

# **India's Balancing Act: Navigating Relations with Israel and Arab Countries in the Aftermath of the Abraham Accord**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Following the Abraham Accord, India navigates delicate ties with Israel and Arab nations in West Asia. This study analyzes India's historical links with Israel, support for Palestinians, and deepening Arab engagement, offering insights into its strategic balancing act. By evaluating the Accord's impact on India's diplomacy, economy, and security, it identifies opportunities and challenges. This research aims to guide policymakers on fostering regional stability and advancing India's strategic interests amidst evolving geopolitics.

**Keywords :** India's balancing act, Israel & Arab countries, Abraham accord, West Asia

## **INTRODUCTION**

India's foreign policy towards West Asia has traditionally been characterized by its support for the Palestinian cause and its close ties with Arab nations. However, the signing of the Abraham Accord in 2020, which normalized relations between Israel and several Arab countries, has introduced a new dynamic for India. The Abraham Accords, signed in September 2020, marked a breakthrough in Middle Eastern diplomacy, normalizing relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, followed by subsequent agreements with Sudan and Morocco. This development, hailed as a step towards peace and stability in the region, also presented new opportunities and challenges for countries like India with multifaceted ties to the parties involved<sup>1</sup>. India's relationship with Israel has steadily strengthened over the years, particularly in defense and technology cooperation. Israel has emerged as one of India's top defense suppliers, with collaboration spanning areas such as missile defense, counterterrorism, and cybersecurity. Additionally, economic and cultural exchanges have flourished, contributing to a robust bilateral partnership. On the other hand, India maintains longstanding ties with various Arab countries, rooted in historical, economic,

and strategic interests. Energy cooperation, trade relations, and the significant Indian diaspora in the Gulf region are integral aspects of these relationships<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, India has traditionally supported the Palestinian cause, aligning itself with Arab states in advocating for a negotiated two-state solution. Against this backdrop, India's challenge lies in striking a delicate balance between its burgeoning ties with Israel and its longstanding relationships with Arab countries. While enhancing cooperation with Israel holds strategic benefits in areas such as defense and technology, India must also navigate sensitivities in the Arab world, particularly regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## **Historical Background:**

India's historical stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been rooted in its support for the Palestinian cause. India recognized the state of Palestine in 1988 and has consistently supported a two-state solution. On the other hand, India recognized Israel in 1950 and has maintained diplomatic relations since then, though with limited engagement. India's relations with Israel and Arab countries have evolved over time, and the aftermath of the Abraham Accord has further complicated this dynamic.

Historically, India has maintained a pro-Arab stance

due to its support for the Palestinian cause. India recognized the State of Palestine in 1988 and has consistently advocated for a peaceful resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. India also played an important role in establishing the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which has traditionally supported the Arab position on the Israel-Palestine issue<sup>3</sup>.

However, India's relationship with Israel has also seen significant development. In 1992, India established diplomatic ties with Israel, following years of secret engagement. Since then, bilateral trade, defense cooperation, and technological collaboration between the two countries have grown. Israel has become one of India's top defense partners, with defense deals worth billions of dollars.

The Abraham Accord, signed in September 2020, marked a turning point in the Middle East by establishing formal diplomatic relations between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain. This agreement demonstrated a shift in Arab countries' approach towards Israel, breaking the long-held Arab consensus of not recognizing Israel until a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was reached.

#### **Implications of the Abraham Accord:**

The Abraham Accord brought about a significant shift in the dynamics of the Israeli-Arab relationship. It led to the establishment of diplomatic ties between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. This normalization has created both opportunities and challenges for India. India's balancing act of navigating relations with Israel and Arab countries in the aftermath of the Abraham Accord holds significant implications in the realms of politics, diplomacy, and trade. The Abraham Accord, signed in September 2020, normalized relations between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain. This marked a major diplomatic breakthrough in west Asia, but it also presented challenges for countries like India, which have long standing relationships with both Israel and Arab countries.

