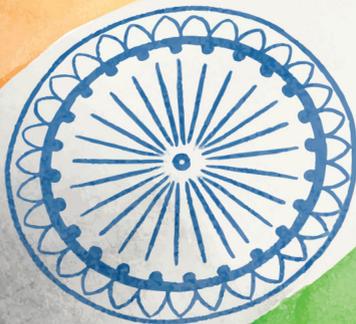


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# The Republic of India: Ties with the Middle East and North Africa

Gleydis Sanamé Chávez



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## The Republic of India: Ties with the Middle East and North Africa

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# The Republic of India: Ties with the Middle East and North Africa

In recent years, India has been considered a leader within the group of countries contributing to development. Its foreign policy has been designed with such a pragmatism that it does not explicitly align itself with one country in order to detract from its ties with another. This position is not current, however. During the years of the Cold War, although it had rapprochements with the Soviet Union - even within the military sphere - it was a founding member of the United Nations (UN) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

One of the most significant moments in the opening and consolidation of its political, economic and commercial ties with the exterior was born with Narendra Modi's arrival to the prime minister's post in 2014. Within the framework of the XVI Legislature of the Republic (2014-2019), the modernisation of the country's economic structure was proposed by Modi through a series of reform policies. This included one of great relevance to the commercial positioning process - the implementation of the "Make in India" programme. The objective of this programme is to convert the national economy into a global manufacturing centre through the development of infrastructures and the promotion of foreign direct investment, together with the advancement of links with other regions.

Modi was re-elected as prime minister in May 2019 and has made clear his commitment to following up on the programmes outlined since the previous legislature. For the Middle East, an area considered by India as belonging to Western Asia, his government has drawn and materialised a fairly comprehensive approach, from the countries of the Persian Gulf, through to Syria, Israel, Iraq and Iran.

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## Main economic-commercial links

According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), India ranks seventeenth among the largest export economies worldwide. In 2017, for example, it exported \$292 billion with a GDP of \$2.6 trillion and a GDP per capita of \$7.06 thousand.<sup>1</sup> Among India's main exportable products are petroleum and bituminous mineral oils, with the exception of crude oils, diamonds, medication, jewellery, precious metals and rice. On the other hand, among the main products it imports are crude oil from petroleum or bituminous minerals, gold, platinum, raw, semi-worked or powdered gold, coal briquettes, ovoids and similar solid fuels obtained from coal, petroleum gas and other gaseous hydrocarbons.

Meanwhile, the General Sub-Directorate of International Relations and Community Affairs of the Government of Spain published a report noting that India's main trading partners in the Middle East are, as recipients of goods, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia. As product issuers, countries include the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Qatar and Kuwait.<sup>2</sup> All form part of the group of 25 countries with the most substantial contact with India.

However, the document of the Government of Spain broadens the spectrum of products exported by India:

*It is necessary to make a special mention of the products of agriculture and the food industry, in the foreign trade of India, given the important role that these activities play in the economy as a whole, and employment in the country. According to official sources of the Government of India, more than 58 per cent of rural households have agriculture as their main livelihood and India is the world's largest producer, consumer and exporter of spices and spice products, and the*

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1 Observatory of Economic Complexity, "India (IND) Exports, Imports, and Business Partners," <https://oec.world/es/profile/country/ind/>.

2 Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, "India, Foreign Trade File," [www.exteriores.gob.es](http://www.exteriores.gob.es).

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second-largest producer of fruits of the world. Horticultural production in India is estimated at 287.3 million tonnes.

*In recent years, the Government of India is betting on facilitating those imports of goods and services that contribute to the development of areas that require foreign technology, in sectors such as, among others, energy (renewable, coal, LNG, electrical networks) and infrastructures (railways, roads, ports, airports, water supply and treatment). Examples include precision instruments and devices, certain ceramic products, electrical equipment and machinery in general, machinery for the tanning and leather industry, textiles, mining, defence material, equipment for food processing and preservation, equipment for cold, drinking water and sanitation management, waste management, renewable energy generation equipment, agricultural and construction machinery, certain telecommunications services, control and inspection services, and engineering and infrastructure services.*<sup>3</sup>

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3 Ibid.

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## Economic agreements

The economic ties between India and the UAE are immense. By 2018, both nations endorsed a currency exchange agreement in which they suppressed the US dollar to prioritise their national currencies, the rupee and the dirham.<sup>4</sup> It was subscribed for the amount of 2 billion dirhams, which is equivalent to about 35 billion rupees (\$495 million). Bilateral trade has reached \$50 billion.

