



India's Strategic Diplomacy Amid West Asia's Tensions

*This editorial is based on “[Escalation of West Asia conflict could hurt India](#)” which was published in *The Hindu Business Line* on 06/10/2024. The article brings into focus the escalating tensions between Iran and Israel, prompting India to call for restraint and dialogue while highlighting its strategic interests in the region. It emphasizes that a broader conflict could significantly impact India’s economic interests, energy security, and regional stability.*

For Prelims: [Iran and Israel](#) , [West Asian region](#), [Yemeni Civil War](#), [United Nations](#) , [UN Refugee Agency](#), [Natanz nuclear facility](#), [Strait of Hormuz](#), [Palestinian-Israeli conflict](#), [Arab Spring 2011](#), [Gulf Cooperation Council](#) , [Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements](#), [Belt and Road Initiative](#), [Organization of Islamic Cooperation](#).

For Mains: Issues Related to West Asia Affecting India’s Interest, Measures can India Adopt to Balance its Relations to Western Asian Countries Despite Concerns.

The escalating tensions between [Iran and Israel](#) have once again raised concerns about the potential for a **wider regional conflict**. India, with its **strategic interests in the [West Asian region](#)**, has urged both sides to exercise restraint and resolve the crisis through dialogue and diplomacy. While India has not offered to play a mediatory role, it has maintained **communication channels with both parties** and expressed its deep concern over the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

India's relations with Israel have deepened in recent years, while its relationship with Iran has been marked by both cooperation and tension. A wider conflict could have serious implications for [India's economic interests](#), **energy security, and regional stability**.

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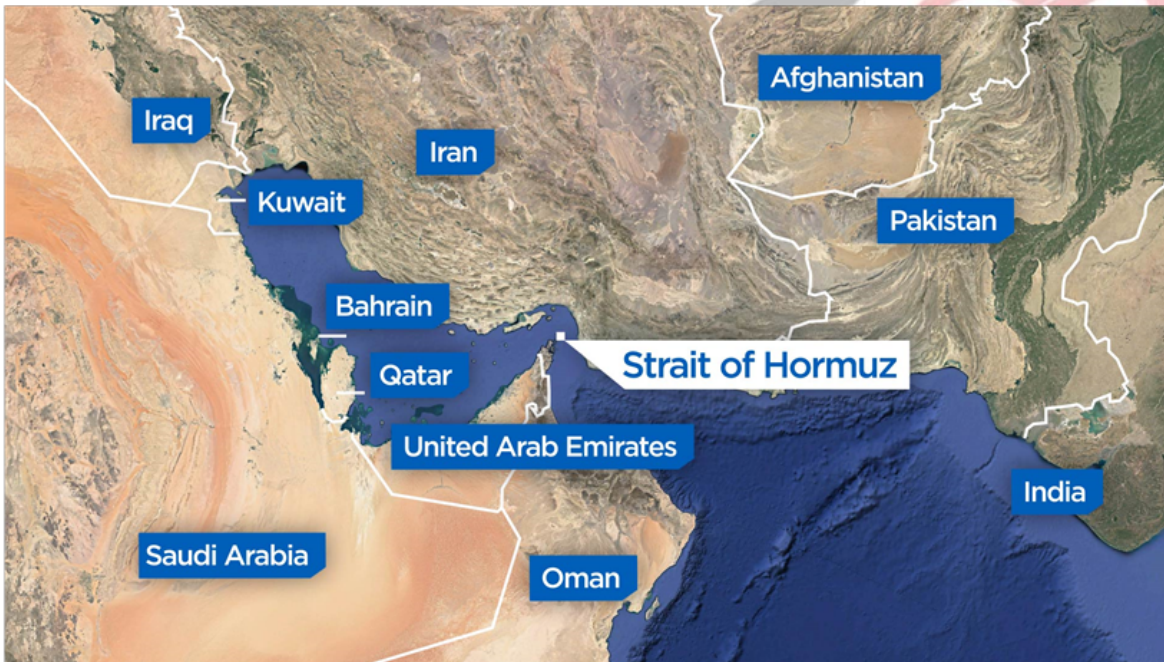
Why is West Asia Consistently Prone to Conflicts?

