developments took place against a backdrop of growing social and political change in the region, culminating in the Arab Spring across the Middle East and North Africa. This period also saw the emergence of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq, along with its offshoots worldwide, including in India's northern periphery (Afghanistan).

The Arab Spring resulted in the ousting of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak (who had visited India after 25 years in 2008),¹⁹ Libya's Muammar Gaddafi (under whose dictatorial rule, India and Libya largely enjoyed warm ties),²⁰ Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh (who also sought to nurture a historic relationship with India),²¹ and nearly led to the downfall of Syria's Bashar Al-Assad (whom India arguably considered the most secular force in Syria). While protests erupted across almost every country in the region, India maintained a studied silence—a stance that commentators like P.R. Kumaraswamy attributed²² to the necessity of protecting the six million-strong diaspora and meeting India's energy needs. These are the two unchanging variables.

The rise of ISIS led to unprecedented global cooperation—both by design and by chance—across geopolitical divides, with the Iraqi city of Fallujah falling to ISIS about six months before India's general elections. Naturally, India's response aligned with global positions and served to advance its own anti-terror advocacy on the world stage since the terror attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001 and subsequent attacks.

However, in Syria, the fight against ISIS was also intertwined with local rebel and jihadi groups opposing the Assad regime in Damascus, which relied heavily on Iran for security. Although India supported the protesters' demands for democratic reform in Syria, its broader political backing of the only remaining Ba'athist regime in the Middle East conflicted with other Arab states that expelled Syria from the Arab League in 2011.²³ During a 2013 interview in Saudi Arabia, then EAM Khurshid rationalized this by saying – "The Arabs here live next door to Syria. They have to consider many factors that confront them in

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Obama administration's attempts to reach a nuclear deal with Tehran, then led by reformist Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, also enabled Israel and the Gulf Arabs (particularly Riyadh and Abu Dhabi) to draw closer to each other. While numerous other internal conflicts unfolded in the region, this is the Middle East that the new government in New Delhi inherited.

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Furthermore, the Obama administration’s attempts to reach a nuclear deal with Tehran, then led by reformist Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, also enabled Israel and the Gulf Arabs (particularly Riyadh and Abu Dhabi) to draw closer to each other. While numerous other internal conflicts unfolded in the region, this is the Middle East that the new government in New Delhi inherited.

2. 2014-2019 – Building and Strengthening Bilaterals

2.1 The New Indian Leadership and its Change

On the eve of the 2014 general elections, India had already emerged²⁵ as the world's third-largest economy (by 2011) with a boost in purchasing power parity and held the third-largest share of global investment expenditure (gross fixed capital formation) at 7%. Despite a general slowdown, the Indian GDP growth still hovered around 4.7%.²⁶ In the general elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secured an outright majority, ending decades of coalition rule in New Delhi. While the BJP fundamentally differed from the Congress, its foreign policy towards the Middle East displayed continuity in intention, with a scaling up of engagement.

2.2 What the Middle East looked like to the World and India

First, there is the rise of new leadership in Saudi Arabia, led by Mohammad bin Salman (MBS), and the consolidation of de facto power by Mohammad bin Zayed in the UAE. Under this new leadership, both Gulf monarchies have shown unprecedented willingness for domestic socio-economic reform,²⁷ even as political authoritarianism continued.

This shift was driven by a strong drive to gradually diversify their economies away from oil and become attractive destinations for foreign investment, especially from the West, which demanded a recalibration of older socio-economic structures that could intimidate potential investors. In terms of foreign policy, this also meant a more pragmatic approach to ideological issues, including the question of Palestine, and their relationship with Israel.

The essence of this change, however, was not a dismissal of traditional Arab concerns but rather an approach rooted in self-preservation and regional economic development. As Peter Salisbury notes, the UAE established a model that rejects any political or religious ideology that might challenge state supremacy.²⁸ In contrast, Abdulkhaleq Abdullah characterized it by the need to 'rise above ideologies' and a desire to 'focus nearly exclusively on the economy to move forward'.²⁹ MBS's rule on the other hand has been guided by a vision of Saudi Arabia that is "devoid of any ideology other than an implicit faith in the market economy," as Ahmad Fathi notes.³⁰ Essentially, it represented a new form of governance devoid of the old state ideology.

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The essence of this change, however, was not a dismissal of traditional Arab concerns but rather an approach rooted in self-preservation and regional economic development. As Peter Salisbury notes, the UAE established a model that rejects any political or religious ideology that might challenge state supremacy....Essentially, it represented a new form of governance devoid of the old state ideology.

Second, there is the continuation of direct conflict between Iran and the Gulf Arabs, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Despite their new approach, Iran and its proxies still posed direct threats to the Gulf Arabs, necessitating a response. Riyadh's anti-Iran rhetoric³¹ was matched by Khamenei's comments³² that consistently undermined Saudi Arabia's Islamic credentials. After Tehran and Riyadh severed ties following

the execution of a prominent Shia cleric by Saudi Arabia in 2016, MBS vocally opposed Iranian nuclearization and called for increased economic pressure on Tehran.³³ In 2017, MBS famously declared that “there is no space for dialogue with Iran.”³⁴ During the 2017-2019 period, Iran’s IRGC continued to launch attacks against US naval ships in the Strait of Hormuz and expanded their scope to include Gulf oil tankers. Moreover, by 2017, the Iran-Gulf Arab divide had deepened sufficiently to impact the relationship between Qatar and its neighboring monarchies. While Doha’s independent foreign policy and its alleged support for Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood already strained ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the latter two severed diplomatic and economic relations with Doha, imposing an air, sea, and land blockade on Qatar, with support from Egypt and Bahrain.³⁵

Third, there is the intensification of the proxy conflict between Iran and the Arab states. On one hand, Russian intervention in Syria from 2015 onwards strengthened³⁶ the Assad regime and helped it eliminate ISIS as an existential threat to Damascus by 2019. It also forced Turkey-backed rebel factions, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, to confine themselves to Idlib in northern Syria.³⁷ On the other hand, the Iran-backed Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, which fought ISIS, failed to disarm or demobilize after the effective defeat of ISIS and evolved into powerful instruments of Iranian politico-military influence in Iraq.³⁸

The IRGC Quds Force Chief, Maj Gen Qassem Soleimani, and Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, were pivotal in facilitating and orchestrating Iranian interventions in Syria and Iraq.³⁹ The Hezbollah itself had established itself as an effective fighting force in Syria, aiding Assad’s troops in repelling several rebel offensives and combating ISIS. Additionally, a coalition of Arab states led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE had begun a direct intervention in Yemen (Operation Decisive Storm) since 2015, supporting the internationally recognized government in exile against the Iran-backed Houthis.⁴⁰ By 2019, as the war continued, the Houthis demonstrated their capacity to target⁴¹ critical energy infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and the UAE with Iranian support, while remaining strong in Yemen and its capital, Sana’a. Indeed, Arab leaders framed the conflict in the region as a fight against Iran; In 2018 Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir asserted that “Iran is the one that is attacking us. Iran has begun to undermine Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.”⁴²

Fourth, is the remarkable evolution of US-Iran cooperation on reaching a nuclear deal, reaching its zenith under Barack Obama (2015) and its nadir under Donald Trump (2018). Given the ongoing tensions between Riyadh and Tehran when Obama secured the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Riyadh viewed it as a “flawed agreement” and made a public commitment to acquiring nuclear weapons if Iran progressed with its weapons program.⁴³ By 2017, as the Trump presidency assumed power in Washington, the threat from Iran was significant enough to forge an informal alliance between Israel and at least six Arab states, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The prevailing regional context enabled Gulf Arab states to readily support Trump’s unilateral withdrawal⁴⁴ from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the

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initiation of his “maximum pressure” campaign on Iran through increased sanctions,⁴⁵ and his designation of the IRGC “as a whole” as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO).⁴⁶ Indeed, by that year, Israel-Arab engagement took on a more coherent shape following the 2019 Warsaw Conference, which Netanyahu asserted was “to advance the common interest of war with Iran.”⁴⁷

2.3 Pakistan and Ideology as Intervening Variables

From a historical perspective, it is the changes in the Middle East that incrementally created opportunities for New Delhi to increase its engagement with the Gulf Arab states and Israel, without necessarily requiring a fundamental overhaul in India's ideological view of the Arab world. In simple terms, the influence of India's traditional ideology on its Middle East relationships had already declined by 2014. By 2019, this gave way to new geopolitical alignments in the region that required active engagement—an approach the Gulf capitals themselves were actively seeking. Nonetheless, even though India did not classify elements of Iran's ‘Axis of Resistance’ (Hezbollah, Houthis, Hamas, Hashd-al-Sha’abi) as terrorist groups, the overall anti-terror focus of the new Israel-Arab alliance aligned well with New Delhi's advocacy against terrorism.

