



## India Looks West while the MENA Region Turns Eastwards

Implications of India's Relations with Israel  
and the UAE

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Tiziano Marino and Giuseppe Dentice

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# India-Middle East Relations

## Opportunities and Challenges

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With the United States shifting its security focus from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific, other major powers are seen as potential players that might fill the void in Middle East security. The fact that India is one such player is further manifested in the recently announced India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor.

This series of *Insights* seeks to unravel the evolutionary paths that the growing multifaceted connections between India and the Middle East might take and the challenges arising. India's relationship with Israel, especially under the purview of the I2U2 partnership, which also includes the United Arab Emirates and the United States, has in particular generated much curiosity among observers. India's longstanding economic ties with the GCC countries, along with its ties with Iraq and Iran, have added to the strategic significance of the Middle East for India and given it strong reasons for a greater role in the Middle East.

# India Looks West while the MENA Region Turns Eastwards

## Implications of India's Relations with Israel and the UAE

Tiziano Marino and Giuseppe Dentice\*

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Security and multilateralism are among the key pillars of India's Look West policy that began in 2014. To broaden and deepen the country's relations with the Middle East beyond the traditional aspects of hydrocarbon purchases and the presence of a large Indian diaspora in the Gulf, New Delhi has focused heavily on the UAE and Israel, two countries that look to the Indo-Pacific with great interest for strategic and commercial reasons. India has now formalised strategic partnerships with the UAE and Israel, and in 2021 joined the two and the United States to establish the "I2U2". Amid increasing geopolitical polarisation and conflict, how important is the I2U2 to India? What are the prospects for regional cooperation between India and its Middle Eastern partners? Can India and its partners move beyond tactical responses to address broader strategic challenges in both the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific?

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Although the focus of Indian foreign policy studies has mainly been on the evolution of New Delhi's relations with its eastern neighbourhood and, more recently, on the maritime partnerships that have emerged within the Indo-Pacific region, as early as 2014 Prime Minister Narendra Modi had drawn attention to the importance for India of developing a global vision that would include actors located to the west, beyond the border with Pakistan.<sup>1</sup>

“India has developed a much more strategic view of the Middle East compared with the post-independence years, when relations with the region were mainly characterised by solidarity for the Palestinian people and an essentially mercantilist interest in oil-producing countries.”

Therefore, in parallel with the development of a “Look East” policy, which later evolved into the broader “Act East” policy and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the United States, Australia and Japan, India's strategic and foreign policy community began to focus on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in order to structure and revitalise relations with the region. Contributing to this evolution has been the fact that India has developed a much more strategic view of the Middle East compared with the post-independence years, when relations with the region were mainly characterised by solidarity for the Palestinian people and an essentially mercantilist interest in oil-producing countries.<sup>2</sup> Even today, however, the pivot of the renewed relationship between

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<sup>1</sup> Office of the Prime Minister of India, “English Rendering of PM's Address at the Launch of ‘Make in India’ Global Initiative”, 24 September 2014, [https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news\\_updates/english-rendering-of-pms-address-at-the-launch-of-make-in-india-global-initiative/](https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/english-rendering-of-pms-address-at-the-launch-of-make-in-india-global-initiative/)

<sup>2</sup> C. Raja Mohan, “India's Middle East Strategy”, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 13 December 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/indias-middle-east-strategy>.