- **Geopolitical Rivalries and Proxy Wars:** The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a significant source of tension in West Asia, **driven by both nations' ambitions to expand their influence in the region.**
 - This competition often manifests in their support for opposing sides in various conflicts.
 - The **Yemeni Civil War**, for example, has seen Saudi Arabia lead a coalition against the Iran-backed Houthi rebels, resulting in a humanitarian crisis with over **377,000 deaths reported by the United Nations between 2015 and beginning of 2022.**
 - These **proxy wars have given blow to the regional refugee crisis**, as per **UN Refugee Agency** report of March 2024, more than **7.2 million Syrians remain internally displaced** in their own country where 70% of the population is in need of humanitarian aid.
 - Additionally, **Israel views Iran as a threat due to its nuclear ambitions and support for Hezbollah**, leading to instances of cyber warfare and airstrikes on Iranian targets in Syria.
 - In **2022**, Iran accused Israel of sabotaging its **Natanz nuclear facility.**
 - Israel recently claimed it killed a **senior Hezbollah commander** in a strike on **Beirut, Lebanon** recently.
 - The **recent pager attack in Lebanon** is also reportedly attributed to Israel.
- **Religious Sectarianism and Identity Conflicts:** The Sunni-Shia divide is a major factor in many

conflicts across West Asia, exacerbating sectarian violence and political struggles.

- The population is approximately **85% Sunni and 15% Shia**, with Iran and Saudi Arabia representing these factions.
- About half a million people died in **Iraq** as a result of war-related causes between the US-led invasion in **2003 and mid-2011**.
- **Bahrain** has also experienced tensions due to the **Sunni monarchy's repression** of the Shia-majority population, particularly since the 2011 Arab Spring protests.
 - These sectarian conflicts contribute significantly to the region's instability and violence.

- **Abundance of Oil and Resource Control:** West Asia is home to approximately **48% of the world's proven oil reserves**, making control over these resources a critical issue.
 - The economic dependence on oil has fueled internal and external conflicts, such as the **Iraq-Kuwait conflict**, which was motivated by oil control and led to a Gulf War.
 - OPEC decisions continue to influence global oil prices. Members of the **OPEC+** oil alliance have **delayed plans to hike production by a scheduled 180,000 barrels per day in October 2024** leading to suspicions with the United States and other oil-consuming nations.
 - Additionally, **strategic waterways like the Strait of Hormuz are vital for oil transit**. About **a fifth of the volume of the world's total oil consumption** passes through the Strait on a daily basis.
 - Iran's threats to close this chokepoint have heightened military tensions with the U.S. and its allies.



- **Colonial Legacy and Artificial Borders:** The colonial legacy in West Asia, particularly the **Sykes-Picot Agreement**, established arbitrary borders that ignored ethnic and tribal divisions, leading to long-term instability.
 - This has resulted in communities being split across national borders and forced into multi-ethnic states lacking a unified national identity.
 - The Kurdish struggle for autonomy exemplifies this issue, as **Kurds seek independence across Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran**, highlighted by a 2017 referendum in Iraq that was met with opposition from neighboring countries.
 - The **Palestinian-Israeli conflict also has roots in the British Mandate**, with ongoing disputes resulting in the displacement of millions.
 - As of **September 2024**, the situation has deteriorated significantly, with Israel's siege preventing **83% of food aid from reaching Gaza**.
- **Authoritarian Regimes and Political Repression:** Many West Asian countries are governed by **authoritarian regimes**, including monarchies and military dictatorships, leading to widespread discontent and political repression.

