

Indo-Arab Relations

Conference background paper

At the moment of Indian independence in August of 1947, ending centuries of colonial rule and subjugation, few could have predicted that the country would be where it is now. India today stands as the world's seventh largest economy, with an estimated Gross Domestic Product of US\$ 2.2 Trillion¹. Statistics from the World Bank indicate that the rate of growth of the Indian economy, already one of the fastest in the world, will reach 7.7% by 2019-2020, and project that by 2022, India will be the globe's fourth largest economic power².

In order to sustain its economic growth, India has become the world's third largest oil importer, as well as the fourth largest importer of liquefied gas, with annual per capita oil consumption in India expected to rise to 25% to reach 1.5 barrels by 2022³. This can only be achieved with increased oil imports and, in turn, ever stronger relations with oil producing countries in the Gulf⁴.

Such vital trade ties form only a part of the Indo-Arab relationship, which stretches deep into history. Particularly through trade, ascendant Islamic states acted as the conduit between the Mediterranean World and India. Arab merchants introduced Indian spices, exotic animals and precious stones as well as sandalwood and ebony from India. Beginning in the eighth century, small settlements of Arab traders had established themselves on the Indian Subcontinent.

The Arabs of antiquity had an intimate knowledge of Indian civilization, including through the access which Arab scholars enjoyed to Indian schools of thought and scholarly traditions. In medieval Mesopotamia, scholarly institutions founded on Indian pedagogical ideals hosted mathematicians and philosophers who had studied in Indian schools, including the medieval physician Al Hareth bin Kalda Al Thaqafi, who had studied with Indian scholars at Gundeshapur. In tandem with this trade in good and ideas, an exchange of gifts and books also grew between Arab and Indian rulers, with the Abbassid Caliph Al Mansour being one of the most important Muslim Arab recipients of works of mathematics and medicine written in India. Some of these early works on mathematics, astronomy and astrology and medicine which made their way from India to the Middle East included a work by Abrahama Sadhanta, which came into Arabic translation with the title *Sind Hind*; and *Arkand*, written by Kahadika; and

¹ Gross domestic product 2016," World Bank Data, available online at: <https://goo.gl/z9SA3L>

² "Skilling India," World Bank, June 23, 2017, available online at: <https://goo.gl/GW3QzW>

³ For a discussion on Indo-Arab trade in hydrocarbons, see Nasser Al-Tamimi, "India-Gulf Relations: will India Become the 'New China'?", Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 2016, available online (Arabic): <http://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2016/04/160403103305878.html>

⁴ "Oil 2017: Analysis and Forecasts to 2022," International Energy Agency, April 2017, available online: <https://www.iea.org/Textbase/npsum/oil2017MRSsum.pdf>

Aryabhata's work on the decimal system. It was the transfer of this knowledge which allowed Europe to discover the decimal system through Arab-ruled Iberia.

Together with this knowledge in scientific fields, came the export of Indian value systems and stories through the transmission of stories and parables. Most famously, these included allegorical *Kalila wa Dumna*, which in turn travelled around the world from its Arabic translation. These stories also inspired a group of medieval Arab geographers and travelers to explore the Indian subcontinent. Notable visits began soon after the Umayyad conquest of Sindh, and included Al Sirafi's travels to China and India during the tenth century and rose to a pinnacle during Ibn Battuta's famous journey. In Sindh itself, a growing community of Arabic speaking scholars quickly made large contributions to Islamic jurisprudence and wider Islamic civilization. The Sindhi city of Mansoura was home to a number of Arabic grammarians and poets, only decades after its construction by the Umayyads. Arab admiration for India was perhaps best expressed by the fifteenth century polymath Qalqashandi, who said of India "A great kingdom, abundant justice, abundant bounty and good politics. The people of India are the best informed when it comes to wisdom, medicine, geometry and curious inventions."

By the late fifteenth century, Portuguese encroachment on the maritime routes in the Indian Ocean led to competition with the Ottoman and other Muslim states for control of the sea trade. Growing Portuguese influence also impacted the Arab spice trade to Europe via the Red Sea, with Portuguese navigators trying to cut the Red Sea out and to establish an independent connection to India. After European domination of these trade routes, and of Asia, the Arabs and Indians were again united, this time in the struggle against European colonialism. This informed the shared attitudes to anti-colonialism and anti-colonial sentiments, adopted by both the Indian independence movement and Arab nationalists. It also explains why the Arab states were quick to join the Non-Aligned Movement following independence.

After the end of the Cold War however, a number of transformations on the world stage impacted Arab-Indian relations over a number of issues. This went hand in hand with the rise of India-Israel relations, with the volume of bilateral between India and Israel going from US\$ 200 million in 1992, to \$1 billion in 2000 to \$4 billion in 2016⁵. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the regional calculus which defined Indian defense policy accelerated growing ties with Israel, which appeared more than ready to export military technology to India⁶. Israeli-Indian cooperation now covers a number of other domains, including research and development and joint industrial manufacturing in defense technologies, agriculture, telecommunications, water resources management and urban planning. By April, 2017, New Delhi and Tel Aviv had signed a two billion-dollar agreement covering defense manufacturing⁷. The rapid acceleration of ties between the two countries has, of course, come at the expense of Palestinian rights of which India had long been a champion.