Politically, India's historical support for the Palestinian cause and advocacy for their rights could be at odds with its growing ties with Israel. Maintaining a delicate balance between these two positions will require India to reassess its stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict. The normalization of relations between Israel and Arab

countries might prompt India to adopt a more nuanced approach, advocating for a peaceful resolution while engaging in bilateral dialogues with both Israel and Arab countries<sup>4</sup>.

Diplomatically, India will need to tread carefully to strengthen its relations with both Israel and Arab countries. The Abraham Accord has created a new Middle East dynamic, with Arab countries aligning themselves with Israel against Iran. India, being reliant on the Gulf countries for energy and with a large diaspora residing there, cannot afford to antagonize Arab countries. Simultaneously, India's strategic partnership with Israel, characterized by defense cooperation and technological collaboration, cannot be neglected. Thus, India will have to maintain a delicate balancing act to prevent any strain in its diplomatic ties with these nations.

Economically, the Abraham Accord has the potential to benefit India. The normalization of relations between Israel and Arab countries opens avenues for collaboration in technology, innovation, and entrepreneurship. India, being a global technology hub, can play a crucial role in facilitating such partnerships. Additionally, improved relations between Israel and Arab countries could lead to increased trade in sectors like agriculture, water management, and defense, where India can find new opportunities.

#### **Opportunities for India:**

The normalization between Israel and Arab countries opens up avenues for India to deepen its diplomatic, economic, and security ties with all parties involved. India has long pursued closer relations with Gulf countries due to strategic interests, including energy security, trade, and investment. The Abraham Accord can serve as a catalyst for enhanced cooperation, particularly in the areas of technology, defense, agriculture, and water management. Some better outcomes of accord are as follow:

1. Israel is planning to initiate a desalination program in Lakshadweep.
2. Check and balance between USA and Russian allies in west Asia through INSTC<sup>(i)</sup> and IMEC<sup>(ii)</sup>.
3. Counter CPEC<sup>(iii)</sup> through Chabahar port in Iran.
4. Kashmir's developmental investments by Dubai's

(i) International north south transport corridor

(ii) India middle east economic corridor

(iii) China pakistan economic corridor

Emaar

5. Counter Turkey's policies against India's interests especially the Kashmir issue.
6. India's reach to Europe through easy access mode.
7. Enhance maritime security in the Red Sea and gulf of Aden.
8. Fulfillment of energy and defense needs of India.

### Challenges for India:

India faces challenges in balancing its relations with Israel and its Arab partners while simultaneously maintaining its historical support for the Palestinian cause. India has always emphasized its solidarity with the Palestinian people and their right to self-determination. The normalization of relations between Israel and Arab countries might strain India's relations with the Palestinians and other Arab nations that consistently advocate for Palestinian rights<sup>5</sup>. Current challenges in front of India are as follow:

- China's 400 billion USD investment plan in Iran.
- The US withdrew from the joint comprehensive plan of action and close ties between Iran and Russia.
- War between Israel and Hamas.
- How to make balance between INSTC<sup>(iv)</sup> and IMEC<sup>(v)</sup>.
- Growing India-Israel friendship and historical Palestine support.
- Expansion of BRI (belt and road initiative) in Djibouti and Saudi Arabia.

### India's Balancing Act:

India's approach to navigating relations with Israel and Arab countries post-Abraham Accord requires careful strategic considerations. India has refrained from making any significant policy shifts and has reiterated its commitment to a two-state solution. It has continued to support Palestine in international forums while simultaneously pursuing engagement with Israel and Arab nations<sup>6</sup>. Recent balancing acts of Modi administration are as follow:

- Adoption De-hyphenated policy 2018 in case of

Israel-Palestine.

- Strengthen I2U2 (India, Israel, USA, UAE)
- Support IMEC (India Middle East economic corridor) to counter BRI (Belt and road initiative)
- Military exercises between India and gulf countries to strengthen maritime security in Arabian Sea<sup>7</sup>.
- India's Haifa port development project (1.2 billion USD) in Israel.