The best evidence for this is that India maintained its longstanding stance on issues rooted in principle, particularly on Palestine. India consistently voted against Israel on recurring UN General Assembly resolutions concerning Palestine, including those calling for Israeli withdrawal from occupied Palestinian and Syrian territories, such as East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, recognizing and reiterating the Palestinian right to self-determination, and advocating for a two-state solution, among others.

Most notably, while PM Modi's visit to Israel (the first by an Indian Prime Minister) did not include a stop in Ramallah in the West Bank, any perceptions⁴⁸ arising from this ‘miss’ were swiftly addressed by PM Modi's historic visit to Palestine in 2018, making him the first Indian premier to do so.⁴⁹ An alignment between the Gulf Arabs and Israel, coupled with their new preference to resolve the Palestinian issue by engaging Israel rather than shunning it, fit well with New Delhi's preference for a negotiated solution that involves all conflict parties and promotes “peaceful co-existence.”

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The Gulf view of Pakistan underwent considerable changes. While the internal political and economic crises in Pakistan led to increased instability, its relationship with the GCC was particularly tumultuous in 2015 after Islamabad adopted a neutral stance in the Yemen conflict.

Hence, while the Indian Prime Minister could travel to Israel on a “historic visit” to meet his “dear friend” (Benjamin Netanyahu) and mark the 25th anniversary of India-Israel ties by expanding collaboration across sectors,⁵⁰ he could also travel to Palestine the following year and declare from the Palestine Authority's headquarters that India's “incessant and steadfast support to the Palestinian cause” has always been at the top of its foreign policy and reiterate India's support for Palestinian statehood.⁵¹

On the other hand, the Gulf view of Pakistan underwent considerable changes. While the internal political and economic crises in Pakistan led to increased instability, its relationship with the GCC was particularly tumultuous in 2015 after Islamabad adopted a neutral stance in the Yemen conflict.⁵² The UAE Foreign Minister even warned that Pakistan would pay a “heavy price” for such neutrality, which the Arab states

perceived as favorable to Iran.⁵³ Given that the long Iran-Pakistan border was a source of friction between the two nations and the presence of ethnic militant groups required careful engagement, Pakistan opted instead to position itself as a mediator between the Arab Gulf and Iran, rather than fulfill Arab expectations for partisan support. This policy was reiterated by Pakistan during the Gulf blockade of Qatar, as it refused to take a side.⁵⁴

Eventually, the Gulf Arabs shifted their positions on the India-Pakistan dispute from being categorically pro-Pakistan to greater neutrality and positioning themselves as potential mediators between India and Pakistan. Even as Pakistan remained economically integrated with (and reliant on) the Gulf, this shift in Arab postures on Kashmir further eased historic Indian apprehensions. The Gulf Arab tilt towards India was solidified in August 2019 when India revoked J&K's constitutional special status and temporarily withdrew its statehood. While Saudi Arabia expressed concern and urged restraint, other Gulf Arab states refrained from making any statements; the UAE proactively labelled it as India's internal issue.⁵⁵ This altered Arab stance was also supported by significant growth in economic ties with India. By mid-2019, CNBC reported that the total value of annual trade between the Arab Peninsula and India reached USD 100 billion.⁵⁶

However, Turkey and Iran have remained critical of India's Kashmir policies, with both countries consistently issuing statements directed at India. While Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, often expresses a variation of "expecting the Indian government to adopt a just policy towards the noble people of Kashmir and prevent the oppression and bullying of Muslims in this region";⁵⁷ the Turkish Foreign Ministry maintains that "India has further complicated the situation in Jammu and Kashmir and has not contributed to peace and stability in the region."⁵⁸

“— Turkey and Iran have remained critical of India's Kashmir policies, with both countries consistently issuing statements directed at India....the Turkish Foreign Ministry maintains that “India has further complicated the situation in Jammu and Kashmir and has not contributed to peace and stability in the region.”

2.4 The Opportunities and Challenges that India Identified

Between 2014 and 2019, changes occurred in the three geopolitical divides in the region: the Gulf Arab-Iran divide intensified, the Israel-Palestine divide simmered with occasional spikes, and the Arab-Israel divide effectively reduced but persisted.

The first also led to new tensions between the other Gulf Arab states and Qatar. For India, this provided more opportunities to strengthen its relationships, specifically with the Gulf. Strategically, while some non-oil trade continued, India-Iran engagement became increasingly focused on specific issues (such as the Chabahar port and the INST Corridor). Meanwhile, just as the Trump factor disabled comprehensive India-Iran ties, it also enabled India's more proactive contact with the Gulf Arabs and Israel.

As the Gulf Arab states remained embroiled in internal conflicts over Qatar, Syria, and Yemen, India focused on strengthening each bilateral relationship while planning for broader frameworks of strategic cooperation in the future. This is in addition to India's ongoing interest and active participation in multilateral arrangements such as the Combined Maritime Forces to counter threats to maritime shipping off the Horn of Africa and its advocacy for international cooperation to combat terrorism.⁵⁹

India's rationale for increased engagement across old geopolitical fault lines was vindicated when PM Modi's visit to Israel did not attract any criticism from the Arab world, publicly or privately. This was due to a recognition of growing mutual interests between New Delhi and Tel Aviv, along with their shared concerns about terrorism; as Arab diplomats in New Delhi conveyed to the press at the time, it was a matter of "realpolitik."⁶⁰ This was further emphasized by the Gulf states' gradual detachment from the Palestine issue and their expanding informal ties with Israel. By 2018, India had demonstrated a notable capacity to address Arab court sensitivities, reportedly assisting in the "return" of the daughter of the Vice President and Prime Minister of Dubai after intercepting her off the coast of Goa.⁶¹ Collectively, these factors enabled India to enhance its relationships across the board.

With Iran, India recognized that the bilateral relationship is founded on historical and cultural pillars, complemented by Iran's strategic location and Tehran's ongoing competition with Pakistan (including in Afghanistan). Both these factors required a pragmatic view of the bilateral relationship, leading New Delhi to limit its response to Iranian criticisms to diplomatic demarches and its own official statements.⁶² Following the enforcement of new US sanctions that halted Iranian oil exports to India,⁶³ progress on the INSTC and investment in the strategic Chabahar port (less than 200 kilometers west of Pakistan's Gwadar port) became the key element sustaining strategic cooperation between Tehran and New Delhi. In contrast, Turkey lacked a proximate geographic basis for cooperation, and Ankara's closeness to Pakistan had only grown. This was particularly evident in 2018 when the latter two agreed to construct four advanced corvettes for the Pakistan Navy under the MILGEM program.⁶⁴

2.5 India's Scaling Up of Relationships Amidst Crises

Unlike Pakistan, which established a special relationship with the Gulf Arabs during and after the Cold War, leading to Arab expectations of partisanship in geopolitical contests, India enjoyed greater flexibility. In any case, India's enhancement of ties with countries such as the UAE was far more expansive than with any Middle Eastern state considered geopolitically deviant by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, including Qatar, Turkey, Iran, and Syria. Generally, India's fresh efforts to strengthen its bilateral ties with key Middle Eastern nations began in 2015 with the Prime Minister's visit to the UAE, followed by trips to Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, Israel, Jordan, Palestine, and Oman—all completed within the next three years. However, with the Emirates in particular, India arguably secured a relationship deeper than with any other Middle Eastern state.

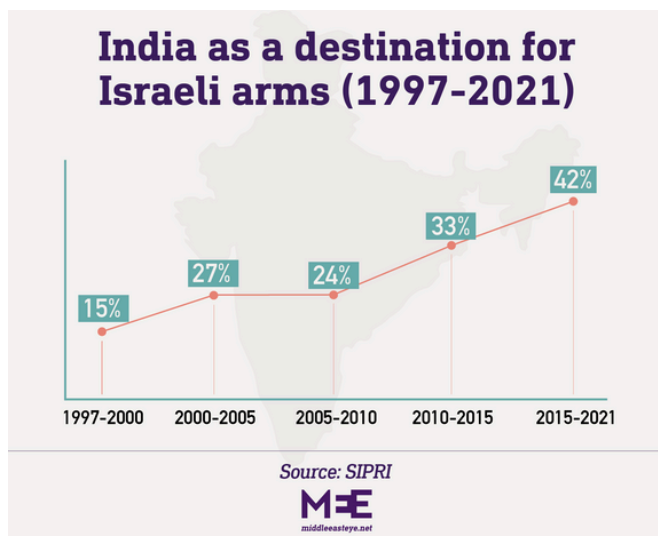
During his first visit to the UAE in 2015, PM Modi encouraged Emirati business leaders to invest USD 1 trillion in Indian infrastructure, energy, and real estate during what he described as 'Asia's Century.'⁶⁵ But more reflective of the new government's comfort in dealing with Arab monarchies was evident in Modi's criticism of former Indian PMs not visiting the UAE and promising that "this will not happen again". Between 2014 and 2019, the number of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) between India and the UAE increased from 2 to 47 across various sectors.⁶⁶ In this 'G-to-G' cooperation, Indian companies and

