

India's Tactical De-Hyphenation: Balancing Israel and Iran

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ABSTRACT

West Asia is a very volatile landscape on the world's political map. For decades, it has been a land of uncertainty and delicacy because of non-reliabilities and intra-skirmishes among regional clouts. Among these skirmishes, the disputes between Israel and Iran remain the most significant and impactful for India, since India has a long history of relations with both nations and shares, at great length, economic and strategic interests with them. This creates an ambience of a delicate balancing act for India. This paper will throw light upon the balancing act and its policy of de-hyphenation to balance out Israel and Iran in West Asia. Moreover, the researcher will trace an account of events surrounding India's strategy towards Israel and Iran and its contemporary implications. This will enhance our understanding of India's strategy of dealing in West Asia with respect to Israel and Iran.

Keywords: De-hyphenation policy, India's Israel policy, Indo-Iran relations, India's balancing act, India's West Asia strategy, India-Israel-Iran triangle

INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy is a continuous and gradual process of decision-making. It involves the interaction of several crucial determinants, such as political institutions, organizations, and the behavior of decision-makers, geographical location, economic development, political history, international ambience, domestic ambience, and both hard and soft power. Together, these determinants constitute a paradigm that serves as the foundation for decision-makers. Moreover, no rational decision-maker can ignore this foundation (Bandyopadhyaya, 2003, p.2). It implies that changes in the behavior of host nations rarely occur suddenly. Likewise, whenever India formulates its foreign policy to negotiate with another country, it prefers to take into account the above-mentioned factors in its interactions with that particular country, where the policy is to be executed. If we consider India's tactical policy of de-hyphenation with respect to Israel and Iran, which is one of the crucial elements of its foreign policy towards West Asia, it plays a vital role in balancing relations between these two rival countries.

Historical context of India's relation with Israel:

If we trace the commencement of the correspondence between India and Israel, it goes back to the Indian national movement, when Indian leaders of the time began supporting Palestinian liberation rights against Israel as part of their Anti-Imperialism policy (Blarel, 2010, p.157). Since Israel's cause was championed by the British under the Balfour Declaration, it was seen as an extended imperialistic expression of Britain in Palestine by Indian leaders of the time (Atran, 1989, p.719). Besides this, British India was home to the largest Muslim population in the world, who regarded the Muslims of Palestine as their true brethren and the land of Jerusalem as the holiest land for the Muslims across the globe. On the other hand, in India, the Muslim League (political party) claimed itself to be the sole representative of Indian Muslims, asserting that nationalist leaders (mostly from the Congress Party) were against the interests of Muslims and that their representation was limited only to Hindus. This ambience of suspicion against the leaders of the Indian National Movement regarding their representation of all people within the territory of

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India, irrespective of religion, inspired and compelled them to resonate with the Palestinian cause and to perceive Israel as an imperialistic infliction upon the land of the Arabian people. This significant proportion of the Muslim population thus played a substantial role in shaping India's stand towards Israel (Kumaraswamy, 2010, pp. 9–10). Consequently, this resulted in the lack of common ground for forging ties between India and Israel at that time.

There were some attempts made by Jewish leadership to persuade Indian leaders in their favour. Personalities such as Olsvanger, Kallenback, Selig Brodsky, and Nahum Sokolov visited India to meet great dignitaries of the time, but most of these attempts went in vain. Likewise, Einstein, the great scientist, wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru on June 13, 1947, outlining reasons why India should support Israel. Nehru wrote back on July 11, 1947, with a polite tone but a firm refusal (Yashee, 2024). Besides these meetings and persuasions, there were no significant reciprocations between India and Israel before independence.

Later, when India gained independence, similar developments were also taking place in Israel and Palestine. As anticipated, both Jews and Arabs were fighting for the land, which led Britain—the mandated authority over Palestine at that time—to take the issue to the newly formed United Nations Organization (UNO). To address the matter, the United Nations appointed the Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) to explore possible solutions. The United Nations proposed the partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, with Jerusalem declared *corpus separatum* to be governed by international laws (United Nations, 1947). Contrary to the UN proposal, India joined Iran and Yugoslavia in the minority group opposing partition and advanced a noble, innovative plan for a united Arab–Jewish state, a kind of federation. When the committee opted for the majority plan, Delhi voted against the partition resolution (United Nations, 1947). Likewise, when Israel later sought admission to the United Nations, India again voted against it. Although India's opposition did not alter Israel's destiny—both times the UN's decisions favoured Israel (Sharma and Bing, 2015, p. 620)—India, observing changes at the international level, eventually showed some decency and recognized Israel as a full-fledged state in 1950.