- The **Arab Spring in 2011** sparked significant uprisings, but many regimes responded with brutal crackdowns.
- As of March 2024, with the support of Russia, the **Assad regime has conducted attacks across north-west Syria**, resulting in over 500 civilian casualties and the displacement of over 120,000 people.
- Human rights organizations have documented numerous abuses, further illustrating the region's struggle for democratic representation.
- **Foreign Interventions and Military Presence:** The United States has maintained a significant military presence in West Asia due to its strategic interests in oil and regional stability.
 - Since 2001, the **U.S. has been involved in conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria**, often with unintended consequences that breed resentment among local populations.
 - The **2003 invasion of Iraq**, premised on eliminating weapons of mass destruction and promoting democracy, led to prolonged instability, sectarian violence, and the rise of extremist groups like ISIL.
 - In late **June 2019**, Iran downed a **U.S. Global Hawk drone** in the Strait of Hormuz, and the US President ordered a cyberattack and the imposition of new sanctions.

What are the Implications of Issues in West Asia for India?

- **Energy Security and Oil Imports:** West Asia is vital to India's energy security, supplying over 60% of its crude oil imports.
 - In 2022-23, **Iraq became the second largest crude oil supplier to India after Russia**. Political instability in the region **often results in oil price volatility**, which can significantly impact India's economy.
 - Brent crude oil prices have been trading at **USD 80-85 per barrel** affecting India's import costs and inflation.
 - To mitigate these risks, **India is actively diversifying its energy sources**, including agreements with Russia, the U.S., and Latin America.
 - India has already felt the effects of the West Asian conflicts, as its share of crude petroleum imports from the region has declined from **34% in FY22 to 30.9% in FY23, and further to approximately 23% in FY24**.
- **Remittances from the Indian Diaspora:** The Indian diaspora in West Asia, numbering over 8 million, is a crucial source of remittances.
 - In 2021, India received around **USD 87 billion in remittances**, with about **50% coming from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)** countries.
 - Economic downturns, like those prompted by the "**Saudization**" policy in **Saudi Arabia**, can adversely affect these remittances, impacting families in states like Kerala that heavily rely on this income.
 - The Covid-19 pandemic caused many Indian workers to return home, and while the situation has come back to normal, the ongoing regional conflicts may continue to threaten job stability and remittance flows.
- **Trade Relations and Economic Impact:** The **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)** is one of India's most important trade partners.
 - During FY 2023-24, India-GCC bilateral trade stood at **USD 161.59 billion**. India's exports were USD 56.3 billion.
 - Any **disruptions** in trade relations due to regional instability could negatively impact India's export sector and food supplies in the Gulf.
 - Furthermore, **India's Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPA) with countries like the UAE** aim to enhance trade but may be hindered by geopolitical tensions.
- **Maritime Security and Trade Routes:** Strategic maritime chokepoints, such as the **Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb**, are crucial for India's trade and energy imports.
 - Threats to these waterways from piracy or state-sponsored attacks can jeopardize India's trade security.
 - The **Strait of Hormuz** remains a critical chokepoint. The seizure of an **Israel-linked cargo ship by Iran in April 2024**, with **17 Indian nationals aboard**, underscores India's stake in the situation.
- **Terrorism and National Security:** The instability in West Asia creates fertile ground for

extremist organizations like **ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Hezbollah**, which sometimes seek recruits from South Asia, including **India**.

- The recent **FATF report** highlights the significant terrorism threat to India from **ISIS and Al-Qaeda-linked groups** in Jammu and Kashmir.
- **Cultural and Religious Ties:** The historical and cultural connections between India and West Asia significantly influence bilateral relations:
 - India is home to the **world's third-largest Muslim population (about 200 million)**, making developments in West Asia, particularly regarding Islamic holy sites, of domestic importance.
- **Geopolitical Alignments and Great Power Rivalries:** China's expanding influence in West Asia, particularly through its **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, poses challenges for India, especially as China strengthens ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia.
 - China's growing influence in the region, exemplified by **brokering the Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement in March 2023**, challenges India's strategic interests.
 - India's participation in the **I2U2 group (India, Israel, UAE, US)** since July 2022 marks a new phase in its **West Asia policy**, but balancing alignment with rival nations to Israel and UAE presents a significant challenge.

What Measures can India Adopt to Balance its Relations to Western Asian Countries Despite Concerns?