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individuals became among the largest investors in the Emirati economy,⁶⁷ investing AED 20.4 billion in Dubai's real estate market in the 18 months following January 2016, in addition to AED 20 billion in 2015 alone, making them the largest private sector employer group.⁶⁸ Similarly, Saudi Arabia emerged as India's fourth-largest trading partner, with bilateral trade soaring to record levels by 2018, reaching USD 27.48 billion.⁶⁹

Moreover, by 2018, the GCC became India's largest regional trading bloc, with an annual trade value of USD 104 billion in FY2017- 2018. This figure surpassed India-ASEAN trade (USD 81 billion) and India-EU trade (USD 102 billion) during the same year.⁷⁰

On the other hand, the India-Israel relationship also grew, with bilateral trade reaching USD 4.16 billion by 2017, and both countries initiating negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA).⁷¹ However, the significance of the India-Israel relationship—still quantitatively modest compared to India-Gulf ties—was in qualitative terms: India-Israel arms trade reached USD 1 billion by 2016,⁷² including the 2015 deals for Heron TP UAVs and Phalcon AWACS systems. By 2018, India awarded an additional USD 770 million contract to Israel for the Barak-8 long-range surface-to-air missile systems.⁷³ A year earlier, the Indian Army had placed a USD 2.5 billion order for the Barak-8 systems, making it the largest single purchase in the history of Israel Aerospace Industries.⁷⁴ India-Israel cooperation also extended to other sectors, including space, agriculture, cyberspace, research, and development, among others.



Source for both infographics: Middle East Eye



India's simultaneous advancement of non-energy cooperation with Iran was evident in its 2016 commitment⁷⁵ to invest USD 500 million in the development of Iran's Chabahar port, for which it secured a sanctions waiver from the Trump administration in 2018.⁷⁶ Even as Trump ended other exemptions from Iran-linked sanctions for India and other states by April 2019,⁷⁷ the Chabahar exception remained.⁷⁸ India's efforts to enhance maritime connectivity with the Middle Eastⁱⁱ through strengthened independent bilateral relationships were supported by both regional shifts and Indian intent and

ii In 2018, India and Oman signed an MoU for the Indian Navy to access the strategically important port of Duqm, which gave India access to ports in states on opposite sides of the Strait of Hormuz.

and determination. However, India's relations with Turkey continued to be strained. For instance, in October 2019, PM Modi postponed a trip to Ankara following Erdogan's remarks criticizing India for its dilution of Article 370 in Kashmir.⁷⁹

3. 2019-2024 – From Bilateralism to Regionalism

3.1 Continuity in Indian Outreach to the ME

In the general elections of 2019, the incumbent BJP-led government in India returned to power with an even larger parliamentary majority. In the years following the elections, the India-Arab relationship demonstrated remarkable resilience. This was especially evident during a brief crisis triggered by inflammatory remarks made by a member of the Indian ruling party about Islam's last Prophet.⁸⁰ While it provoked strong reactions from the Arab street and some pushback from the Gulf states,⁸¹ the Indian response was swift and satisfactory—the crisis subsided in under a month. Such incidents, along with the ability of either side to overcome inconveniences in the bilateral relationship, proved to both Gulf capitals and New Delhi that their ties were now sufficiently safeguarded. These bilateral relationships, in turn, generated greater trust for broader frameworks of cooperation.

3.2 The New Middle East

Between 2019 and 2024, the Middle East's geopolitical chessboard first presented a picture of unprecedented stability before devolving into its most violent period of the current decade. As was the case in the 2014-2019 period, India's proactiveness in the region followed the waxing and waning of the region's openness to broader strategic ties based on regional integration and stability.

While President Donald Trump maintained 'maximum pressure' on Iran, crippling its formal oil export economy during his last year in office, he also significantly weakened the Axis of Resistance by ordering the assassination of Maj Gen Qassem Soleimani,⁸² who was the IRGC Quds Force Chief and architect of Iran's regional politico-military influence. However, towards the end of 2020, the United States brokered unprecedented agreements to normalize bilateral relations between Israel and four Arab states—the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan.⁸³ The true benefits of the Abraham Accords materialized fully during the subsequent four years of the Biden administration. On one hand, the agreements demonstrated the Gulf Arab states' willingness to challenge their conventional ideologies. On the other hand, they eliminated a significant barrier to creating formal multilateral frameworks that include Israel. Most importantly, they attempted to reduce the regional security responsibilities that Washington had historically carried—an objective central to Trump's foreign policy.

While the Biden administration maintained this policy, it also eased sanctions⁸⁴ on Iranian energy trade and removed the Yemeni Houthis from the US list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations.⁸⁵ However, as the civil war in Yemen entered its tenth year and Gulf Arab-backed forces failed to oust the Houthis from Sana'a and other areas, the group continued to raise concerns, particularly for Saudi Arabia and the UAE. By 2022, the Houthis launched direct attacks on Arab territory again, even targeting oil and airport infrastructure in the Emirati capital of Abu Dhabi.⁸⁶

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Additionally, as Assad emerged as the sole victor of the Syrian civil war, Iran's Axis appeared to have not only survived Trump's maximum pressure campaign but also thrived. Collectively, these developments compelled Arab states to devise a new approach for sustained regional stability to support their economic ambitions. Similar to Israel, the larger Gulf Arab powers now sought resolution through engagement with key neighbors. This included several significant milestones: the end of the Qatar blockade and full restoration of Arab ties with Qatar in 2021;⁸⁷ Syria's re-admission to the Arab League;⁸⁸ a Beijing-facilitated rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2023;⁸⁹ and the initiation of a plan by the UAE and Saudi Arabia to extricate themselves from the fighting in Yemen and establish a ceasefire.⁹⁰ Moreover, as Vivian Nereim of the New York Times reported, the Houthi attacks in 2019 on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq-Khurais oil facilities made Saudi officials recognize the "limitations of their American alliance, pushing them toward talks with Iran rather than continued conflict."⁹¹

Most importantly, Saudi Arabia and Iran not only restored diplomatic ties but also proactively engaged in dialogue for economic cooperation after Saudi-Iran bilateral trade resumed in April 2023.⁹² Similarly, the UAE-Iran Joint Economic Committee for multi-sectoral cooperation held its first session in May 2024.⁹³ Iran itself experienced fundamental shifts in its domestic politics. While the sanctioned Iranian economy was in free fall, a leadership change in the Iranian President's office by mid-2024 indicated a new willingness within Iran's establishment to engage with the West.⁹⁴ This shift was reinforced by the deepening reconciliation across the Persian Gulf. As of September 2023, the Middle East experienced peace across two key relationships, Arab-Israel and Arab-Iran. The Israel-Palestine relationship remained tense but had been relatively inactive since the 2021 Israel-Hamas crisis. On September 29, the then-US National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, declared that the "Middle East region is quieter today than it has been in two decades."⁹⁵

3.3 The Relegation of the Old Disabling Variables, and the Rise of Strategic Partnership

Given that India had already upgraded its ties with most regional powers bilaterally, the broader stabilization of the region created new opportunities for strategic proactivity. By 2023, both of the earlier disabling factors in the India-Middle East relationship were also retreating. For instance, the internal transformations in the Gulf monarchies—including rapprochement with Israel, a focus on counterterrorism and counter-Islamism, a restructuring of their relationships with Pakistan, and efforts to become global investment hubs by relaxing socio-religious norms—collectively facilitated the Arab Gulf's engagement with India, as India itself drew closer.

By 2023, India had re-established itself as the world's third-largest economy,⁹⁶ while Pakistan ranked 26th. This shift contributed to a further tilt in the Middle East-South Asia equation, as

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Arab states also displayed more decisive signs of moving away from pro-Pakistan inclinations regarding the Kashmir issue. For instance, a joint statement from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia during MBS's visit to Islamabad included no references to India's August 2019 actions and called for bilateral dialogue between the two states for dispute resolution, a position India has maintained since the 1972 Shimla Agreement.⁹⁷ Pakistan was also relying on Arab aid to navigate its ongoing economic crises. Amid a global economic slowdown, Saudi Arabia provided financial support to cash-strapped Pakistan, amounting to USD 8 billion in 2022⁹⁸ and USD 2 billion in 2023,⁹⁹ respectively.