In February of the same year, India and the UAE signed an oil agreement termed by the media, including the *Emirates News Agency (WAM)*, as “historic”. Within the agreement, India was granted a 10 per cent stake in the interests of the Lower Zakum, off the shores of Abu Dhabi. India contributed around \$599 million for a period of 40 years for Indian oil and gas companies to exploit Arab hydrocarbons. Never before had such a concession been achieved.<sup>5</sup>

During Modi’s visit to the country in August 2019, he stressed that the Emirates is his third-largest trading partner. Between 2018 and 2019, bilateral exchanges reached around \$60 billion.<sup>6</sup> The meeting reaffirmed the interest in promoting investment. A commitment of \$75 billion was established by the UAE in India, aimed at different sectors such as renewable energy, food, ports, airports and defence, among others.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, in the Arab state resides a sizeable Indian community of about 2.6 million, contributing significantly to its homeland’s economy, not only in remittances (over \$11 billion), but also through money and investment flow from business leaders.

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4 Signed during the December 2018 meeting between Indian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sushma Swaraj and Emirati Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Abdullah Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, held in Abu Dhabi.

5 Anadolu Agency, “United Arab Emirates and India sign ‘historic’ oil agreement,” February 11, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/es/economía/emiratos-árabes-Unidos-e-India-Firman-Historico-Agreement-Petrolero/1060493>.

6 El Correo del Golgo, “El primer ministro indio llega a Emiratos Árabes en el ‘mejor momento’ de las relaciones bilaterales,” August 24, 2019, <https://elcorreo.ae/emiratos/primer-ministro-indio-llega-emiratos-arabes-en-mejor-momento-sus-relaciones-bilaterales>.

7 Ibid.

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The economic ties with Saudi Arabia represent the second-largest in the area. In February 2020, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, while visiting India, stressed that his country expects investments in Asian lands of about \$100 billion. By 2019, the largest Arab nation was the second-largest supplier of oil after Iraq in the Middle East, with an approximate amount of 200 thousand barrels per day.<sup>8</sup> In October 2019, Modi held official meetings in Riyadh with King Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, Bin Salman and King Abdullah II of Jordan. During the visit, they signed around 12 agreements encompassing civil aviation, energy renewables, oil and gas. Furthermore, an amount in dollars that Bin Salman had promised to invest in February were allocated to refining, petrochemicals, infrastructure, agriculture and mining.<sup>9</sup>

As for Iran, the rapprochements are increasingly solid. At the beginning of 2019, the foreign minister of Iran pointed out in the framework of the joint Iran-India economic meeting in New Delhi in January that India represented the most reliable economic partner in difficult times.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, after the US exit from the nuclear agreement in 2018, by June of the same year, an amount of \$13 billion was quantified as a result of the trade agreements between Tehran and New Delhi.

The ties not only point to oil and gas, but also the banking sector, insurance and the development of commercial corridors. For Iran, India represents the second destination for crude oil, after China. For this reason, India has tried to circumvent Washington's sanctions on Shia Muslims. In fact, due to the damages caused by the first regulations, the White House issued temporary

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8 Katsoulas, Fotios, "Crude Oil Trade Middle East Gulf and Western Africa flows to India strengthening, replacing volumes from Iran," IHS Markit, May 13, 2019, <https://ihsmarkit.com/research-analysis/crude-oil-trade-meg-and-waf-flows-to-india-strengthening.html>.

9 Roche, Elizabeth, "India and Saudi Arabia to sign dozen agreements during PM Modi's two-day visit," Mint, October 27, 2019, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/india-and-saudi-arabia-to-sign-dozen-agreements-during-pm-modi-s-two-day-visit-11572162783344.html>.