If we examine the trajectory of India–Israel relations after this recognition, there was not much difference from the past. Until 1992, interactions remained only nominal,

and India's policy of skepticism persisted even after recognition. It was only after the end of the Cold War and normalization of ties that major developments began to take place between India and Israel. Since then, relations have grown stronger across multiple fields such as defence and security, agriculture and irrigation techniques, water management and recycling, science and technology, and energy cooperation. Meanwhile, trade and investment have also expanded in sectors like diamonds, pharmaceuticals, and high-tech industries. Partnerships in education and innovation are further strengthening ties through academic exchanges and startup collaborations (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023, pp. 1–6). The burgeoning of relations in almost every field makes it clear how important Israel is for India in West Asia, along with other countries such as Iran. This reality underscores the solid need for the policy of de-hyphenation, allowing India to consolidate ties with both countries without compromising on either side.

Historical context of India's relations with Iran:

India and Iran have a long history of relations rooted in the history of cultural and economic ties from the time of the Indus Valley civilization. Some traces of bilateral trade were found in their seals which proves the existence of trade relations between the traders of the Indus valley civilization and Persia (Frenez, 2023, pp. 1-2). These earlier evidences of ties were kept alive for very long time through the uses of the means of transports to exchange goods and services. Later on these exchanges were done through the use of Silk Road, which connects eastern world with the Western world (Hafeez, 2019, p. 23). The end of these immemorial Relations was seen with the culmination period of the Mughal Empire. Although, the relations between India and Iran were amiable during the Mughal period, even the official language of India was Persian. But the rising dominance of the British in India ultimately brings the culmination of the Mughal Empire as well as the diplomatic ties between India and Iran (Firdous, 2016, p.106). Later on, After India's Independence Iran become the first foreign country to send an ambassador and establish her embassy in India, and not just that, to enhance their cooperation further they signed the treaty of friendship in 1950 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022). These initial cordial developments between these two countries remained temporary. Soon the enthronement of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and the cold war took place, which changed

the whole paradigm of correspondence between the two countries. Since the USA supported the ascendance of the Shah, it became natural to him to side himself with the US led alliance during the Col-War. Consequently both countries harboured the varying stances over the international environment of the time. Iran sat with the America led group and signed the Baghdad Pact (CENTO). Unlike Iran, India came forth with an innovative idea of the Non-alignment, which signified India's Independent stance over the issues of International importance and from here relations started straining. On the other hand Iran being member of the Baghdad Pact came closer to other parties of the pact as well, including Pakistan, and this act of closeness with Pakistan resulted into the help from Iran to Pakistan during the Indo-Pak wars 1965-71 that strained the already strained relations further (Naaz, 2001 and Choudhary, 1974). During the entire time of the cold war India Iran's relations had been a roller coaster ride for both countries. If we see the time of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, India was not initially welcoming towards the Islamic republic of Iran but soon India realized the area of convergence are much more important than this new development and changed her stance and gradually started correspondence. Despite these lows and highs of the time both countries found the convergence of the interests in many grounds such as Afghanistan, Central Asia, and energy sector. Afghanistan, where both opposed the Taliban and supported a peaceful settlement with the conciliation and representation of all ethnic groups out there, Central Asia, the geopolitical interests from the security purpose and the economic importance were the consideration worthy, and the final one the energy sector, where both share extensive interests and were looking for a long-term solid partnership. These important considerations cause the continuity of the relations during the 1990s, and even kept their ties alive and intact through the pulls and pushes of the times (Naaz, 2001).

After the end of the cold war, the whole paradigm of India's foreign policy towards Iran got shifted due to a host of reasons: Firstly, novel economic reforms of Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG) led India's integration across the world on large scale in terms of trade, goods, services and cultural exchange. This decisive shift required the need of the energy efficiency and made energy security a central concern of India's foreign policy. Since Iran is oil- and gas-rich country and India's continues rising energy demands made or makes

Iran as an important companion of India in this field. Secondly, the unipolar world order and the rise of the USA, the rise of America created an environment of the complexities for India. For example, its ever growing ties with America were or are risking its ties with his adversaries other sides of the word's corner, following this trend India's ties are suffered or still suffering with Iran due to U.S. sanctions, And thirdly, the loss of the USSR as a strategic partner, The disintegration of the Soviet Union created a diplomatic vacuum for India, prompting it to seek new partnerships to safeguard strategic interests. Iran emerged as an important regional ally. Since both nations shared concerns about the Taliban's rise in Afghanistan in the late 1990s, and collaboration on infrastructure projects like the Chabahar Port in Iran aimed to provide India access to Central Asia and Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan. In a nutshell, we see the post-Cold War shifts pushed India toward a more pragmatic, interest-based foreign policy towards Iran, due to its geographic, strategic, and energy significance (Yazdani, 2007 and Cheema, 2013).

