



INDIA - ISRAEL RELATIONS - GS II MAINS

Q. “India has so far been successful in balancing its interests in the Middle East, both bilaterally and multilaterally, without taking sides with either of the conflicting nations in the region”. In the light of above statement, critically analyse the India's stand on recent Israel-Palestine conflict. (15 marks, 250 words)

News: *Principled shift: On India's stand on Gaza*

What's in the news?

- Two months after Israel's bombardment of Gaza residents in retaliation for the October 7 terror attacks by Hamas began, India joined its voice to the global call to stop the bombing, voting in favour of a resolution at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) along with 152 other nations.

Key takeaways:

- The resolution demanded an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, an observance of international humanitarian law, the unconditional release of all hostages, as well as “ensuring humanitarian access”.
- India's vote was a shift from its previous vote at the last such UNGA resolution on October 27, when despite the death of 8,000 Gazans, India had decided to abstain from voting for a resolution that called for a ceasefire.
- The government and the MEA explained this to be a matter of principle, as part of India's “zero-tolerance” approach towards terrorism, as the earlier resolution did not contain an “explicit condemnation” of the October 7 attacks.
- However, while the UNGA resolution passed on December 12 bears no direct mention of the terror attacks, India has voted in favour.

Operations by both Hamas and Israel:

- Hamas, the militant group ruling the Gaza Strip, mounted one of the most audacious attacks on Israel known as “Operation ‘Al-Aqsa Storm”.
- In retaliation, Israel has formally declared war on Hamas under “Operation Iron Sword”.

Israel Palestine Conflict:

- It is a decades long dispute between Israel and Palestine that began in the middle of the twentieth century when the Jews from various parts of the world were granted the homeland in present-day Israel by Britain.



- It is one of the world's longest conflicts where Israel has occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip which the Palestine state claims.
- Numerous attempts have been made to resolve the conflict as part of the peace process by various groups of countries and the United Nation.
- With time, the countries around have normalized the ties with Israel through the Abraham Accord, Oslo Accord, etc. (PLO itself).
- But the deadlock still persists and the world community is persistent in its effort to attain the two-state solution.

India's position on Israel-Palestine conflict:

- **Post Independence:**
 - India's political attitude towards Israel was set quite firmly shortly after independence in 1947, when Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi vowed to support the Palestinian cause as they rejected the idea of two nations on the basis of religion.
 - India's position with regard to Palestine was also guided by the general consensus in the Arab world, the Non-Aligned Movement and the United Nations.
- **Vote against Israel at UN:**
 - When the partition of Palestine plan was put to vote at the UN, India voted against, along with the Arab countries.
 - When Israel applied for admission to the UN, India again voted against.
- **Recognition for Israel:**
 - New Delhi, however, recognized Israel in 1950.
 - In 1953, Israel was allowed to open a consulate in Mumbai, but no diplomatic presence was granted in New Delhi.
- **Recognition for the Palestine Liberation organization (PLO):**
 - In early 70's the Palestine Liberation organization (PLO) emerged as the representative of the people of Palestine
 - India recognized PLO as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and permitted it an independent office at New Delhi.
 - While India was one of the last non-Muslim states to recognize Israel, it became the first non-Arab state to recognize the PLO.
- **Towards the end of the Cold War:**
 - The end of the Cold War weakened the Non-Aligned Movement and reduced the ideological hostility towards Israel.

India-Israel Relations:

India did not establish diplomatic relations with Israel until 1992 for several reasons, including

- **Political ideology:**



- India's commitment to the non-aligned movement caused implied freezing relations with Israel that was increasingly seen as leaning towards the Western bloc.
- **Ties with Arab countries:**
 - India's dependence on Arab states for oil imports led to a pro-Arab tilt in its West Asia Policy.
 - A need to garner Arab support for its position over the Kashmir issue compelled New Delhi to pursue an exclusively pro-Arab policy.
- **Nehru and Gandhi's stand:**
 - Both of them pledged support for the Palestinian cause and rejected the notion of two nations based on religious criteria.
 - As an international scofflaw and occupying power, Israel has struggled to break diplomatic ties with the countries of the Global South, including India.

Shift of India's stand:

- On the **Kashmir issue**, West Asia supported Pakistan.
- **Oslo Accords of 1993:**
 - Agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), aimed to establish a framework for peace and self-governance in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories.

Origin of India Israel Relations:

- **In 1992, started defence deals and cooperation in science, technology and agriculture.**
- India was still reticent about its ties with Israel as it balanced this with its historical support for the Palestinian cause, its dependence on the Arab world for oil and the pro-Palestinian sentiments of the country's Muslim citizens.
- **First high-level visits:**
 - In 2000, L K Advani became the first Indian minister to visit Israel.
 - The two countries set up a joint anti-terror commission in 2000.
 - And in 2003, Ariel Sharon became the first Israeli Prime Minister to visit India.

