



Securing India's Interests in the Middle East

This editorial is based on [“A widening war in the Middle East”](#) which was published in The Indian Express on 07/08/2024. The article highlights the escalating conflict in the Middle East, driven by recent assassinations of Iranian proxy leaders, with no significant political outcomes despite the intense violence and widespread social and economic repercussions for both Israel and Iran.

For Prelims: [Middle East](#), [India's crude oil and natural gas requirements](#), [Chabahar port project](#) , [International North-South Transport Corridor](#) , [India-Middle East-Europe Corridor](#), [Organization of Islamic Cooperation](#), [Arab League](#), [UNSC](#), [Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#), [Abraham Accords](#), [India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement](#)

For Mains: Significance of the Middle East for India, Issues Related to Middle East and Impact on India.

The [Middle East](#) remains a region of profound significance for the world, and India is no exception. The recent escalation between **Israel and Iran-backed forces**, characterized by a vicious cycle of violence and retaliation, underscores the region's complex dynamics. This prolonged instability not only destabilizes the region but also **has global repercussions, including oil price volatility and heightened geopolitical tensions.**

Given its strategic location, energy security interests, and growing economic ties, India has a vital stake in a **stable Middle East**. The region remains a crucial source of energy for India, while also being a significant market for its goods and services. India must therefore actively engage with all key stakeholders, pursuing a **balanced and independent foreign policy.**

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What is the Significance of the Middle East for India?

- **Energy Security and Trade Ties:** The Middle East is of paramount importance to India's energy security.
 - The region supplies [India's crude oil and natural gas requirements](#), making it a critical source of fuel for India's rapidly growing economy.
 - As per **World Energy Outlook 2021 of IEA**, the current share of India in global primary energy consumption is **6.1%** and is likely to increase to about **9.8%** under stated policy scenarios by 2050.
 - Countries like **Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and the UAE** are major energy partners for India.
 - Disruptions in the region's energy supply or fluctuations in global oil prices have a **direct impact on India's economic performance and inflation levels**.
- **Counter-Terrorism Cooperation:** The Middle East has been a historical safe haven for various terrorist organizations, including **al-Qaeda, ISIS, and their affiliates**, which pose a significant threat to India's national security.
 - India has been collaborating with countries in the region, such as the **UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Israel**, to enhance intelligence sharing, coordinate counter-terrorism efforts, and disrupt the financing and logistics of these terrorist groups.
 - Over the last 10 years, India has imported **USD 2.9 billion in military equipment** from Israel, according to SIPRI.
 - **Saudi Arabia** has recently committed to strengthening their partnership with India to fight terrorism by sharing intelligence and cutting off terror funding.
 - This cooperation has **aided India in foiling several terrorist plots and dismantling extremist networks** that have targeted Indian interests both at home and abroad.
- **Diaspora and Remittance Flows:** The Middle East hosts a significant Indian diaspora.
 - More than **66% of India's 1.34 crore Non-Resident Indians (NRIs)** live in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain.
 - These expatriate communities not only contribute to the local economies but also serve as a **crucial source of remittances for India**.
 - The welfare and security of this diaspora is a key concern for India, and it has taken various

measures to protect them as seen in recent [India's Former Navy veterans case in Qatar](#).