More importantly, the UAE emerged as an active partner in promoting development projects in the Indian Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) after August 2019.¹⁰⁰ While PM Modi received the Emirates' highest civilian honor¹⁰¹ during a visit to Abu Dhabi just 19 days after the abrogation in 2019, UAE-based Indian business giants like Yusuf Ali have been among the most prominent investors to undertake large-scale ventures in post-2019 J&K. For instance, Ali's Lulu Group announced a 250-crore project to open J&K's first hypermarket in a new Srinagar mall in 2023.¹⁰²

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Given the strong reinforcement of the India-Gulf bridge after August 2019 and the even more robust position of the Indian ruling party at the center, India quickly expanded its strategic focus on relations with the Gulf Arab states. In October of that year, India became only the fourth state to establish a 'Strategic Partnership Council Agreement'¹⁰³ with Saudi Arabia, emphasizing security and defense cooperation. By January and February 2024, India conducted its first-ever joint military exercises with both the UAE¹⁰⁴ and Saudi Arabia,¹⁰⁵ respectively. By early 2025, India and UAE declared that "close cooperation between the defence industries" should be an "integral part" of their bilateral relationship,¹⁰⁶ within the framework of their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.¹⁰⁷

Meanwhile, India also sought to reframe other bilateral relationships where fresh opportunities had arisen. On one hand, since the end of the Qatar diplomatic crisis, India attempted to shift the India-Qatar relationship away from its crisis-focused character (which had entrenched itself particularly after Doha detained decorated Indian navy veterans on espionage charges and sentenced them to death).¹⁰⁸ India's outreach to Qatar through the Prime Minister and continued proactive engagement with Doha ensured the release and return of the former naval officers to India. On the other hand, by the end of 2024, India was also "closing the Gulf circle," as C. Raja Mohan termed it,¹⁰⁹ with the Indian Prime Minister visiting Kuwait and elevating bilateral ties to the level of a "strategic partnership."¹¹⁰

By May 2024, India also signed a 10-year 'Long Term Bilateral Contract on Chabahar Port' with Iran, following a preliminary agreement¹¹¹ signed during the EAM's visit to Tehran in January of that year. When the Biden administration issued light threats of sanctions in response,¹¹² EAM Jaishankar asserted that the port's development would benefit the entire region and that a "narrow view" should be avoided.¹¹³ India weathered this threat.

Furthermore, while Pakistan made no serious mediation attempts between Riyadh and Tehran, any potential for it was removed by a Beijing-facilitated rapprochement in 2023.¹¹⁴ Additionally, Islamabad's relationship with Tehran experienced a turbulent period in early 2024, with both countries exchanging airstrikes¹¹⁵ on terrorist groups in each other's territory (resulting in civilian casualties); however, ties were quickly mended in the aftermath.¹¹⁶

Turkey, however, enmeshed itself further with Pakistan, forging a strong strategic partnership that enables Ankara to project influence into the Indian Ocean. Turkey has been crucial in modernizing the Pakistan Navy, both through the MILGEM Corvette program¹¹⁷ and the mid-life upgrades it is undertaking on Pakistan's AIP-equipped, French-built Agosta 90-B submarines.¹¹⁸ This has further hindered opportunities for natural partnerships between India and Turkey.

3.4 Historic Shifts in the Middle East by 2020

While the Israel-Palestine issue remained unresolved, the 2020 Abraham Accords marked a watershed moment for the Middle East. Technically, the Arab states signing the Accords were assuming that Donald Trump's 'Peace to Prosperity' plan¹¹⁹ for a Palestinian state would come to fruition. The texts of the Abraham Accords and the Peace to Prosperity plan were linked through an assumption that the broader Arab-Israeli normalization would pave the way for a Palestinian state.¹²⁰

However, even as the Israeli state has pushed the prospects for a Palestinian state further away since then,¹²¹ its Accords with Arab states have flourished, proving that the sources of Arab comfort with normalization with Israel lie as much in their internal positions as they do in Palestine. Until 2023, the former seemed strong enough to sustain proactive cooperation. No matter how tenuous (as would later be proven), the Accords achieved a rare moment of geopolitical alignment in the Middle East, at least west of the Persian Gulf.

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3.5 India's Unique Position, Leverage, and Initiative – I2U2, IMEEC

Given the stable state of the region and the new geopolitical alignments, the ground was arguably fresh for India to further elevate its Middle East strategy for the first time, from strengthening bilateral relationships to leveraging them for new regional architectures of cooperation.

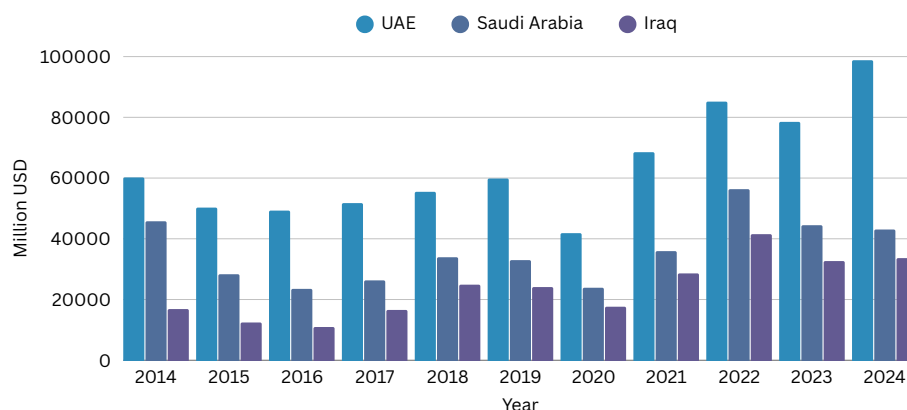
For instance, the concept of an 'Indo-Abrahamic Alliance', posited¹²² by Egyptian foreign policy thinker Mohammed Soliman, and endorsed¹²³ by Indian thinkers such as C Raja Mohan, ultimately led to a minilateral grouping between India, the UAE, the United States, and Israel (I2U2) in 2022. The founding declaration¹²⁴ of the I2U2 grouping, after its inaugural meeting, asserted that it was primarily aimed at

boosting cooperation in joint investments and new initiatives in water, energy, transportation, space, health, and food security. While the non-security focus of the minilateral drew parallels with the Quad, the I2U2 heads of government/state have met only once, in contrast to the Quad, which has also seen more expansive cooperative engagements at multiple levels of leadership.

India's opportunity for greater proactiveness and initiative was particularly enhanced by its G20 Presidency in 2023. This, in turn, facilitated the formalization of potential I2U2 space cooperation and established communication between the business councils of each bilateral partner. The most significant aspect regarding India and the Middle East at the New Delhi G20 Summit was the IMEEC, an ambitious India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor. This corridor was designed to be a sea-rail-land trade route connecting India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, and Greece/Italy.

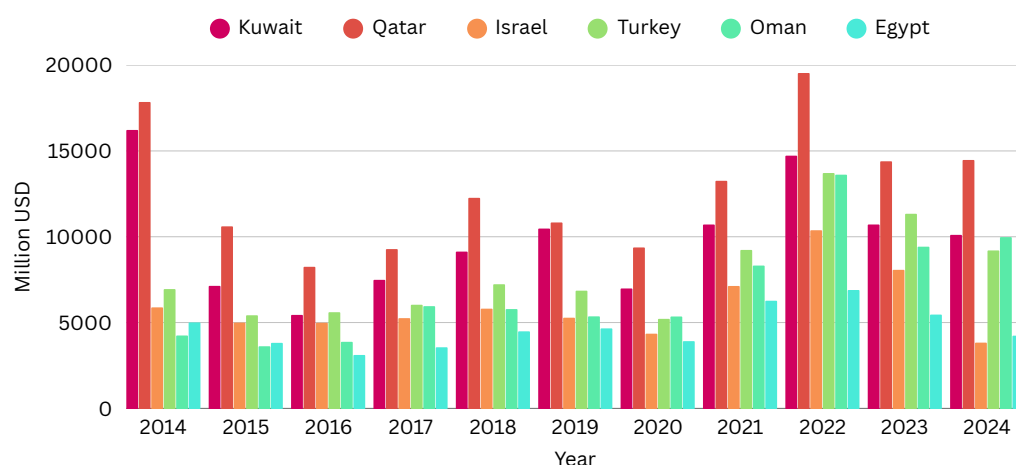
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India's total trade (Goods)