There are pretty much expectations and possibilities of the cultural, economic and energy exchanges between India and Iran, although to great extent efforts are also done from both sides in this direction but the influence of America is still playing a crucial role and sometimes giving a blow to these expectations and possibilities. Despite these pulls and pushes India is trying to succeed in balancing out Iran and America. To lead these interactions further the Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Iran in 2016, which reaffirmed India's interests in Iran by signing multiple agreements in multiple sectors such as culture, energy, infrastructure, trade, and science. The primary focus of India remained around the progress of the Chabahar Port, which is very crucial in developing a regional networking and connectivity to Afghanistan, Central Asia and beyond. Likewise, India and Iran agreed to enhance and broaden the energy cooperation through the development of the Farzad B gas field. Both countries aimed to boost up their trade relations further through a Preferential Trade Agreement and investment treaties. Apart from these we are also sharing Cultural and educational exchanges to enhance it further both countries agreed to promote people to people contacts and educational centers such and Persian studies and tourism as well. Besides these, both nations consented to come together against global challenges such as terrorism and did a commitment for cooperation in counter-terrorism

and security. Maritime security and defense were also taken into consideration (Ministry of External Affairs, 2016). Both countries are still working on to realize these commitments. Having said that West-Asia is a volatile landscape for any sort of realization currently there is one more serious issue lingering in front of India that is to balance out Israel along with US. This ambience in West- Asia is becoming a tougher task for India to balance out the triangle of clouts.

Historical Context of Israel-Iran's relations and its implication over the India's foreign policy:

If we trace the trajectory of Israel–Iran relations from the second half of the 20th century to the present, we observe that it has never been steady from the outset. Initially, when Israel was seeking legitimacy as a state in Palestine through the UN's resolution on partition, Iran voted against the resolution, siding with India and Yugoslavia. Likewise, when the question of Israel's entry into the UN arose, Iran again voted in the same manner as before (Maher, 2023, p.227). Despite these initial refusals, when Ben-Gurion declared Israel as a legitimate state, Iran came forward to recognize Israel and became the second Muslim country after Turkey to do so (Green, 2018). At that time, this recognition was a significant achievement for Israel, which was widely perceived as an imperialist-sponsored intruder in West Asia.

Meanwhile, Iran was undergoing political upheaval. In 1953, Premier Mossadegh was toppled by a US- and British-backed faction led by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. The Shah adjusted Iran's foreign policy in line with the international milieu of the time, maintaining a pro-Western tilt, which significantly benefited Israel. However, this phase proved temporary. A major blow to Israel's expectations in Iran came with the Islamic Revolution of 1979 under Ayatollah Khomeini.

The revolution brought a substantial paradigm shift in Tehran's foreign policy, especially toward the USA and Israel. Khomeini's regime viewed Israel not only as an existential threat to Islam and Iran but also as a danger to humanity itself, questioning Israel's legitimacy over Palestine in particular and in Muslim-dominated West Asia in general. Moreover, Iran under Khomeini was deeply troubled by Israel's close ties with Washington, often identifying Israel as America's proxy, a force that could threaten Tehran (Rezaei and Cohen, 2014, pp. 442–443). For example, the values of the Islamic Revolution lay in agitation against the *pariahs* of the region and the

supporters of the infidels, with a commitment to destroy “The Little Satan” Israel along with “The Great Satan” America (Shapira and Diker, 2007, pp. 33–34).

To counter Israel's influence in West Asia, Khomeini consistently sponsored jihadist groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad (Malakoutikhah, 2020, p. 913). Such strategies have always been intolerable to Israel. Since then, relations between the two countries have remained locked in continuous confrontation, with both sides attempting to undermine each other as much as possible. Broadly, Israel–Iran relations since Khomeini's rise have been marked by deterioration, though with occasional exceptions. For example, during the Iran–Iraq War of the 1980s, Israel provided Iran with arms and ammunition, despite their otherwise hostile ties (Green, 2018).