### India's Engagement with Israel:

India's engagement with Israel has been primarily driven by defense and security cooperation, as well as technological exchanges. Both countries have collaborated on various defense projects, including joint military exercises and defense technology transfer. Defense ties between India and Israel are as follow:

- *Boost to Strategic Ties* : Israel among top 4 arms suppliers to India (apart from Russia, US and France). Annual sales worth over \$1 billion
- *Missile Defense* : 3 joint DRDO<sup>(vi)</sup>-Israeli Aerospace Industries projects underway for Barak-8 surface-to-air missile systems for Navy (initial cost Rs 2,606 crore), IAF (Rs 10,076 crore) and Army (Rs 16,830 crore)
- *Drones* : Over 100 Israeli UAVS<sup>(vii)</sup>, from Heron and Searcher- II surveillance and precision-targeting drones to Harop killer' drones, inducted. Rs. 3,500-crore Project Cheetah to fit Heron drones with missiles in pipeline
- *Radars* : Israeli radars, from Aerostat to Green Pine radars, inducted. Now, acquiring 66 air defense fire control radars for Rs. 4,577 crore
- *AWACS*<sup>(viii)</sup>: Impending deal for 2 Phalcon AWACS for over \$1.5 billion. 3 Phalcon AWACS, mounted on IL-76 aircraft, earlier inducted under \$1.1 billion deal
- *Missiles and Bombs*: Inductions range from Spyder quick-reaction anti-aircraft missiles, Python and Derby air-to- air missiles to Crystal Maze PGMs and Spice-2000 bombs<sup>8</sup>.

Politically, India and Israel have been engaging in diplomatic exchanges and high-level visits to enhance

(iv) International north south transport corridor

(v) India middle east economic corridor

(vi) Defense research and development organization

(vii) Unmanned aerial vehicles

(viii) Airborne warning and control system

bilateral ties. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a historic visit to Israel in 2017, the first-ever by an Indian Prime Minister. The visit signaled a significant shift in India's approach towards Israel, highlighting the importance India attaches to its relationship with Israel<sup>9</sup>. The two countries have also been engaging in regular consultations on regional and global issues of common interest. Economically, trade and investment have become crucial pillars of India-Israel relations. The bilateral trade volume between the two countries reached \$5 billion in 2020, and both sides have set a target of reaching \$20 billion by 2025<sup>10</sup>. Cooperation in sectors such as agriculture, water management, renewable energy, and technology has been growing steadily. India has also become an important market for Israeli defense and cybersecurity technologies, with several defense deals being signed between the two countries.

| Bilateral trade with Israel |        |
|-----------------------------|--------|
| (Time period )              | (\$bn) |
| 2013-2014                   | 6.05   |
| 2014-2015                   | 5.16   |
| 2015-2016                   | 4.19   |
| 2016-2017                   | 5.02   |

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In the realm of defense and security, India and Israel have a robust partnership. Defense cooperation includes joint military exercises, exchanges between defense establishments, and the procurement of Israeli defense systems by India. Israel's expertise in defense technology and India's defense modernization efforts provide a strong foundation for collaboration<sup>12</sup>.

Additionally, India and Israel have been collaborating in the field of innovation, research, and development. Initiatives such as the India-Israel Industrial R&D and Technological Innovation Fund (I4F), established in 2017, promote joint R&D projects between Indian and Israeli companies in various sectors<sup>13</sup>.

### India's Engagement with Arab Countries:

India's historical ties with Arab countries and its quest for energy security have shaped its relations in the region. India has a significant diaspora in Gulf countries and has pursued economic and cultural ties with them. It has been an integral partner in infrastructure development, trade,

and investment in the Arab region.

India's engagement with Arab countries regarding its balancing act of navigating relations with Israel and Arab countries in the aftermath of the Abraham Accord is characterized by longstanding ties, cultural connections, and cooperation in various sectors.