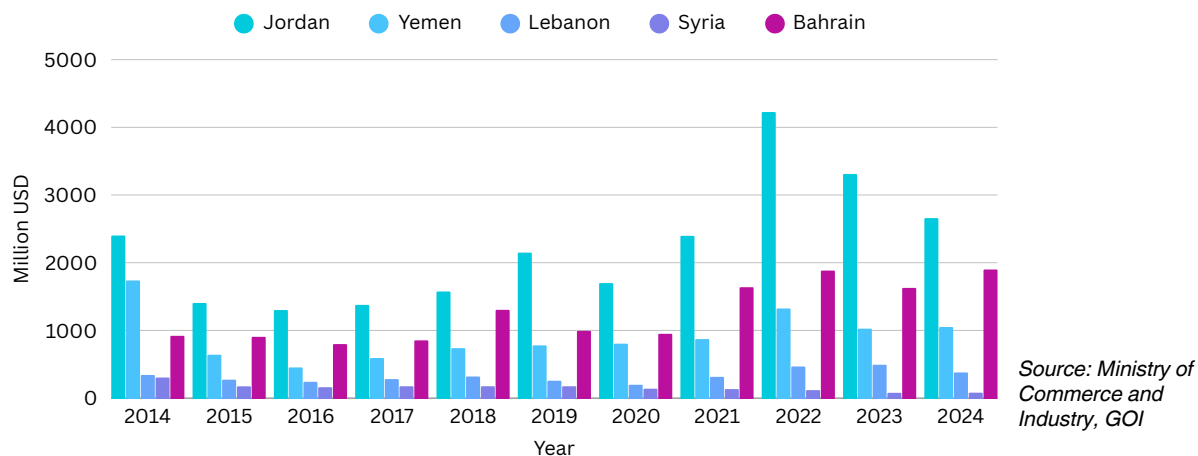
Source: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GOI

India's total trade (Goods)

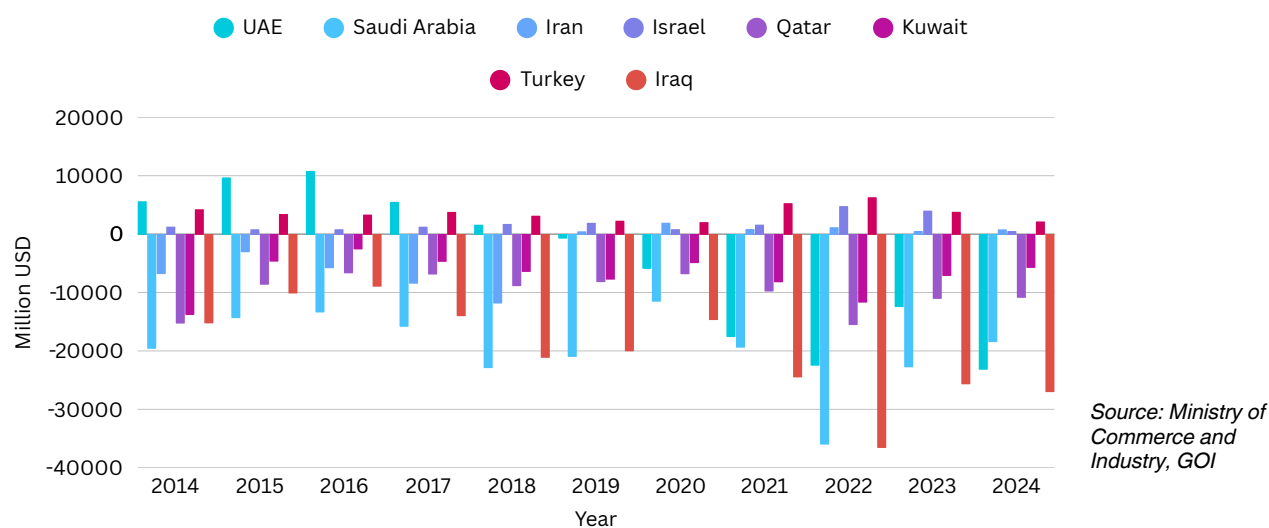


Source: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GOI

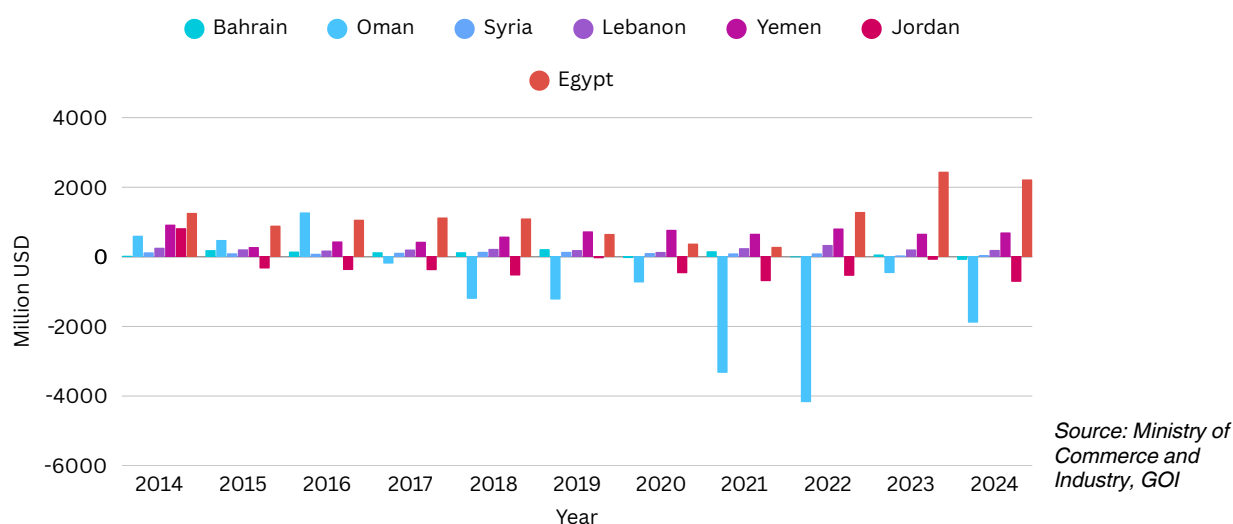
India's total trade (Goods)



India's balance of trade (Goods), negative indicating trade deficit



India's balance of trade (Goods), negative indicating trade deficit



Undoubtedly, India's growing comfort and confidence in the India-UAE bilateral relationship mitigated the inherent risks of this strategy, potentially the most important outcome of the Abraham Accords. India and the UAE established a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2022.¹²⁵ Following the CEPA, India-UAE trade grew by 16% to USD 85 billion in just over a year. Both nations also signed a unique Bilateral Investment Treaty¹²⁶ and expanded their cooperation to include civil nuclear collaboration. By 2024, the total number of multi-sectoral Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) between Indian and Emirati public and private entities had reached 88.¹²⁷

More generally, India's new openness to Free Trade Agreements (FTA) also meant that by 2022, India and the GCC agreed to resume negotiations for an FTA.¹²⁸ By then, apart from India's openness to FTAs,¹²⁹ the GCC's investments in India stood at USD 18 billion, and GCC states contributed 35% and 70% of India's oil and gas imports, respectively.¹³⁰ While the GCC remained India's largest trading bloc, trade for FY 2021-2022 was valued at over USD 154 billion (compared to USD 104 billion in 2018).¹³¹ By September 2023, as the Middle East remained quiet and stable, India had laid the groundwork for a regional connectivity framework that was unprecedented in both nature and scale, connecting South Asia with West Asia.

3.6 Crisis – Staying Invested in the Region

Despite the vocal enthusiasm among all states party to the IMEEC (including the United States), the immediate prospects for the project significantly diminished following Hamas' October 7th terror attacks in Israel, which resulted in approximately 1,200 deaths and over 200 hostages taken,¹³² mostly Israeli civilians living in communities near the Gaza Strip. India's initial response mirrored that of Arab states, as India abstained from a UNGA resolution for a ceasefire in Gaza after Israel's ongoing retaliation in the Strip resulted in over 10,000 Palestinian deaths.¹³³ India distinguished itself from the Global South, which overwhelmingly supported the ceasefire call. Israel's campaign in Gaza was ultimately perceived globally¹³⁴ as being conducted with disproportionate civilian casualties and a neglect for urban areas, further complicated by a renewed attempt to expand settlements in Palestine. This situation prompted South Africa, supported by Arab states, to bring a case to the International Court of Justice, accusing Israel of violating the 1949 Genocide Convention.¹³⁵

In a remarkable reversal of positions in just under a month, India voted in favor of a subsequent UNGA resolution reiterating the call for a ceasefire.¹³⁶ Even more than directly scuttling stability in the Levant, the entry of the other components of the Iran-backed Axis of Resistance ensured that Israel's war in Gaza had a global impact. The Houthis were effectively targeting and attacking commercial shipping in the Red Sea,¹³⁷ the Hezbollah had opened a fresh front between Israel and Lebanon,¹³⁸ and Iraqi militias were targeting¹³⁹ both Israel directly as well as US troops in the region with rockets and drones.

As the death toll in Gaza climbed due to sustained Israeli aerial bombardment and ground action, the Arab street became more restless. Saudi Arabia moved farther back from the brink of normalizing ties with Israel, Bahrain recalled its Ambassador from Israel, and the Arab League-OIC joint summit characterized Israeli actions as "genocide" by late 2024.¹⁴⁰ The Saudi Crown Prince himself separately termed Israel's actions a genocide

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and backed the statements issued by the joint summit in Riyadh.¹⁴¹ India adopted a risk-averse posture of reiterating its support for the two-state solution and calling on all parties to respect international humanitarian law.¹⁴² As the incumbent BJP government headed into elections and sought a record third term from the Indian electorate, its regional strategy for the Middle East was in great peril.