Economic and Commercial Relations:

- The bilateral merchandise trade grew from USD 200 million in 1992 to **USD 6.35 billion** (excluding defence) during the period 2021-2022, with the balance of trade being in India's favour.
- **India is Israel's third-largest trade partner in Asia and seventh largest globally.**
- In recent years, bilateral trade has diversified into several sectors such as pharmaceuticals, agriculture, IT and telecom, and homeland security.
- Israeli companies have been instrumental in transferring technology to India in areas like renewable energy, telecom, water technologies etc.



- Many of them have also set up R&D centers in India.
- The **Free Trade Agreement (FTA)** between the two countries is also on cards.

Defence Cooperation:

- India imports critical defense technologies from Israel.
- There are regular exchanges between the armed forces.
- There is cooperation on security issues, including a **Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism**.
- Indian armed forces use **Israeli Phalcon AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control Systems), Heron drones and Barak anti-missile defence systems**.

Cooperation in Agriculture:

- A three-year joint work program has been signed between the two countries in 2021 for the development in agriculture cooperation.
- It is aimed at establishing **Centers of Excellence**, intensifying value chains and encouraging private investment.
- India has benefited from **Israeli expertise and technologies** in horticulture mechanization, orchard and canopy management, micro-irrigation and post-harvest management.
- **Israeli drip irrigation technologies** and products are now widely used in India.
- Some Israeli companies and experts are providing expertise to manage and improve dairy farming in India through their expertise in high milk yield.

Science & Technology:

- The two countries have established a **Joint Committee on S&T**, established under the S&T Cooperation Agreement signed in 1993.
- **India-Israel Industrial R&D and Technological Innovation Fund (I4F)** has been set up to secure cooperation between the Department of Science and Technology (DST), the Government of India, and the Israel Innovation Authority, Government of Israel to promote, facilitate and support joint industrial R&D projects.
- It will address the challenges in the agreed 'Focus Sectors'.

Energy:

- **Tamar and Leviathan gas fields off the coast of Israel** were explored recently and India has been one of the first countries to bid for an exploration license in order to extract and import natural gas from the fields.
- India's ONGC Videsh, Bharat Petro Resources, Indian Oil and Oil India were awarded an exploration license by the Israeli government, a clear sign of ongoing diversification in ties between the two countries.



Cultural Exchange - Diaspora:

- Approximately 85,000 Jews of Indian origin live in Israel.
- Most arrived during the 1950s and 1960s, with the majority from Maharashtra (Bene Israelis) and smaller groups from Kerala (Cochini Jews) and Kolkata (Baghdadi Jews).
- Some Indian Jews from North Eastern states (Bnei Menashe) have also migrated recently.

Dehyphenation Policy:

- The "De-hyphenation" policy of India with respect to Israel and Palestine refers to **India's attempt to separate its relationship with Israel from its relationship with Palestine.**
- Prior to this policy, India's approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was often seen as being heavily influenced by its support for the Palestinian cause.

Challenges in India Israel Relations:

1. Relation with Iran:

- Israel sees Iran as an existential threat, while India values cooperation for energy supplies and a Chabahar port route to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

2. Approach towards the Arab world:

- Israel has differences with Arab nations, whereas India's recent UN vote against the US on Jerusalem reflects India's significant interests in the region.

3. Stand on China:

- China is Israel's largest trading partner in Asia (Beijing's bilateral trade with Israel totalling \$22.1 billion in 2022), with strong technology and investment linkages.
- The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is stuck because of the concerns from the Indian domestic industry.

4. Foreign Policy:

- It is difficult to delink Israel and Palestine in India's foreign policy, making it a significant consideration while strategizing the diplomatic relationship with Israel and other nations in the Middle East.

WAY FORWARD:

- India has so far been successful in **balancing its interests in the Middle East, both bilaterally and multilaterally**, without taking sides with either of the conflicting nations in the region.
- **Flexibility in favour of India's national interest** must be made the top priority of the Indian government while dealing with Israel and Arab countries.
- **P2P contact:** Despite increasing bonhomie between the two states, the people-to-people contact is still lacking. Increased citizen engagement will give further depth to the relations between the two countries.



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- **Bigger trade volumes:** Though the trade volumes between the two countries have been increasing year on year, still it's much below its potential level. FTA should be executed soon and the trade basket must expand.
- **Striking balance:** A striking balance should be maintained between relations with Israel and Palestine for India's geostrategic needs and international morality.

Go back to basics:

I2U2:

- **Members:** India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, and United States.
- It is also referred to as the West Asian Quad/Middle East Quad/New Quad.
- **Objectives:** To promote economic development, scientific innovation, and regional stability.