India's relationship with Arab countries has deep historical and cultural roots. India has a large diaspora in the Arab world, with millions of Indians residing in countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait<sup>14</sup>. These connections have helped foster strong people-to-people ties and economic cooperation between India and Arab countries.

| INDIA-GCC Trade Statistics FY 2018 - FY 2022(US\$ Millions) |         |         |
|---|---------|---------|
| (Time period)   | Imports | Exports |
| 2017-2018   | 64079   | 39391   |
| 2018-2019   | 79716   | 41622   |
| 2019-2020   | 80465   | 40466   |
| 2020-2021   | 59589   | 87364   |

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Economically, India has long-standing trade relationships with Arab countries. The Gulf countries, in particular, are critical sources of energy for India, and bilateral trade between India and Arab countries has been consistently strong. India is also a major recipient of remittances from its diaspora in the Arab world, which contributes to its economy.

| Top 5 Recipients of Remittances (2023) |                   |
|--|-------------------|
| (Country)                              | (In US\$ Billion) |
| INDIA                                  | \$125 billion     |
| MEXICO                                 | \$67 billion      |
| CHINA                                  | \$50 billion      |
| PHILIPPINES                            | \$40 billion      |
| EGYPT                                  | \$24 billion      |

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| Where Do Remittances To India Come From The Top 5 countries? |                   |
|--|-------------------|
| (Country)  | (Remittance in %) |
| USA <sup>(ix)</sup>  | 23.4%             |
| UAE <sup>(x)</sup>   | 18%               |
| UK <sup>(xi)</sup>   | 6.8%              |
| SINGAPORE  | 5.7%              |
| SAUDI ARABIA   | 5.1%              |

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(ix) United States of America

(x) 2 United Arab Emirates

(xi) United Kingdom

Diplomatically, India has maintained a policy of engaging with Arab countries on various regional and global issues. India has supported the Arab consensus on the Israel-Palestine issue and has consistently advocated for the rights of the Palestinian people. India has also been actively involved in peace efforts in the region and has supported initiatives such as the Arab Peace Initiative.

India's relationship with Arab countries extends to other areas as well. In the field of defense, India has developed defense ties with countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman. This includes defense cooperation, joint military exercises, and the exchange of defense technology<sup>18</sup>.

Culturally, India has a rich history of cultural exchanges with Arab countries. Arabic language and literature have been influential in India, and there are strong educational and cultural ties between the two regions. Arab countries have also been major destinations for Indian tourists, further strengthening cultural bonds.

Overall, India's engagement with Arab countries is characterized by a multifaceted relationship that encompasses economic cooperation, diplomatic engagement, defense ties, and cultural exchanges.

### Conclusion:

India's balancing act in navigating its relations with Israel and Arab countries in the aftermath of the Abraham Accord requires careful strategic considerations. By adopting a nuanced approach, India can leverage the opportunities presented by the accord to enhance its engagement with both Israel and Arab nations, while also addressing the sensitivities associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. India has deep historical and cultural ties with Arab countries, and its longstanding support for the Palestinian cause has shaped its approach to the Israel-Arab dynamic. At the same time, India has been actively engaging with Israel over the years, forging strong political, economic, and defense partnerships.

The Abraham Accord has brought a significant shift in the Middle East, with Arab countries formalizing diplomatic relations with Israel. This development has created new complexities for India as it strives to maintain its relationships with both Israel and Arab nations. India's commitment to the Palestinian cause remains intact, and it continues to advocate for a peaceful resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

India's engagement with Israel has seen significant

growth in recent years, with bilateral trade, defense cooperation, and technology collaboration flourishing. India recognizes Israel as an important partner in various domains, including defense, agriculture, water management, and innovation.

Simultaneously, India values its ties with Arab countries, which encompass economic cooperation, energy security, and cultural exchanges. India has a large diaspora in the Arab world, and these people-to-people connections contribute to the strength of the bilateral relationships. To navigate this delicate balancing act, India must maintain its principled stance on the Israel-Palestine issue while actively engaging with both Israel and Arab countries. India's approach should continue to be guided by its commitment to multilateralism, peace, and stability in the region.

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