Armed Non-State Actor Groups in the Middle East

A key feature of the Middle Eastern political landscape is the presence of multiple armed non-state actor groups, especially in the Levantine region. Prominent among these are Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen, and the Hashd-al-Sha'abi in Iraq, along with traditional jihadist groups such as Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and their offshoots such as the Hayat Tahrir al-Shaam. Each of these groups has witnessed dramatic evolutions in character, but has been a potent military force with a proven ability to shape the political character of the states in which they operate. For example, while Hezbollah emerged as a result of Israel's invasion of Lebanon and an Iranian desire to nurture a strong proxy force against Israel, its political character has been complex. On one hand, it is deeply integrated with the Lebanese state, with representation in Parliament and a share in the state's Executive, and was key to fighting ISIS in Syria (especially since 2013). On the other hand, it has been designated (wholly) as a terror group by at least 20 states, led by the United States,¹⁴³ and at least five states (including the European Union) deem its military wing (distinct from the political organization) as a terrorist organization.¹⁴⁴ For most of these groups that have a strong political character in the Middle East, India follows the United Nations position and does not regard them as terror groups.¹⁴⁵ India's only exception has been for ISIS, which drew dozens of active Indian recruits, travelling especially from the state of Kerala.¹⁴⁶ On the 7th of October, Hamas' terror attack on Israel categorically proved the ability of these groups to upend plans for regional connectivity that states such as India might be part of.¹⁴⁷ In its aftermath, and amidst Israel's disproportionate response in Gaza, Israel strongly advocated for India to designate Hamas as a terror organization,¹⁴⁸ and even designated Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Tayyiba as a terror group in November 2023.¹⁴⁹ India refrained from reciprocating this action with a similar designation of Hamas. This, among many other indicators, reveals India's reluctance to proactively engage in Middle Eastern affairs, particularly given the complex web of actors and the diverse ways in which they interact with one another. India's approach, rather, has been to condemn terrorism in general (including acts by several of these groups), and to respect the ability of Middle Eastern states to resolve internal issues relating to these groups.

India-Turkey Relations

Between 2014 and 2024, the India-Turkey relationship has been in a silo of its own. In this period, unlike the Arab states, which saw significant shifts in leadership, President Erdogan's hold over Turkey remained strong, despite internal challenges. Turkish foreign policy, while reflecting a strong desire to go beyond its NATO-centric position and broaden engagements in Asia and Africa, has not shed its position on core issues between India and Pakistan, including the Kashmir issue.¹⁵⁰

While both states maintain a robust economic relationship, the bilateral trade deficit has almost consistently been in India's favor. As of January 2025, Ankara had a negative trade balance of USD 274 million with New Delhi.¹⁵¹ This has led Turkey to strongly advocate for both a Free Trade Agreement¹⁵² and a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with India.¹⁵³ In any case, overall bilateral trade volumes between India and Turkey are incomparable with those between India and the two Gulf powerhouses of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. However, trade alone is not the defining marker of strategic ties. Turkey's burgeoning relationship with Pakistan has not been characterized by a concurrent sensitivity to India's position on Kashmir¹⁵⁴—something which Arab states have deftly executed. Both India and Turkey have sought to nurture their own versions of strategic autonomy, and both states aspire towards a greater leadership position in a multipolar world order.¹⁵⁵ But there is no inherent competition between New Delhi and Ankara in this quest, and India's strategic vision for the Middle East through projects such as the IMEC does not align with Turkish objectives. Ankara even views it as a strategic threat, given its potential to undercut Turkey's role as the land-bridge between Asia and Europe.¹⁵⁶

Even as Ankara pushes its own East-West corridor through Iraq,¹⁵⁷ both India and Turkey continue to engage each other, especially through multilateral forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. However, a wider misalignment in geopolitical outlook continues to challenge India-Turkey relations, preventing a strategic evolution in the bilateral relationship. Perhaps the biggest indicator of this is that positive interactions such as India's aid to Syria and Turkey during their devastating earthquake in early 2023,¹⁵⁸ failed to act as a springboard for better, broader ties. In any case, the India-Turkey relationship took a strong turn for the worse, following Turkey's unequivocal (and largely unique) political, diplomatic, and military support to Pakistan during India's cross-border strikes against terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan, following the Pahalgam terror attacks in April 2025.¹⁵⁹

4. Woods and Trees – 2024 – Till Date

4.1 Unprecedented Continuity in Indian Leadership

The 2024 general elections revived coalition politics in New Delhi, with the BJP emerging as the largest party¹⁶⁰ in the Lok Sabha but failing to reach the majority mark. However, this shift arguably had little impact on India's Middle East policy. In fact, the new Indian government remained optimistic about the IMEEC despite Israel's war in Gaza. The unprecedented scale of the IMEEC, in terms of India-led cross-regional connectivity projects, was evident in how prominently it featured as a foreign policy success story during the election campaign. The BJP's 2024 manifesto stated that the party "will facilitate the international movement of trade and services through Bharat [India] by boosting connectivity to Europe via the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor."¹⁶¹ The sources of concern continued to lie in the region itself, not in whether India's interests and appetite would endure.

4.2 Continuing Crisis in the Middle East

By the end of 2024, more shifts occurred in the Middle East.

First, Israel eliminated key leaders of the Iranian Axis of Resistance in Gaza (Hamas leaders Yahya Sinwar and Mohammad Deif), Lebanon (Hassan Nasrallah, Fuad Shukr, among others), Tehran (Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh), and the entire top leadership¹⁶² of Hezbollah, along with key IRGC officials at Iran's Damascus consulate.

Second, Israel's invasion¹⁶³ of Lebanon and the severe strains on Hezbollah led to a temporary loosening of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria. These opportunities created by the Israel-Lebanon war allowed for a rapid advance¹⁶⁴ by the Idlib-based Syrian opposition led by Hayat Tahrir al-Shaam (HTS) into Damascus. With unprecedented speed, the HTS success resulted in the end of decades-long Ba'ath party rule in Syria, following Assad's escape¹⁶⁵ to Moscow and the party's dissolution. Unlike India's critical reactions¹⁶⁶ to the violent ends of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, the conclusion of the last ally from an older ideological mold elicited a more calibrated, forward-looking response from India.¹⁶⁷

However, this complete reorientation of the Middle East also brought some internal contradictions. While the Gulf Arab states were initially viewed as remaining loyal to their informal security alliance with Israel against Iran, by late 2024 and early 2025, this had radically shifted. On one hand, as Israel officially undermined the prospects for a Palestinian state through a parliamentary resolution,¹⁶⁸ Arab states increased their support for the two-state solution and Palestinian sovereignty.¹⁶⁹

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The new Indian government remained optimistic about the IMEEC despite Israel's war in Gaza... The BJP's 2024 manifesto stated that the party "will facilitate the international movement of trade and services through Bharat [India] by boosting connectivity to Europe via the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor.

On the other hand, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE demonstrated an unprecedented willingness to cooperate with Iran on defense. While the Chief of General Staff of the Saudi military made a historic first visit to Tehran,¹⁷⁰ the Iranian IRGC, which had been accused of attacking Emirati ships until 2019, sent its warships for exchanges and exercises with the Emirati military in early 2025¹⁷¹—another historic first, with such scenes of warm IRGC-Emirati interaction never witnessed before. Hence, while the Palestinian question promises more friction between the Arab states and Israel, the deepening of the rapprochement with Iran, even months after the electoral victory of a US presidential candidate hostile to Tehran, suggests more stability.

Notably, the question of Palestine has always remained important to every Arab monarchy; a struggle whose leadership the Arabs could not cede to Iran, which, through its proxy groups, has been the principal military opponent of Israel throughout this war. Their approach to seeking a resolution has evolved, shifting from contesting Israel's legitimacy and shunning it, to accepting Israel's sovereignty and engaging with it to facilitate the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state.