India and the broader MENA region remains energy supply, with Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and also Iran (at least until the imposition of sanctions and strong US pressure during Donald Trump's presidency),<sup>3</sup> standing out as Delhi's main oil suppliers.<sup>4</sup> In parallel, Qatar has emerged as a central player in LNG supplies to India, accounting for approximately 40% of New Delhi's total imports in 2020–2021.<sup>5</sup> Given India's high annual energy consumption growth rate of 4.5% – much higher than the world average of 1.4%<sup>6</sup> – New Delhi seems to have realised the need to leverage trade (inter)dependence with the region to strengthen its presence and expand areas of cooperation. As a result,

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India has sought to develop strategic partnerships in the public and private sectors with the oil giants of the Gulf, especially ARAMCO (Saudi Arabia) and ADNOC (UAE). Moreover, the Indian business community has increasingly focused on the Gulf and, particularly, the UAE, with some 11,000 new Indian companies joining the Dubai Chamber of Commerce in 2022, an increase that took the total number

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<sup>3</sup> The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), “Crude Petroleum Iran – Historical Data 2018–2019”, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-product/crude-petroleum/reporter/irn>; Kabir Taneja, “US rhetoric Dogs India-Iran Ties”, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), 1 June 2019, [orfonline.org/research/us-rhetoric-dogs-india-iran-ties-51500/](https://orfonline.org/research/us-rhetoric-dogs-india-iran-ties-51500/)

<sup>4</sup> Bilal Abdi, “Iraq Maintains Top Position as India's Crude Oil Supplier in 2018–2019”, *The Economic Times – Energy World*, 30 April 2019, <https://energy.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/oil-and-gas/iraq-maintains-top-position-as-indias-crude-oil-supplier-in-2018-2019/69106973>.

<sup>5</sup> The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), “Natural Gas Liquefied – Historical Data 2020–2021”, <https://oec.world/en/profile/hs/natural-gas-liquefied>.

<sup>6</sup> Lok Sabha Secretariat (Research & Information Division), “Background Note on India-Gulf Energy Cooperation”, August 2022, <https://parliamentlibraryindia.nic.in/lcwing/India-Gulf%20Energy%20Cooperation.pdf>

of Indian companies registered with the chamber to around 83,000.<sup>7</sup> Also, with 9,136 Indian companies registered in Qatar as of 2022, that emirate was evidently another extremely attractive destination for Indian enterprises.<sup>8</sup>

**“In April 2017, India’s Integrated Defence Staff released the first public Joint Doctrine for the Indian Armed Forces (JDIAF-2017), in which the MENA area is defined as a “central pillar” in India’s external security paradigm.”**

An additional element that has traditionally made the MENA region of vital importance to India is the presence of a large diaspora. Since the 1970s, the broad MENA region, and more specifically the Gulf, has been an important destination for Indian economic migration, mainly from states such as Kerala, whose economy has become largely dependent on remittances. In recent years, the India-Gulf area has emerged as the second largest migration corridor in the world, and an estimated 8.5 million of the approximately 31 million non-resident Indians work in the Gulf.<sup>9</sup> With Indians accounting for more than 30% of the expatriate workforce in the Gulf states<sup>10</sup> and India absorbing a large part of the region’s energy resources, New Delhi began to realise the importance of stability in the region. In light of this, in April 2017,

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<sup>7</sup> Arabian Business, “UAE-India Trade to Reach \$100bn in next 5 years”, *Arabian Business*, 24 January 2023, <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/politics-economics/uae-india-trade-to-reach-100bn-in-next-5-years>

<sup>8</sup> Qatar News Agency, “Qatar Participates in CII Partnership Summit 2023 in India”, 18 March 2023, <https://www.qna.org.qa/en/News%20Area/News/2023-03/18/0015-qatar-participates-in%C2%AD0cii-partnership-summit-2023-in-india>

<sup>9</sup> Bhupesh G. Chintamani, “India–GCC Countries Connection: Trends, Prospective, and Opportunities”, in *Indian Migration to the Gulf Issues. Perspectives and Opportunities*, ed. Anisur Rahman, Sameer Babu M, and Ansari PA John (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2023), p. 84.