⁵ "First ever Indian PM visit to Israel amid booming defense ties," CNBC, June 30, 2017, at: <https://goo.gl/mmhLkV>

⁶ Ashok Sharma and Dov Bing, "India-Israel relations: The evolving partnership," *Israel Affairs*, vol. 21, no. 4 (2015).

⁷ Israeli Firm Inks Historic \$2 Billion Defense Deal with India," *Jerusalem Post*, April 6, 2017, at: <https://goo.gl/zxBgmG>

Despite its ambitions on the world stage, India's development is held back by a number of structural weaknesses. The country, despite its massive power, is home to one-third of the world's poor and remains one of the nations most afflicted by food insecurity. These are compounded by a financial deficit and a slow pace of private sector investments as well as the inability to confront environmental pollution. The twin challenges of meeting economic demand as well as its environmental challenges will be difficult to balance.

India would require an investment of \$2.5 trillion to carry out the changes expected to meet its 2030 climate change goals, in addition to another \$200 billion to carry out improvements to its agricultural and related sectors. Yet, with 25% of its population living without access to electricity, India's economic development can only be possible with the energy it must import from abroad. In fact, the volume of energy imported by India is expected to increase by up to 25% between now and 2040. Compounding all of these problems is India's inability to tackle the challenge of bureaucratic and administrative corruption, which it must do in order to become more attractive to foreign capital⁸.

A comprehensive understanding of Arab-Indo relations would call for a strategic research approach. Such an understanding must take into account India's position in world trade and, specifically, its position as the world's nineteenth largest exporter, with the value of Indian exports to the world market reaching an estimated \$265 billion. Similarly, an attempt to understand Indo-Arab relations must take in India's need for energy resources, particularly as 86% of India's oil imports come from OPEC member states. Sources for Indian hydrocarbons imports however go beyond the Arab states, however: New Delhi is the second largest importer—after China—of Iranian gas, which it does at the rate of 400,000 barrels-of-oil-equivalent (BOE) per day. A third point which must be considered is India's regional and wider global ambitions. India's geographical outreach to its Arab neighbors is not solely driven by the desire for oil, but also by the need to secure a number of strategic interests it shares with the Arab region and, in particular, the Gulf states. The clearest illustration of this is found in what Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi work to reach out to West Asia⁹. The concomitant rolling back of the United States from the region as well as New Delhi's competition with China have both also contributed to India's reaching out to the Arab states.

Finally, the Arab states, for their part, are motivated to build stronger relations with India by their need for more diverse international partnerships, particularly with the rising powers. The Arab states also stand to benefit from a relationship with India in terms of the diversification of their economies. This means, in particular, the drive for Arab states to advance their technology and manufacturing sectors with Indian help. These transformations, however, come at a time when the Arab Gulf states host seven million Indian workers and import large volume of goods from India.

⁸ "Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2016," Transparency International, 2016, at: <https://goo.gl/SLmRJU>

⁹ See Kadira Pethiyagoda, "India-GCC Relations: Delhi's Strategic Opportunity," Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper Series, No. 18, February, 2017, available online: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/india_gcc_relations.pdf



Indian Prime Minister Modi's policy of reaching out to West Asia, announced in 2014, paves the way for a meaningful Indo-Arab strategic partnership which goes beyond stereotyped notions and ideological dispositions which fell victim to domestic Indian political disputes. Such a strategic partnership would not only help to achieve their limited interests, but also reduce traditional Arab reliance on the West for political, security and economic assistance. The developmental and political upheavals experienced both by India and the Arab states, and the unraveling of traditional alliances across the globe have provided the opportunity for such a new Indo-Arab partnership.

The Conference

Our conference is rooted in the belief of the importance of the historically rich relations between the Arabs and India, as well as the need to forecast their future growth. "The Arabs and India: the Future and Transformations with a Rising World Power," will form a part of the "The Arabs and the World" series of conferences, held annually by the ACRPS since 2011 and which focus on the relations which tie the Arab peoples with other nations.

Scholars interested in participating in the event, which will be held are requested to consider submitting a paper which addresses one of the topics below:

1. The history of Indo-Arab relations.
2. Cultural interactions and exchange across the Indo-Arab divide.
3. Indo-Arab relations during the era of the Non-Aligned Movement.
4. India's experience of development: the lessons for the Arab states.
5. How the ascendancy of India has impacted India's relations with the Arab states.
6. India, Israel and the Question of Palestine.
7. Indian communities in the Gulf Arab states: labor rights, migration policies and the impact on Indo-Arab ties.
8. Energy as a cornerstone of Indo-Arab relations: is there a future for Indo-Arab cooperation outside of the energy domain?



Next Steps

- Abstracts/research proposals of no more than 400 words are to be submitted by September 20, 2017. The abstract must cover the research question to be tackled, an explanation of its importance and relevance to the conference. This submission must also include a separate bibliography/list of references.
- For papers for which the abstract has been accepted, a complete draft must be submitted by February 1, 2018. Authors will be notified directly of the Academic Committee's evaluation. This may include the need to revise a work before its acceptance into the conference.

All correspondence related to this conference should be sent directly by email, and addressed to the Academic Committee of the Indo-Arab Relations Conference 2018:

arab-indiaconf@dohainstitute.org