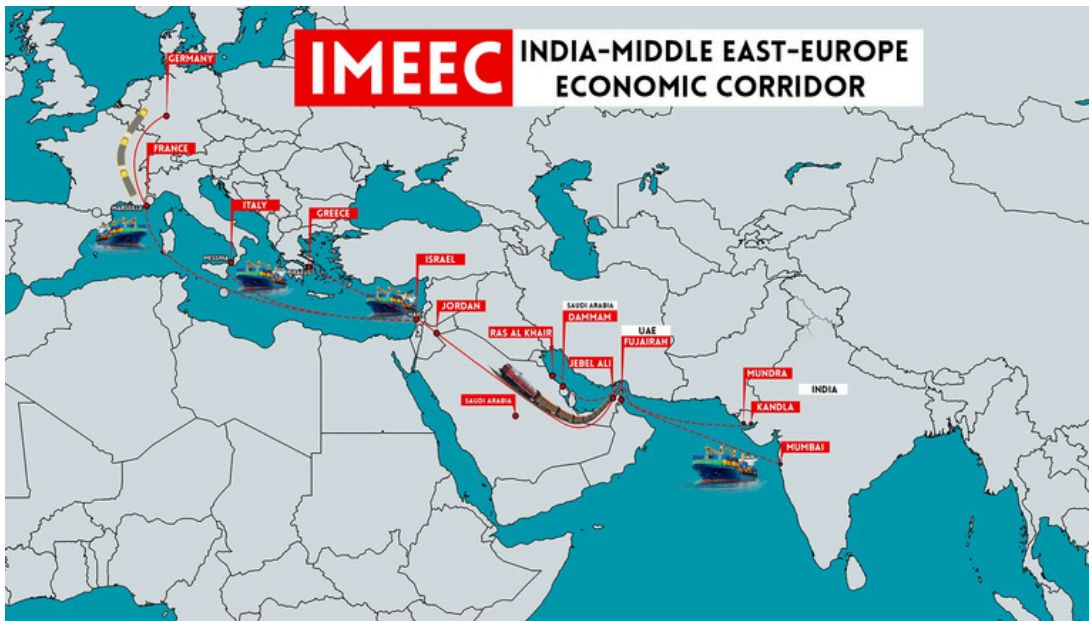
4.3 Stagnation and Questions over Key Initiatives

The expanding conflict in the Middle East, despite the reorientation of the Gulf Arab-Iran relationship, threatens the short- and long-term viability of major initiatives like the IMEEC. Officials and diplomats in India have already acknowledged that “it would be challenging to revive diplomacy over IMEEC between Israel and Arab countries until there was some form of commitment from the Netanyahu government regarding discussions for a two-state solution, which seems unlikely at present. In the meantime, India would maintain the project on the agenda with the relevant countries.”¹⁷²

This strategy further underscores India's goal to maintain its bilateral relationships in the Middle East at an advanced stage, even as regional conflicts unfold. Given the proximity of the October 7th attacks to the IMEEC's launch, states could not meet the 60-day timeline for a stakeholder meeting, which has effectively been postponed indefinitely. While India navigates the crisis, it has also sought to redefine how progress on the IMEEC is measured. Its consistent bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE have enabled these states to advance on the first leg of the Corridor, as reflected in the India-UAE transcontinental trade corridor pact signed in February 2024.¹⁷³ For now, the broader concept of the IMEEC remains hostage to armed conflict and political tensions on the ground. This is similar to other proposed India-led corridors elsewhere, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP).

The Trump administration's new plan¹⁷⁴ to depopulate Gaza threatens to disrupt the emerging Middle Eastern order that has developed in the post-2020 era. Although Hamas has bolstered its fighting strength according to U.S. assessments,¹⁷⁵ Gulf states have solidified their insistence on establishing a Palestinian state, with Saudi Arabia reaffirming¹⁷⁶ this as a non-negotiable condition for any potential normalization of relations with Israel following Trump's remarks on Gaza.

“While India navigates the crisis, it has also sought to redefine how progress on the IMEEC is measured. Its consistent bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE have enabled these states to advance on the first leg of the Corridor, as reflected in the India-UAE transcontinental trade corridor pact signed in February 2024.



Source: ETV
Bharat

More importantly, by early 2025, Jordan and Israel had drawn closer¹⁷⁷ to conflict than ever before since their 1994 peace treaty, with both countries deploying¹⁷⁸ additional troops to their border after fierce Jordanian resistance to American-Israeli proposals to relocate Palestinians to Jordan. The Hashemite Kingdom already accommodates over two million Palestinians, which has long required careful management of the state's socio-political structure. For the IMEEC to succeed, sustained peace between Jordan and Israel is essential, as this corridor leg is where geopolitical challenges truly begin.

Moreover, projects like the I2U2 and IMEEC have emerged as Arab states demonstrate a proactivity akin to that of India. For the Arab states, this interest also extends to China; all Gulf states are currently engaged in various Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, either directly or indirectly. More importantly, China, which constructed¹⁷⁹ the high-speed cross-Saudi railway intended to support the IMEEC, has also expanded its defense cooperation with the Gulf Arab states. Riyadh and Beijing reportedly agreed to elevate their bilateral military ties to a "higher level," with the relationship between both armies being on a "fast track" following multiple exchanges, joint drills, exercises, and personnel training.¹⁸⁰

Notably, while the IMEEC can counterbalance the BRI, the evolving dynamics in the Middle East introduce further complications: the formation of a Turkey-backed regime in Damascus¹⁸¹ has opened the possibility of a Qatar-Saudi-Syria-Turkey gas pipeline to Europe, thus competing with the IMEEC, which could also supply gas to Europe without relying on Israel for access to the Mediterranean (unlike the IMEEC). Neither Turkey nor Qatar is part of the IMEEC.

“While the IMEEC can counterbalance the BRI, the evolving dynamics in the Middle East introduce further complications: the formation of a Turkey-backed regime in Damascus has opened the possibility of a Qatar-Saudi-Syria-Turkey gas pipeline to Europe.

4.4 New Guardrails in the India-Middle East Relationship

First, throughout the 15-month war in Gaza, India maintained a careful balancing act while monitoring reactions from Arab states and the public. India's initial moment of solidarity with Israel after October 7th (which generated perceptions of policy change) occurred alongside developments in the Arab world that included more-than-usual criticism of Hamas and sympathy for Israel. While the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) was quick to reiterate India's support for the two-state solution and nip any perceptions of a shift in India's Palestine policy, India's political statements also eventually reflected a balance. This occurred as the Arabs' sympathetic view of Israel after October 7th also changed as Israel's war on Gaza progressed. The gruesome Palestinian death toll, multiple reports by international observers characterizing Israeli actions as genocidal, and Israel's fierce resistance to a Palestinian state, influenced a hardening of the Arab stance against Israel (threatening but not undoing the warmth built between 2020 and 2023).

Second, India's experience from 2014 to 2019 in strengthening bilateral relationships with the Gulf Arab states, despite ongoing turmoil in the Middle East, indicates that India's avenues for strategic engagement and cooperation with these countries are supported by significant stakes. The establishment of regional cooperation frameworks based on these foundations now depends more on sustained stability and the elimination of conflict sources. Essentially, even if the regional crisis draws on for longer and prevents projects such as the IMEEC or I2U2 from progressing, the strong bilateral relationships that India has built enable New Delhi to wait it out. India and the UAE are each other's second-largest trading partners, and there remains interest and demand for trade along the IMEEC Corridor and its three connectivity verticals—digital, energy, and transport. While the broader strategic rationale behind IMEEC remains solid, tactical obstacles threaten immediate plans for India-Middle East-Europe connectivity. In April 2025, a significant piece of evidence emerged vindicating India's efforts to keep its bilateral relationships strong with Middle Eastern states despite shifting geopolitical sands. April 2025 featured PM Modi's third visit to Saudi Arabia (albeit cut short due to the terror attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir), while two major events unfolded. These developments included the Trump administration and the Iranian government resuming talks for a new nuclear deal, as well as the Saudi Defense Minister visiting Tehran to meet with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, a first in 25 years, among other senior leaders. A snapshot image of the month would reflect India's foresight in maintaining its strong Chabahar-focused partnership with Iran, while complying with US sanctions, and deepening its strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia. Notwithstanding the rupture in the Arab-Israel relationship, the shifts in the Arab-Iran-US relationship vindicated India's preference to remain engaged with states across geopolitical lines.

Third, India arguably understands that the OIC's consistent statements criticizing it over Kashmir cannot influence New Delhi's perception of the Gulf Arab states' political stance. While these statements reflect the agreement of these states, they are not supported by the individual positions of the Gulf Arab states, which are now deeply invested in India and its role in the Middle East. Furthermore, in states such as Saudi Arabia, the senior leadership landscape has changed drastically compared to the court that the pre-2014 Indian government dealt with. Before the change of government in New Delhi in 2014, India's External Affairs Minister (EAM) and senior leaders were meeting with Crown Prince Salman, Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal, Prince Muqrin, Interior Minister Mohammed bin Naif, and Labor Minister Adel Fakeih. While Salman bin Abdul Aziz became king in 2015, Saud bin Faisal passed away that same year, and Prince Muqrin was dismissed after a brief tenure as Crown Prince, replaced by Mohammad bin Nayef in 2015. By 2017, both MBN and Adel Fakeih faced the end of their political careers after being detained during MBS' 2017 purge of the royal court.