<sup>10</sup> John Calabrese, “India-Gulf Migration: A Testing Time”, Middle East Institute, 14 April 2020, [mei.edu/publications/india-gulf-migration-testing-time](http://mei.edu/publications/india-gulf-migration-testing-time)

India's Integrated Defence Staff released the first public Joint Doctrine for the Indian Armed Forces (JDIAF-2017), in which the MENA area is defined as a "central pillar" in India's external security paradigm.<sup>11</sup> New Delhi's search for capital and technology to support the development of national modernisation plans, not least in the defence sector, also has contributed to increasing the region's importance to India in recent years and has been a driving force in the development of relations with Israel.

From a political perspective, India's approach of non-interference in major regional disputes has contributed to the strengthening of relations with the MENA countries. Notably, this approach has enabled India not only to be recognised as a credible interlocutor, but also as a country with which partnerships can be developed that promote a multilateral vision of interstate relations and eschew the logic of bloc confrontation. For instance, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt, a country that has been traditionally non-aligned, paid an official visit to India in January 2023 to revive cooperation in the agriculture, digital and trade sectors.

**“This common approach in which geopolitical and geoeconomic issues create axes of convergence among Israel, the Gulf monarchies and India is strongly supported by the United States to counterbalance and contain new systemic developments emerging in the region.”**

On the other hand, the formalisation in 2021 of the “I2U2” minilateral group, named after the participating countries, India, Israel, the UAE and the United States, also known as the “Quadrilateral of West Asia”, could be seen as an example of how India balances its

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<sup>11</sup> Integrated Defence Staff, India, “Joint Doctrine Indian Armed Forces”, April 2017, [https://bharatshakti.in/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Joint\\_Doctrine\\_Indian\\_Armed\\_Forces.pdf](https://bharatshakti.in/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Joint_Doctrine_Indian_Armed_Forces.pdf)

traditional foreign policy stance with closer strategic ties with the United States. Formed in the aftermath of the signing of the Abraham Accords, the I2U2 was created first and foremost as a minilateral platform in the Indo-Pacific tied in with the US strategy in this wider region.<sup>12</sup>

## India's Relations with Israel and the UAE

New Delhi has in recent years quickly transformed several decades of low-level engagements with Tel Aviv and the Gulf monarchies, elevating those engagements to strategic partnerships. Interestingly, this new approach, aimed at preserving and strengthening the national interests of the respective countries, has been fostered by the emergence of global tensions closely related to geopolitical, geoeconomic and strategic issues. In this context, the I2U2 countries have sought greater cooperation in several areas of mutual interest, starting with the construction of an India-Middle East interconnectivity system in areas such as technology, energy, transportation, space, and water and food security.<sup>13</sup>

This common approach in which geopolitical and geoeconomic issues create axes of convergence among Israel, the Gulf monarchies and India is strongly supported by the United States to counterbalance and contain new systemic developments emerging in the region, such as those proposed by China. As stated by Michael Tanchum, “[f]or Washington, the development of an arc of commercial connectivity from India’s Arabian Sea coast to Israel’s Mediterranean coast with the UAE as its hub provides a geopolitical counterweight to China’s expanding commercial presence across the Indo-Pacific into the Middle East”.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Narayanappa Janardhan and Gedaliah Afterman, “US Leans on Economic Strategy to Achieve Geopolitical Ends in the Middle East and Asia”, The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 6 June 2023, <https://agsiw.org/u-s-leans-on-economic-strategy-to-achieve-geopolitical-ends-in-the-middle-east-and-asia/>.

<sup>13</sup> The White House, “Joint Statement of the Leaders of India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, and the United States (I2U2)”, 14 July 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/14/joint-statement-of-the-leaders-of-india-israel-united-arab-emirates-and-the-united-states-i2u2/>.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Tanchum, “The India–Middle East Food Corridor: How the UAE, Israel, and India Are Forging a New Inter-Regional Supply Chain”, Middle East Institute, 27 July



This new posture between India and its West Asian partners aims to reap synergy through cooperation.<sup>15</sup>

“The signing of the Abraham Accords and subsequent normalisation of diplomatic relations between Israel and the UAE, as well as the marginalisation of the Palestinian cause from regional and international agendas, constitute a turning point for all these countries.”