10 Moonakal, Nadeem Ahmed, "India-Iran Relations: Assessing Prospects and Challenges," Rasanah, September 15, 2020, <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/centre-for-researches-and-studies/india-iran-relations-assessing-prospects-and-challenges/>.

exemptions in favour of the Modi government so that it could continue importing Iranian oil. The Indian economy demands about 4.7 million barrels of oil per day, of which the national production, only 949 thousand barrels per day, cannot satisfy.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, this anti-sanctions position was followed by the Modi administration's refusal to be part of the US' anti-Iranian coalition in the Persian Gulf, following the oil crisis in 2019 in the region.<sup>12</sup>

Among the bilateral agreements is one achieved in December 2018, deciding upon the abandonment of the US dollar in commercial activity. As with the UAE, the rupee became the bargaining chip during the importation processes by India of Iranian oil.<sup>13</sup> Payments were also made through a third country, such as Turkey: "Payment for a portion of Iranian oil is made in rupees in accounts opened by the Iranian oil company at UCO Bank, which is based in Calcutta."<sup>14</sup> Already in 2017, agreements on liquefied gas had been endorsed. For example, in May of the same year, one was signed guaranteeing that Indian companies could import about 44 thousand tonnes of the resource every thirty days, for a lapse of six months.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, by November 2016, Iran had surpassed Saudi Arabia in the number of exports of barrels of oil, with 789 thousand per day, compared with 697 thousand from the Sunni country.<sup>16</sup>

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11 Empresa Exterior, "The Indian economy will suffer from the US blockade of Iranian oil imports," November 2, 2018, <https://empresae exterior.com/art/68179/la-economia--india-se-resentira-del-bloqueo-estadoamericano-a-las-importaciones-de-petroleo-irani>.

12 Hispan TV, "India does not join the US anti-Iranian coalition in the Persian Gulf," July 19, 2019, <https://www.hispantv.com/noticias/la-india/433415/buques-coalicion-militar-golfo-iran>.

13 Al Manar TV, "India abandons the dollar in its trade with Iran and the United Arab Emirates," December 12, 2018, <http://spanish.almanar.com.lb/268567>.

14 Al Manar TV, "India and Iran agree to use the rupee in their trade relations," June 23, 2018, <https://spanish.almanar.com.lb/214612>.

15 Al Manar TV, "India starts importing liquefied gas from Iran," May 13, 2017, <https://spanish.almanar.com.lb/84482>.

16 Al Manar TV, "Iran displaces Saudi Arabia as the first oil supplier to India," November 18, 2016, <https://spanish.almanar.com.lb/28305>.

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However, the quantities and positions have varied over the years in the wake of the increasing sanctions against Iran.<sup>17</sup>

Likewise, in 2018, together with Russia, both nations focused on pushing the 7,200-kilometre International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project. The new route seeks to be a shorter route option than that offered by the Suez Canal. It aims to unite the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf with Russia and Europe. The tour will involve rail and sea transportation, passing through major cities such as Bandar Abbas (Gulf), Bandar Anzali (Caspian Sea) and Astrakhan (Russia). The estimated annual capacity of the INSTC is expected to be between 20 and 30 million metric tonnes of goods.<sup>18</sup> In addition, it reduces expenses by 40 per cent compared with the route from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean.

Another tremendous bilateral effort is represented by the Chabahar Port of the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchistan. It is a new free trade route managed by India to reach destinations such as Afghanistan or other parts of Central Asia without depending on the national territory of its arch-enemy, Pakistan. It was inaugurated in October 2017, with a cargo of wheat (1.1 million tonnes) shipped from the Indian port of Kandla after arriving in Iran to be transported by truck to Afghan territory. This project dates back to May 2016, when Iran, Afghanistan and India signed the Chabahar Agreement, an initiative to create a regional transportation network.<sup>19</sup> The agreement to develop the facility cost \$85.21 million.<sup>20</sup> The Shahid Beheshti Port will be managed for ten years by the Indian company Indian Ports Global Ltd (IPGL), a signatory to the agreement with the Iranian Arya Bandar shipping company.

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17 Ibid.

18 Al Manar TV, "Iran, Russia and India are betting on the North-South Corridor, the fastest and cheapest way to unite Asia and Europe," October 18, 2019, <https://spanish.almanar.com.lb/364641>.

19 Al Manar TV, "India begins to use the Iranian port of Chabahar," November 1, 2018, <https://spanish.almanar.com.lb/256720>.

20 Al Manar TV, "India and Iran will launch the development project for Iran's strategic port of Chabahar this week," June 11, 2018, <https://spanish.almanar.com.lb/211143>.