Joint Military Exercises				
Exercise Name	Type	Year(s) Conducted	Location	Key Details/Participating Units
UAE				
DESERT CYCLONE	Army	2024	Mahajan, Rajasthan	First bilateral army exercise; UAE Land Forces & Indian Army; Sub-conventional operations, FIBUA, peacekeeping.
Zayed Talwar	Navy	2023	UAE	Bilateral naval exercise; INS Visakhapatnam, INS Trikand & UAE Navy; Enhance interoperability and synergy.
Desert Flag	Air Force	(Multilateral)	UAE	India & UAE both participate in this UAE-hosted multinational exercise for complex fighter engagements and best practice exchange; IAF deploys MiG-29 and Jaguar aircraft.
Desert Knight	Air Force	2023	Arabian Sea	Trilateral air combat exercise involving India, UAE, and France; Strengthen trilateral defense cooperation and enhance military interoperability.
Qatar				
Za'ir-Al-Bahr	Navy	2019, 2021	Doha, Persian Gulf	Bilateral maritime exercise; Indian Navy & Qatar Emiri Naval Forces; Counter-terrorism, maritime security, tactical exercises.
Desert Flag	Air Force	2025 (Multilateral)	UAE	India & Qatar both participate in this UAE-hosted multinational exercise for complex fighter engagements and best practice exchange.
Iniochos	Air Force	2025 (Multilateral)	Greece	Qatar participates in this Greek-hosted exercise alongside India and Israel, involving advanced air warfare training.
Saudi Arabia				
EX-SADA TANSEEQ-I	Army	2024	Mahajan, Rajasthan	First joint land force exercise; Royal Saudi Land Forces & Indian Army; Joint operations in semi-desert terrain.
Al Mohed Al Hindi	Navy	2021	Off Al Jubail	First bilateral naval exercise; INS Kochi & Royal Saudi Navy's Badr; Asymmetric threat, anti-piracy, boarding ops.

Al Mohed Al Hindi 23	Navy	2023	Off Al Jubail	Second bilateral naval exercise; INS Tarkash, INS Subhadra & Royal Saudi Naval Force; Wide spectrum of maritime operations.
Desert Flag	Air Force	2025 (Multilateral)	UAE	India & Saudi Arabia both participate in this UAE-hosted multinational exercise for complex fighter engagements and best practice exchange.
Red Flag	Air Force	2024 (Multilateral)	USA	Saudi Arabia participates in this US-hosted exercise, in which India has also participated previously, for advanced air combat training.
Spears of Victory	Air Force	2025 (Multilateral)	Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia hosts this multinational exercise focused on enhancing combat readiness and interoperability; India's direct participation not confirmed.

The new leadership, working with MBS, brought a new pragmatism to the table, given the generational shift in the Saudi monarchy and their dilution of older ideological constraints. In any case, India's consistent and "steadfast" support for a Palestinian state was explicitly acknowledged by the Arab League in early 2024.¹⁸² This reflected a satisfaction with India's political positions, within more functional groupings such as the Arab League, even while larger ideological groupings such as the OIC continue to criticize India over Kashmir. Besides, in other multilateral groupings such as the BRICS, India has been vocal in its support for Saudi and Emirati membership, which manifested in June 2024.¹⁸³

More importantly, both the rise of new leadership in Gulf states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, as well as their new geoeconomic priorities, resulted in their reduced appetite to criticize India for any ideological or pro-Pakistan considerations. This has been especially true with regard to the Kashmir issue, which Pakistan megaphones as an issue for the Muslim world.

Consequently, there is a lack of sustained points of dispute or friction between India and the Arab world, which would inherently disable broader partnerships. States such as Turkey are exceptions to the norm.

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5. Lighthouse – Looking Ahead for India and the Middle East

5.1 For the Region

At the time of writing this report, the Israel-Hamas ceasefire has collapsed,¹⁸⁴ while larger crises have emerged over the new Israeli-American plan for Gaza. The intensity of the 17-month-long war, the entrenched positions of each relevant state, and the impact on global trade and shipping indicate that all parties have a vested interest in preventing the Israel-Palestine question from escalating into violence again, after the current crisis is managed and resolved. This is pushing each party towards varying forms of dispute resolution, even as their approaches differ significantly.

However, the ongoing crisis in the Middle East and the upending of the Iranian Axis also allow for the sustenance of Arab rapprochement with Iran rather than disabling it, as it increases the bargaining capacity of Arab states in their respective bilaterals with Iran. Given that this occurs amidst a downturn of Arab ties with Israel, it still means that from India's perspective today, the Arab-Iran hyphenation is steady, while the Israel-Palestine hyphenation is conflict-ridden, and the Arab-Israel hyphenation is on the brink of crisis.

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5.2 For India

India has a significant stake in Middle Eastern stability. Its ambitious cross-continental trade corridor plan was announced when India arguably sat in a proverbial geopolitical sweet spot, like never before in its history, particularly concerning the Middle East.¹⁸⁵ A complex trade corridor with strategic benefits linking India and Europe through Arab countries and Israel, during a period of relative calm on almost all regional fronts, is a scenario that has seldom manifested for India to harbor any strategic aspirations.

However, between the IMEEC announcement¹⁸⁶ on September 9, 2023, and Hamas' attacks on Israel on October 7, this sweet spot lasted only 28 days. Since then, the IMEEC has often been viewed¹⁸⁷ with some suspicion, even as New Delhi remains steadfast and finds the UAE and Saudi Arabia reciprocating interest. Currently, India will continue to advance the India-Middle East segment of the IMEEC, treating it as a trilateral corridor with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In the long term, it is in India's interest for all three relationships to remain stable.

In terms of policy, India's contemporary history reflects a deep reluctance to engage proactively in the Middle East's dispute resolution processes. This cautious approach has minimized the risk of adverse perceptions from any party, while India actively nurtures strong bilateral relationships with each. In the current crisis, the Indian strategy has adhered to this rationale.

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5.3 For both India and the Region

India's balanced approach to the Middle East holds as long as Indian interests are secure. However, there have been conflicts where Middle Eastern states are engaged in proxy battles, and where India, under the current leadership, has clearly taken a side. In the recent Armenia-Azerbaijan war over Nagorno Karabakh, Israel, Pakistan, and Turkey supported¹⁸⁸ Azerbaijan's claim to Nagorno Karabakh, while Armenia depended¹⁸⁹ on Indian arms. These arms transfers reached record levels by 2024,¹⁹⁰ with Armenia becoming the largest recipient of Indian arms exports that year. India's proactive stance in Armenia was significantly influenced by its desire to counter the Turkish-Pakistani expansion in the South Caucasus and establish a strategic foothold, even as Pakistan and Israel were aligned on the political spectrum.

Consequently, it is in India's interest to leverage its strong ties with both Israel and the Arab world to advocate more actively for the establishment of a Palestinian state, which can bring lasting stability to the region. Several material facts that form the basis of the Indian stance are changing without prompting any modifications in Indian expressions. For instance, aside from Israel's increasing resistance to a two-state solution, which India supports, most of India's humanitarian assistance to Palestine has been provided through UN agencies, such as UNRWA,¹⁹¹ which Israel has now banned.¹⁹² India's pragmatism in Middle Eastern conflicts is justified by the large Indian expatriate population in the region. However, the longer the original sources of conflict in the region persist, the greater the risk to the Indian diaspora. Israel's opposition to a Palestinian state and the rise in settlement activity further undermine India's long-standing position on the Palestine question and pose the threat of generating more regional instability.

Moreover, the framing of the Palestine question has evolved. It is no longer merely an ideological or moral issue for Gulf Arab and other Middle Eastern states. The Emirati and Saudi monarchies, along with other countries such as Jordan and Egypt, have invested considerable resources in mitigating the potential for political or militant Islam to re-emerge using causes like that of Palestine. Now, the indiscriminate conduct of Israel's war on Gaza in particular (with the death toll having crossed 50,000),¹⁹³ and its opposition to Palestinian sovereignty in general, risks fueling a resurgence of these forces and threatens new cycles of violence. This is precisely the outcome that endangers Arab and Indian plans for regional connectivity and economic growth. For instance, the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Islamic Action Front (IAF) in Jordan secured only five seats in the 2020 parliamentary elections.¹⁹⁴ However, in the September 2024 election, with an electoral platform strongly supporting Hamas in Gaza, the IAF won 31 seats;¹⁹⁵ numbers not seen in 30 years since the party's founding in 1992. States such as Saudi Arabia recognize this, which is why they are focusing on ensuring that the state does not cede the politically vital pro-Palestinian space to elements that could threaten it, internally or externally.

Essentially, the question of the final settlement of the Palestinian issue is now more grounded in realpolitik than before, given the increased stakes for each Arab state and partners like India in maintaining regional stability. Without addressing the question of Palestinian statehood, regional frameworks of cooperation will always be built on tenuous grounds. India, in the meantime, will continue focusing on deepening its bilateral relationships with Middle Eastern states, while it waits for sustainable resolution of the fresh conflicts in the region to substantially advance its larger regional connectivity projects and strategic interests.

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