- **Cultural and Civilizational Linkages:** The Middle East shares deep cultural, civilizational, and historical ties with India, dating back to ancient maritime trade routes.
 - Today, these linkages are reflected in the **shared architectural heritage, culinary traditions, and the vibrant exchange of art, literature**, and scholarship between India and the region.
 - Recent initiatives like the **India-Arab League media symposium** and the **BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi** have aimed to further strengthen these cultural connections.
- **Regional Connectivity and Infrastructure:** India has been actively involved in developing regional connectivity and infrastructure projects in the Middle East, which can have significant implications for its economic and strategic interests.
 - For instance, India's participation in the [Chabahar port project](#) in Iran, the [International North-South Transport Corridor \(INSTC\)](#) and [India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor](#) are aimed at enhancing India's access to Central Asia and Europe through the Middle Eastern landmass.
 - These initiatives can boost India's trade, expand its regional influence, and reduce its dependence on Pakistan for access to Afghanistan and beyond.
- **Multilateral Engagement and Global Influence:** India's active engagement with the Middle East also allows it to exercise its influence within multilateral forums like the **United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Arab League**.
 - India's ability to navigate these complex regional dynamics and build coalitions can enhance its global standing and bargaining power on issues of strategic importance, such as **climate change financing, and reform of international institutions like UNSC**.
 - It can also help in resolving domestic issues like bolstering India's position on the Kashmir issue through collaboration with like-minded OIC countries.

Why does the Middle East Consistently Remain a Region of Persistent Conflict and Instability?

- **Geopolitical Rivalries and Proxy Conflicts:** The Middle East is a hotbed of geopolitical rivalries between regional and global powers, including **Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and the United States**.
 - These rivalries often manifest through **proxy conflicts**, where countries support non-state actors or opposing factions to advance their strategic interests.
 - For instance, conflict in Yemen, where **Iran-backed Houthi rebels** are fighting the **Saudi-led coalition**, is a prime example of how these geopolitical tensions can escalate into protracted and devastating wars.
 - The **lack of a clear balance of power** and the tendency of external actors to intervene in local conflicts have perpetuated instability in the region.
- **Protracted Conflicts and Unresolved Disputes:** The Middle East is characterized by numerous protracted conflicts, such as [Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#), which have resisted resolution for decades.
 - These conflicts are often exacerbated by the involvement of external actors, the **rigidity of the parties' positions**, and the lack of a comprehensive, inclusive, and just peace process.
 - Resolutions like the [Abraham Accords](#), which normalized relations between **Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain**, are now facing setbacks, reversing earlier progress.
- **Sectarian Divides and Identity Politics:** The Middle East is characterized by deep-seated sectarian divides, particularly between **Sunni and Shia Muslims**, which have fueled numerous conflicts and power struggles.
 - These sectarian tensions have been exploited by **political actors to mobilize support, consolidate power**, and marginalize opposing groups.
 - The **rise of identity-based movements**, such as **Arab nationalism** and Islamism, has also contributed to the region's political fragmentation and the emergence of radical ideologies.
 - The [Syrian civil war](#), where the conflict has taken on a distinct sectarian character, is a prime example of how these identity-based divisions can escalate into violent confrontations.
- **Authoritarian Regimes and Lack of Democratization:** Many countries in the Middle East are governed by authoritarian regimes that prioritize regime security over the well-being of their

citizens.

- These regimes often rely on repressive measures, such as **crackdowns on dissent, political imprisonment, and the suppression of civil liberties**, to maintain their grip on power.
 - The lack of genuine democratic reforms and accountable governance has fueled popular discontent, leading to uprisings and revolutions, such as the **Arab Spring in 2011**.
 - The failure to address the root causes of these uprisings, including **economic inequality, corruption, and political marginalization**, has perpetuated the cycle of instability in the region.
- **Resource Scarcity and Environmental Challenges:** The Middle East is facing severe environmental challenges, including **reduced oil resources, water scarcity, desertification, and the impacts of climate change**.
 - These resource constraints have the potential to exacerbate existing tensions and fuel new conflicts over the control and distribution of limited resources.
 - For example, the dispute over the construction of the [Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile River](#) has raised tensions between **Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia**.

How can India Strengthen its Relationship with the Middle East?