With regards to Syria, India has been closely involved in reconstruction. Early in 2015, the Syrian minister of petroleum and mineral resources, then Suleiman Al-Abbas, met with the Indian Ambassador to his country Man Mohan Bhanot, and they signed agreements to encourage Asian investment in the Arab territory.<sup>21</sup> The agreements included oil, gas and mineral resources, such as the development of phosphate production. Furthermore, India is part of the group of countries linked to the 236 foreign investment projects established in industrial zones to develop the Syrian economy.<sup>22</sup> Towards the end of 2019, the Indian company RAD Internationals carried out investment projects in energy and infrastructure along with Acme Cleantech Solutions Private Limited, the largest solar energy company in the Indian homeland.<sup>23</sup>

In 2018, both countries reaffirmed cooperative ties in higher education. In April of 2018, the Syrian Minister of Higher Education Atef Naddaf travelled to New Delhi, where he met with his peer, Prakash Javadekar. At the meeting<sup>24</sup> it was agreed to increase the number of scholarships in India for Syrian students, as well as the mutual acceptance of carrying out technical and scientific improvement programmes.<sup>25</sup> Later in 2019, a delegation from the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs visited Damascus. Along the way, it was decided to reinforce reconstruction projects, including upgrading the India-Syria Centre for Excellence in Information Technology. Thus, in the same month of the high-level visit, in May, the Tishreen Power Plant construction restarted with Indian financing after halting due to war complications, with an approximate cost

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21 Syrian Arab News Agency, "Syria and India examine investment possibility of Indian companies in Syria," March 30, 2020, <https://www.sana.sy/es/?p=135643>.

22 Sputnik, "More than 230 projects are carried out in Syria thanks to foreign investment," November 16, 2018, <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/oriente-medio/201811161083467099-reconstruccion-de-siria/>.

23 Al Manar TV, "Chinese and Indian companies will participate in the process of rebuilding Syria," November 30, 2019, <https://spanish.almanar.com.lb/377940>.

24 Al Manar TV, "Syria and India cooperate in the field of higher education," April 5, 2018, <https://spanish.almanar.com.lb/191068>.

25 India has offered some 1,000 scholarships for postgraduate and master's studies, in specialisms such as computing, technology, energy, gastronomy and nursing.

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of €305 million. The collaboration also extended to the medical sector. Since 2016, Indian doctors began to travel to Damascus and other provinces of Syria to help victims of the conflict.<sup>26</sup>

Concerning Israel, during Netanyahu's visit to New Delhi in 2018, nine agreements were signed to boost trade and cooperation in sectors such as agriculture, science, technology, security, oil, gas, computer security, films and entrepreneurship, amounting to a cost of \$5 billion.<sup>27</sup>

According to Professor P.R. Kumaraswamy at the School of International Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi:

*During more than 25 years of diplomatic relations, Israel has expanded its footprint in areas such as agriculture, horticulture, floriculture, water management, public health, combating desertification, waste recycling and more. It has taken Indian farmers to Agritech exhibitions and established model farms and training centres in different parts of India. Dozens of agreements have been signed between Israeli ministries, Indian companies and state governments.<sup>28</sup>*

## Trade relations with North Africa

Trade relations with North Africa do not reach the levels of those with the Middle East. In the case of Egypt, it represents one of the leading trading partners for India on the African continent. A bilateral trade agreement has been in place since 1978 and is based on the most-favoured-nation clauses

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26 Deccan Herald, "India believes humanitarian aid to Syria must be consistent," February 26, 2021, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/india-believes-humanitarian-aid-to-syria-must-be-consistent-955494.html>.

27 Enlace Judío, "The alliance between India and Israel," February 10, 2018, <https://www.enlacejudio.com/2018/02/10/la-alianza-entre-india-e-israel/>.

28 Aurora, "Decentralisation the key to India-Israel relations," June 28, 2017, <http://www.aurora-israel.co.il/descentralizacion-la-clave-de-las-relaciones-india-israel>.

(MFNs). India represents Egypt's sixth-largest trading partner, third-largest export destination and eleventh-largest source of import for Egypt. India's top five exportable products are mineral fuels, meat, vehicles and parts, cotton yarns and organic chemicals, while the top five Indian imports are crude oil, rock phosphate, inorganic chemicals, cotton and fruit.<sup>29</sup> Among the most relevant agreements are the Executive Programmes for Scientific and Technological Cooperation for the period 2015-2018 (December 2014), the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation between Secretaries of the National Security Councils of India and Egypt (December 2015) and the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Tourism (August 2015).