- **Pursue Strategic Autonomy and Non-Alignment:** India should maintain its policy of non-alignment in West Asian conflicts by fostering **strong bilateral relationships with key players such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, and the UAE**.
 - By avoiding **overt alignment with any particular faction**, India can navigate regional rivalries without becoming embroiled in them.
 - Consistently adopting a **neutral stance on sensitive issues like the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry and the Israel-Palestine conflict** will further enhance India's image as a peace-promoting nation and a reliable partner for all parties involved.
- **Strengthen Economic and Energy Ties:** While West Asia remains crucial for India's energy security, the country should **prioritize diversifying its energy imports** to reduce dependency on any single region.
 - Enhancing **renewable energy capabilities** will help lessen reliance on West Asian oil over time.
 - Strengthening trade and investment relations with GCC countries is essential, exploring new sectors such as technology, defense, and infrastructure for significant benefits.
 - The **India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)** has the potential to substantially boost trade, and similar agreements with other GCC nations can help safeguard India's economic interests.
- **Expand Diplomatic Engagements and Multilateral Cooperation:** India should continue strengthening bilateral relations through regular high-level engagements with West Asian countries.
 - Active participation in regional multilateral forums such as the **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (as an observer), and the Quad** (comprising India, Israel, UAE, and the U.S.) will reinforce India's role as a constructive regional actor, allowing collaboration on issues like maritime security and counter-terrorism.
 - Additionally, **leveraging the I2U2 forum (India, Israel, UAE, and the U.S.)** can facilitate collaboration in areas such as **food security, clean energy, and technology**.
- **Enhance Defense and Security Cooperation:** Given the strategic importance of maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz, India should **strengthen its naval presence in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea**.
 - Increasing naval collaborations through joint exercises with **Oman, the UAE, and the U.S.** can enhance India's capability to secure these vital sea lanes.
 - Expanding bilateral defense agreements with West Asian countries, focusing on joint military training, intelligence sharing, and arms sales, will be vital.
 - Strengthening **counter-terrorism collaboration with countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel**, particularly in intelligence-sharing, cyber-security, and counter-

radicalization efforts, can mitigate potential threats from extremist groups and enhance India's internal security.

- **Prioritize Energy Security and Renewable Energy Initiatives:** To mitigate risks arising from West Asian conflicts, India should expand its **Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR)** capacity.
 - India eyes a **new strategic crude oil reserve in Mangalore**. This would provide a buffer against disruptions in oil supply, as experienced during the **Saudi oil facility attacks in 2019**.
 - Collaborating with West Asian countries on renewable energy projects, given the region's growing interest in clean energy, is essential.
 - Joint initiatives on **solar energy with the UAE or hydrogen fuel projects** with Saudi Arabia would align with India's goals under the International Solar Alliance and contribute to its energy diversification strategy.
- **Promote Cultural Diplomacy and People-to-People Ties:** With over 8 million Indians residing in West Asia, India should continue to advocate for their welfare, particularly **concerning labor reforms**.
 - Diplomatic missions must actively engage with host governments to **protect Indian workers' rights** and ensure safe repatriation when necessary.
 - Hosting **cultural festivals and events (IPL Auction 2025 is likely to be held in Saudi Arabia)** can help build soft power in the region and foster goodwill.
 - Moreover, India could offer **technical training and educational scholarships** for students from West Asia, enhancing its reputation as a destination for higher education and skill development, fostering **long-term people-to-people ties and generating goodwill in the region**.

Conclusion

India's strategic interests in West Asia necessitate a balanced approach to **navigate the complexities of regional tensions**. Prioritizing **issue-based diplomacy and multilateral cooperation** will be essential for India to emerge as a stabilizing force in a region fraught with conflict, thereby protecting its national interests while contributing to regional peace and stability.

Drishti Mains Question:

West Asia has often been a region of continuous geopolitical turmoils. Analyze the factors behind this persistent instability and explain how India can maintain a balanced approach in its ties with the region.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

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)**

PDF Reference URL: <https://www.drishtias.com/current-affairs-news-analysis-editorials/news-editorials/07-10-2024/print>