However, India’s growing relations with the UAE and Israel carry potential complications. While India is formally helping Iran to develop its port in Chabahar – although there have been many delays caused by US sanctions, which have not only affected Iranian oil exports to India but also hindered Indo-Iranian cooperation on the development of the port – the Gulf monarchies boosted relations with India’s key rival, Pakistan, to offset Iran’s growing influence in the Middle East. In fact, for decades, Pakistan has acted as a regional balancing power against Iran.

Nevertheless, the signing of the Abraham Accords and subsequent normalisation of diplomatic relations between Israel and the UAE, as well as the marginalisation of the Palestinian cause from regional and international agendas, constitute a turning point for all these countries. In fact, the normalisation agreements between Israel and the UAE (followed also by Israel’s normalisation with Bahrain, among other Arab countries) have reconfigured political alignments in West Asia: the accords have not only created opportunities for India’s bilateral engagements in the MENA region but also have led to the creation of

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2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/india-middle-east-food-corridor-how-uae-israel-and-india-are-forging-new-inter>.

<sup>15</sup> Manjari Singh, “India-UAE-Israel Relations: From Normalisation to Complementarities, Collaboration and Cooperation”, Raisina Files 2023, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), 3 March 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-uae-israel-relations/>.

trilateral cooperation between India, Israel and the UAE in many areas, including energy, medicine, agriculture and food security. While the volume of mutual trade between Israel, India and the UAE is continuously increasing, in terms of military relations India is a major importer of Israeli weapons.<sup>16</sup>

**“It is no secret that Washington is interested in encouraging India to take an active role in maintaining the security of the Gulf region as a counterweight to Chinese influence in that arena.”**

Not surprisingly, the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between India and the UAE and the ongoing talks for a Free Trade Agreement between India and Israel fit into an almost win-win dynamic aimed at helping to forge a triangular political and economic partnership. Moreover, the geographical proximity of the three countries makes them more willing to implement joint infrastructural projects – not only in refining and petrochemicals, but also in ports, roads and projects on connectivity of a highly strategic nature (such as the railway that could connect the Middle East to India.<sup>17</sup> The goal is to stress that they have a concrete framework of cooperation – but not in an exclusive way – under the US banner and its strategy for the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>18</sup> Some of the projects undertaken under the I2U2 banner appear to be envisaged as alternatives to Chinese initiatives such as those under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Tanchum, “The India–Middle East Food Corridor”.

<sup>17</sup> B. Ravid, “Scoop: US, Saudi Arabia, Others to Discuss Railway Project Connecting Middle East”, *Axios*, 6 May 2023, <https://www.axios.com/2023/05/06/saudi-arabia-india-railway-middle-east-biden>.

<sup>18</sup> John Calabrese, “The US and the I2U2: Cross-Bracing Partnerships across the Indo-Pacific”, Middle East Institute, 27 September 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/us-and-i2u2-cross-bracing-partnerships-across-indo-pacific>.

It is no secret that Washington is interested in encouraging India to take an active role in maintaining the security of the Gulf region as a counterweight to Chinese influence in that arena. The triangular axis between India, Israel and the UAE indeed has a highly strategic value and demonstrates India's interest in profiling itself to the countries of the Middle East as an alternative (along with the United States) to China. Notwithstanding its focus on economic cooperation, the I2U2 has a clear geopolitical impact, which sees an almost unique opportunity for India to place itself as a geostrategic pivot between the Indo-Pacific and the wider Mediterranean. Indeed, from this perspective, India is seeking new forms of development that also involve strategic logistics and interconnections of various kinds with the likes of Israel, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, as well as historically important entities such as Egypt, which operates the Suez Canal.