The nuances of Israel–Iran relations reveal their highly complex and unstable nature, resembling more of a zigzag trajectory. From this perspective, the relationship presents a complicated challenge for any country maintaining ties with both. For India, the deterioration of Iran–Israel relations carries significant implications. Achieving the aspiration of becoming a world power would be impossible without ensuring its energy needs, access to cutting-edge technology, unhindered routes to Central Asia and beyond, intelligence-sharing in science and technology, thriving trade, and advanced arms and ammunition. From this point of view, both Israel and Iran are indispensable for India's aspirations in the 21st century, thereby necessitating careful balance between the two.

However, this balancing act is far from easy. For instance, when Prime Minister Modi visited Israel in 2017 and signed several MOUs, the move was not viewed favorably in Tehran. Following this visit, Ayatollah Khomeini raised the issue of Jammu and Kashmir, drawing a parallel between their plight and that of the Palestinians (Hafeez, 2019, p.33). He stated: “*Muslims the world over should also openly support the people of Bahrain, Kashmir and Yemen and repudiate oppressors and tyrants who attacked people in Ramadan*” (“Iranian leader backs Palestine, Kashmir struggle,” 2017, Jun 27).

This remark reflects the complexities and sensitivities inherent in the triangular relationship. To manage such challenges, India must carefully walk a tightrope in order to maintain its policy of De-Hyphenation between Israel and Iran.

India's Tactical De-Hyphenation of Iran and Israel:

The policy of De-Hyphenation is a novel rhetoric in the dictionary of foreign policy, which means the De-Hyphenation of rival countries by the approaching one (Sujith, 2023). In other words, when 'A' seeks to establish strategic and cordial relations with both 'B' and 'C', who are otherwise characterized by mutual scuffles and skirmishes, and 'A' is able to maintain equidistance or deal independently with both 'B' and 'C' without compromising its interests with either country, is called De-Hyphenation.

When we examine India's present situation in West Asia with respect to Israel and Iran, it becomes clear that India is calculatingly trying to De-Hyphenate the West Asian countries—for example, Israel–Palestine and, simultaneously, Israel–Iran (Roy, 2018). India's current ties with both Israel and Iran are driven by dynamic partnerships across multiple fields such as defence, security, intelligence sharing, science, technology, economic security, and energy security. It is evident that India has vital convergences of interest with both countries in West Asia, and prioritizing one relationship at the cost of the other would not be a wise step.

To resolve these complexities, the only viable path is De-Hyphenation. India's current status of relations further clarifies the picture and indicates the extent to which India is able to sustain its policy of De-Hyphenation with respect to Israel and Iran.

India's Defense Ties:

India, as the world's largest arms importer, has become Israel's most reliable and trustworthy buyer, contributing nearly 37 per cent of Israel's total defense exports (Khan, 2025). The list of imports includes various types of missiles, aerostat balloons, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), assault rifles, electronic suites and avionics, Thermal Imaging Stand Alone Systems (TISAS), fast attack craft fitted with modern surveillance systems, Long Range Observation Systems (LOROS), Hand-Held Thermal Imaging Systems (HHTI), hi-tech sensors, Portable Laser Designating Systems (PLDS), and Thermal Imaging Fire Control Systems (TIFCS) (Cowshish, 2017, p.403). The prospering relationship in the defence sector is also contributing to other areas such as the economy, technology sharing, research projects, and the strengthening of India's strategic position.

At the same time, India has been strengthening its strategic position and economic ties with Iran. In May

2024, India signed a deal with Tehran under which India Ports Global Ltd. (IPGL) secured a 10-year lease to manage the Shahid Beheshti terminal in Chabahar. India has already supplied approximately \$24 million worth of port equipment such as cranes and handling gear, with further procurement underway as part of a larger \$120 million grant, plus a \$250 million line of credit for infrastructure (Peri and Haidar, 2024). This is an imperative project for India from both security and strategic perspectives, as it provides a strong hold near the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman. Chabahar's location in the vicinity of Pakistan's Gwadar Port—controlled by China under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—adds further significance. The port thus acts as a counter to China's growing influence in the region (Tekir, 2025). Although surveillance is not its sole purpose, Chabahar can monitor Chinese developments and naval activity near Gwadar and keep an eye on China's naval movements in the Arabian Sea (Solangi and Hasan, 2019, pp. 49–50). This project has attracted the attention of both the US and Israel, but despite such challenges, India continues to hold a significant position at Chabahar and is working to expand it further.