- **Balanced and Nuanced Foreign Policy Approach:** India's ability to maintain balanced and nuanced relations with key players in the Middle East is a valuable asset.
 - By **avoiding the temptation to take sides in the region's geopolitical rivalries**, India can establish itself as a neutral mediator and promoter of dialogue, as demonstrated during the **Israel-Hamas conflict**, where India **condemned the terrorist attacks on Israel while also supporting a two-state solution for Palestine**.
 - Also, India's recent efforts to **maintain open channels of communication with Iran**, even in the face of US sanctions, demonstrate its commitment to this balanced foreign policy approach.
- **Enhancing Economic Engagement and Interdependence:** Strengthening economic ties and interdependence can be a crucial element of India's Middle East strategy.
 - By expanding **trade, investment, and energy cooperation**, India can create shared incentives for regional stability and peaceful coexistence.
 - Initiatives like the [India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement](#) can serve as models for developing mutually beneficial economic relationships.
 - Additionally, India can leverage its vast diaspora in promoting [Unified Payment Interface](#) in the region to deepen its digital foothold and influence in the Middle East.
- **Strengthening Defense and Security Cooperation:** India can deepen its defense and security cooperation with key partners in the Middle East.
 - This can involve joint military exercises and the **co-development of defense technologies**.
 - By positioning itself as a reliable security partner, India can contribute to regional stability, deter aggression, and build trust among its Middle Eastern counterparts.
- **Middle East as Link Between the Global North and Global South:** India's position as a leading voice of the [Global South](#) can enable it to play a mediating role between the **Middle Eastern countries** and the traditional Western powers.
 - By advocating for the interests of developing nations, championing the reform of global governance structures, and fostering **South-South cooperation**, India can help bridge the divide and create more inclusive platforms for dialogue and negotiation.
 - This can involve India's enhanced engagement with the **Organization of Islamic Cooperation**, and other regional bodies to amplify the concerns of the Middle Eastern countries and promote a more equitable global order.
- **Promoting Mutual Tourism:** India can urge like minded Middle Eastern countries to leverage its vast tourism market to promote **mutual tourism between the Middle East and India**.
 - This can involve collaborative marketing campaigns, such as the recent **"Visit Saudi" advertisements** featured during the **Indian Premier League (IPL)**, which capitalized on the shared interests and aspirations of the two regions.
 - India can also **streamline visa processes and develop tailor-made tourism packages** to cater to the preferences of Middle Eastern travelers, further strengthening the tourism and hospitality linkages between the two regions.

- **Strengthening Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance:** India can position itself as a reliable partner in the **Middle East for disaster management and humanitarian assistance**, building on its existing capabilities and experience.
 - This can include coordinating with regional organizations and national authorities to develop **early warning systems, enhance emergency response capabilities**, and provide rapid relief during natural disasters or complex humanitarian crises.
 - [Operation Dost in Turkey and Syria](#) is a prime example of India's rapid humanitarian assistance.

Conclusion

The Middle East remains a region of vital importance for India, with deep **historical, cultural, and economic ties**. By leveraging its **position as a leading voice of the Global South**, India can play a constructive role in **bridging the divide between the Middle Eastern countries and the traditional global powers**, while also addressing shared challenges like terrorism and climate change.

Drishti Mains Question:

Analyze the role of India in the evolving geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East. How can India balance its relations with various regional powers while safeguarding its national interests?

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. Mediterranean Sea is a border of which of the following countries? (2017)

1. Jordan
2. Iraq
3. Lebanon
4. Syria

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

- (a) 1, 2 and 3 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 3 and 4 only
- (d) 1, 3 and 4 only

Ans: C

Q. Which one of the following countries of South-West Asia does not open out to the Mediterranean Sea? (2015)

- (a) Syria
- (b) Jordan
- (c) Lebanon
- (d) Israel

Ans: B

Q. The term “two-state solution” is sometimes mentioned in the news in the context of the affairs of (2018)

- (a) China
- (b) Israel
- (c) Iraq
- (d) Yemen

Ans: B

Mains

Q. “India’s relations with Israel have, of late, acquired a depth and diversity, which cannot be rolled back.” Discuss. **(2018)**

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