There exists in Egypt an Indian community of around 3,600 people, specifically concentrated in the capital, Cairo. There are also small communities in Alexandria, Port Said and Ismailia. Most members of the Indian community in Egypt work either for Indian companies or for other multinationals. Regarding cultural exchange and promotion, there are the annual cultural festival "India by the Nile", which has become the largest foreign festival in Egypt, and the Maulana Azad Indian Culture Centre (MACIC), which was established in Cairo in 1992 to promote cooperation between the two countries through the implementation of the Cultural Exchange Programme.<sup>30</sup>

Morocco, for example, presents India as the fifth-largest customer for 2018 (in 2017, it was the eighth), with 3.80 per cent of the total exported products. Spain and France hold the first two places, respectively. However, in the case of the countries from which Morocco imports, India does not appear within the top ten - neither in 2017 nor in 2018. The main Moroccan exports for 2018 comprise automobiles and their components, phosphates and their derivatives, agricultural and food products, textile products, pharmaceuticals, and aeronautical and electronic industries. Citrus fruits and seafood are among

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29 Embassy of India in Cairo, <https://www.eoicairo.gov.in>.

30 Ibid.

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the most exported food products.<sup>31</sup> However, in previous years, India had already signed agreements with Rabat in fields such as automotive and natural resources.<sup>32</sup>

As for Tunisia, India continues to be one of its main customers in the phosphoric acid market. Since 2013, the Tunisian Indian Fertiliser SA (TIFERT) joint venture has been in operation, with an approximate value of \$450 million and a production capacity of 360,000 tonnes of phosphoric acid. Tunisia imports from India assembly kits, cars, electrical items, cotton, mechanical motors, organic chemicals, rubber, rice, coffee and spices.<sup>33</sup>

In September 2016, within the Third Africa-India Forum Summit framework, India and the African Union (AU) reached several key commitments, with the fields of action including the economy, commerce and industry, energy, agriculture, infrastructure, healthcare and security.<sup>34</sup>

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31 Diplomatic Information Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation February 2019, <https://www.foment.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/INFORME-ECONOMICO-Y-COMERCIAL-MARRUECOS.pdf>, pp. 29-30.

32 Price, Gareth, "India and the Maghreb, a prosperous relationship," Afkar/Ideas, 2007, [https://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/afkar/afkar-16/india\\_magreb\\_relacion\\_Gareth\\_Price\\_afkar16\\_esp.pdf](https://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/afkar/afkar-16/india_magreb_relacion_Gareth_Price_afkar16_esp.pdf), P. 26.

33 Embassy of India in Tunisia, "<http://www.embassyofindiatunis.com/>.

34 Beri, Ruchita, "Third India Africa Forum Summit: Key Outcomes," Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, October-December 2015, [https://idsa.in/africatrends/third-india-africa-forum-summit\\_rberi\\_1215](https://idsa.in/africatrends/third-india-africa-forum-summit_rberi_1215).

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## Defence agreements

The Republic of India is regarded as being among the top arms importing countries. In its strategic partnership with Israel, it has been a loyal partner in purchasing arms. Tel Aviv has even sold around 41 per cent of its military production to India. The deals also extend to the missile industry. In 2017, for example, it sold a surface-to-air missile system for \$2.6 billion.<sup>35</sup> The contract was signed with Israel Aerospace Industries, including supplies of drones, radars, launchers and communications systems.<sup>36</sup> Twelve agreements were signed with Saudi Arabia in October 2019, including defence, security cooperation and aviation.

## Conclusions

The main political-economic trends of the Republic of India regarding the Middle East have been characterised by the search for nearby markets capable of supplying its increasingly growing demands for energy resources, responding to the national economic growth policies of Modi, as well as the replay of regional powers between his government and the Asian giant, China.

These relations already represent an essential place in the stability of India, while those established with North Africa do not hold the same importance. The latter are not principal within the broad panorama of India's exchanges with other regions of the world. However, in an increasingly growing state, trends suggest that in the not-so-distant future, Africa will be the area of influence between powers.

Likewise, New Delhi's performance has revolved around prioritising strategic agreements and promoting South-South collaboration, seeking to rethink traditional external forces in their areas of interest.

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35 Armanian, Nazanin, "India e Israel crean una inquietante asociación estratégica," Público, July 10, 2017, <https://m.publico.es/redirect/blogs/puntoyseguido/4066/india-e-israel-crean-una-inquietante-asociacion-estrategica/>.

36 RFI, "Historic visit of Indian Prime Minister Modi to Israel," July 4, 2017, <http://www.rfi.fr/es/oriente-medio/20170704-historica-visita-del-primer-ministro-indio-modi-israel>.

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