

PM Modi understood the exceptional importance of relations with the Middle East that included Israel too. Hence a rounded and balanced relationship was to follow -**Ambassador Anil Trigunayat***

The Middle East especially the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) is India's immediate neighbourhood. It is strategic and bears directly on India's wellbeing and vice versa. The relations have been extremely close for centuries through trade and travel and the Arabs have been the carriers of Indian knowledge to the west and therefore contributed a great deal to India and the global good. India has almost 8 million Indian nationals contributing to the local economies and who range from industrialists, investors, top notch professionals, doctors bankers, nurses, programmers to blue collar workers. They contribute to India's foreign exchange through remittances to the tune of \$60 billion per annum. That is almost equal to the FDI India receives. India depends heavily on the petroleum resources of the region and imports of 70% of its crude oil and 85% of its natural gas requirements and consequently, is a major stakeholder in their stability, progress and prosperity. UAE alone can boast of over 5000 Indian companies in their special economic zones and it has emerged as a major entrepot to Indian products and exports to the region and rest of the world.

India has always unstintingly supported the Palestinian cause which was also very dear to the Middle East countries. Arab -Israeli relations have their own negative dynamic in the international public perception and outreach. But the dynamic in the region has also changed and the hostility to a great extent appears to be diminishing. India's relationship with Israel provided some fodder to the critics who accused India of diluting its support and cooperation with the Arab world but India had kept Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in the loop while establishing diplomatic relations in 1992. A misplaced notion yet India continued to maintain its relations with all the countries in the region to subserve her own national interest. Our stand and support have been clear and articulated in all the fora while giving huge assistance to the Palestinians both as grant and in capacity building. Hence the balanced equation was maintained. As late as September 20 at the UN, Mrs Sushma Swaraj the External affairs Minister reiterated India's historical support for Palestine stating that it will be a central point of its foreign policy. "For independent India support for the Palestinian cause has been a reference point of its foreign policy," she told the Non-aligned Movement's Ministerial Committee on Palestine on the sidelines of the high-level General Assembly meeting. "I strongly believe that India's expanding relations in the region with all nations will only strengthen the Palestinian cause, that can never be undermined," she said. This clears the deck for any doubt.

After PM Modi took over, the Arab governments were concerned and conveyed that they expected a pro-Israeli policy of the new government at the expense of relations with them and the Palestinian cause itself. Besides the longstanding personal friendship and bonhomie between PM Modi and PM Netanyahu made them wary. This was soon dispelled. PM Modi understood the exceptional importance of relations with the Middle East that included Israel too. Hence a rounded and balanced relationship was to follow. PM Modi converted the “Look West” policy to “Link West “ through his very first visit to the UAE followed by Qatar and Saudi Arabia as well as to Iran in the first two years and to Israel only this year to celebrate the 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations besides several of the leaders from the region visited India. Crown Prince of UAE was the Chief guest on our Republic Day. Exceptional collaboration in security & intelligence matters with an unusual emphasis on counterterrorism cooperation was the hallmark of the declarations post the visit that clearly targeted the cross-border and havens of terrorism especially in Pakistan that was a warning to them since hitherto under the Islamic cloak Pakistan was able to garner their support as benefactors. This was no longer available or at least was qualified which is a stellar achievement. The Joint Statement with UAE was an exceptional document as it forbade Pakistan to use UAE territory for anti-India activities which has hitherto been the case as the fugitive terrorist Dawood and his D Company and several others had been taking refuge in UAE and shuttling between Pakistan and the UAE and carrying out anti-India activities. In fact, several accused Indian origin terrorist were extradited to India. Moreover, billions of dollars strategic investments in India have been agreed to by these countries. While Iran is the Gateway of India to Central Asia and strategic Chabahar port, the GCC countries are integral to India’s energy security and safety & welfare of the huge Indian diaspora as well as for security and counterterrorism efforts.

Indo-Israeli relations were catapulted to a new orbit during PM Modi’s July visit to Tel Aviv – the first by any Indian Prime Minister. Israel has emerged as a major and reliable security, intelligence and Counterterrorism partner for India. In defence, it is the third largest supplier after USA and Russia with over \$1 billion turnover and many more deals in the pipeline. Reputed for its arid agricultural technologies it has become a close partner in India’s food security. Israel now commands the friendship of the oldest democracy (USA) and the largest democracy (India). Netanyahu welcomed Modi “we waited 70 years for you“.



India has always maintained that it will not take sides in the affairs of our brothers in West Asia but encourages them to resolve the issues bilaterally or through the GCC mechanism.

Even during the Arab Spring phase India was against the external intervention in Libya or Syria and continued to extend the support in their nation-building efforts.

The region has been facing profound turbulence and instability in which India could definitely be asked to play a greater role. But India has to wade through carefully in these fissures as new powers like Turkey- a NATO member country, Russia and Iran could stoke the Shia-Sunni divide further that would debilitate the GCC in the long run. In a departure from the past and a following, a realpolitik PM Modi does not seem to hesitate to collaborate with the US in the region since the US still continues to be an arbiter given its military bases and long-standing ties and strategic interest in the region. As for the recent crisis between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt India rightly refused to take sides because India does maintain excellent relations with all the countries bilaterally and has strong stakes in each of them and in their safety and security. Hence it expects the resolution of the issues through dialogue in keeping with her policy. Visiting foreign ministers of Qatar and UAE briefed the Indian government but publicly articulated that while India understood their viewpoint they did not expect India to take sides. India has followed a policy of nurturing bilateral ties with all the countries in the region without getting entangled in their ideological or sectarian fault lines. This is the key success of the foreign policy as India can not afford to be drawn into their ongoing conflict but in this turbulent era of shifting alliances in the region and Cold War 2.0, a time may come when we will have to exercise choices much to our dismay and dislike.

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