India's Economic Ties:

India is Israel's second-largest partner in Asia for merchandise trade. Since the commencement of diplomatic ties in 1992, economic exchanges and bilateral trade have continuously expanded. Starting from US\$200 million in 1992—composed primarily of diamond trade—merchandise trade excluding defence reached a peak of US\$10.77 billion in FY 2022–23. However, a decline was noted in FY 2023–24 and FY 2024–25, when bilateral trade excluding defence dropped to US\$6.53 billion and US\$3.75 billion, respectively, due to regional security concerns and disruptions in trade routes (Embassy of India, Tel Aviv, n.d.). Although diamond, petroleum products, and chemicals continue to dominate bilateral trade, recent data shows diversification into sectors such as electronic machinery, high-tech products, communication systems, and medical equipment.

On similar lines, India and Iran also share an important trading relationship. India has consistently been among Iran's five largest trade partners in recent years. Major Indian exports to Iran include rice, tea, sugar, pharmaceuticals, man-made staple fibers, electrical machinery, and artificial jewellery, while imports from Iran primarily consist of dry fruits, inorganic/organic

chemicals, and glassware (Embassy of India, Tehran, n.d.). As of May 2025, India exported goods worth around \$109 million to Iran and imported \$27.9 million, resulting in a positive trade balance of approximately \$81 million. Between May 2024 and May 2025, Indian exports to Iran increased by \$1.55 million (1.44%), while imports decreased by \$4.6 million (14.2%) (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025).

Cultural Ties:

India and Israel share deep cultural ties and have been working to strengthen them through multiple initiatives. In 2020, both countries signed an agreement to enhance cultural ties and people-to-people interactions for the period 2020–23, building upon the cultural agreement signed on May 18, 1993 (India, Israel sign cultural agreement to further strengthen people-to-people ties, 2020). The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the Israel Antiquities Authority (IIA) are collaborating on the preservation and protection of archaeological sites. In addition, joint initiatives include book festivals, literary translations in both languages, student exchanges through scholarships, and collaborative film-making projects.

Similarly, India has continued to deepen its cultural ties with Iran. India and Iran share Civilisational and cultural links dating back to the Indus Valley Civilization, which remain a continuing source of robust people-to-people contacts (Frenez, 2023). The Indian Cultural Centre established in Tehran in 2013, now known as the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre (SVCC), plays a vital role in promoting cultural cooperation (Embassy of India, Tehran, n.d.). Tourism flows between both countries further reinforce these ties, while collaborations in filmmaking and cinema are also underway. For instance, the Iran Culture House in Mumbai and Indian film festivals are working towards a framework for greater representation and appreciation of Iranian cinema in India (Mumbai: Indian Cinema Delegation Visits Iran To Boost Cultural Exchange, 2025)

Taken together, India's defence cooperation with Israel, its strategic projects in Iran, expanding trade with both countries, and strong cultural linkages with each reflect New Delhi's ability to pursue parallel tracks in its foreign policy. The strengthening of military and technological collaboration with Israel coexists with strategic port investments and energy cooperation with Iran. Similarly, while Israel remains a vital partner in high-tech trade and innovation, Iran continues to be an

important regional trade partner with which India enjoys a positive trade balance. Cultural initiatives with both further reinforce people-to-people ties and historical connections. This simultaneous engagement illustrates how India is effectively sustaining its policy of De-Hyphenation—managing relations with rival states like Israel and Iran independently, without compromising its core interests with either side.

Conclusion:

India's engagement with both countries spans multiple fields and is remarkably vast, extending across nearly every sector—from defence and security to energy security, from trade in wheat and rice to trade in diamonds and armaments, and from collaboration in education to cooperation in cinema. If we observe the overall trajectory of India's relations with both Israel and Iran, we notice that India has been balancing the two almost equally. Despite challenges and occasional highs and lows, India has managed to sustain this balance to a considerable extent.

Although this balancing act resembles walking a tightrope, it remains essential for securing India's aspirational goals in the 21st century and safeguarding its interests with both countries. Therefore, consolidating the policy of De-Hyphenation further in the context of West Asia is not only necessary but also strategic. It represents a tactical move toward sustaining India's partnerships with both Israel and Iran while simultaneously acting as the safeguard of India's long-term interests in the region.

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