## I2U2: The West Asia Quad

The first meeting of the I2U2 that took place in October 2021 represented a culmination of the growing relationship between India, Israel and the UAE, which began a few years earlier. On that occasion, Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar visited Israel, where he met with Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, while the UAE and US foreign ministers joined them in a virtual meeting. Notably, the four ministers discussed expanding economic and political cooperation in the Middle East and Asia, including through trade, combating climate change, energy cooperation and strengthening maritime security.<sup>19</sup> In addition, given that the Covid-19 pandemic was at a critical phase then, the meeting offered an opportunity to explore joint solutions in the health sector. The first meeting mainly served to make clear the nature of the forum – i.e., as an

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<sup>19</sup> US Department of State (Office of the Spokesperson), “Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken’s Meeting with Emirati Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and Israeli Foreign Minister and Alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid”, 18 October 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-of-state-antony-j-blinkens-meeting-with-emirati-foreign-minister-sheikh-abdullah-bin-zayed-indian-external-affairs-minister-dr-subrahmanyam-jaishankar-and-israeli-foreign-minist/>.

example of pragmatic tactical alignment rather than a platform inspired by ideological factors.<sup>20</sup> Nine months later, during a trip by US President Joe Biden to Israel, the first I2U2 leaders-level meeting was held, with Prime Minister Modi and UAE President Mohamed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan attending remotely. Among the areas surfaced for possible cooperation were water, energy, transportation, space, health and food security.<sup>21</sup> Notably, the issues of food security and clean energy were at the centre of the discussions, highlighting that the I2U2 was essentially a “geoeconomic rather than geopolitical” forum.<sup>22</sup>

“Projects related to the construction of integrated food parks throughout India and hybrid renewable energy in Gujarat state have highlighted what the real strategic value of the I2U2 is for India: capital and technology in exchange for facilitated access to the fast-growing Indian market.”

In this context, projects related to the construction of integrated food parks throughout India and hybrid renewable energy in Gujarat state have highlighted what the real strategic value of the I2U2 is for India: capital and technology in exchange for facilitated access to the fast-growing Indian market. However, the changed international environment shaped by the conflict in Ukraine and the growing tension between Washington and Beijing offered the four I2U2 actors a chance to revive the political aspects of the arrangement. In this regard, the West

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<sup>20</sup> Harshil Mehta, “How I2U2 Is Truly a Platform for 21st Century”, News18, 19 July 2022, <https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/how-i2u2-is-truly-a-platform-for-21st-century-5585119.html>.

<sup>21</sup> The White House, “Joint Statement of the Leaders of India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, and the United States (I2U2)”.

<sup>22</sup> Navdeep Suri and Kabir Taneja, “Editor’s note”, in *I2U2: Pathways for a New Multilateral*, ed. Navdeep Suri and Kabir Taneja (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, 2023), p. 5.

Asian Quad is an important element of the strategy put in place by the United States to get closer to India, now that relations with China are deteriorating. Moreover, both Delhi and Washington are banking on the I2U2 to counter China's growing influence in the MENA region, which has been highlighted recently by its role in the Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement.

The geopolitical aspects, however, do not overshadow the economic nature of the I2U2, as recent meetings show. In February 2023, the first meeting of I2U2 deputy ministers in Abu Dhabi provided an opportunity to discuss investment opportunities with private sector stakeholders to address issues related to energy crisis management and growing food insecurity. In addition, in April 2023, senior officials from the United States, India, Israel and the UAE signed a memorandum of understanding to create a joint trade coalition. In this context, it is expected that the United States, together with Israel, will seek to deepen the political aspects of the agreement in the near future. Despite any efforts of this nature, however, it is by no means certain that India and the UAE will change their pragmatic approach to the I2U2, and this difference in agenda between these two players and the United States could be the main challenge that the minilateral will face in the future.<sup>23</sup>

## Prospects

Despite the slow pace of growth in Middle East–India connection, its potential is vast in terms of complementarities, collaboration and cooperation.<sup>24</sup> The intention to tap this potential emerged strongly at the G20 summit held in India in September 2023, where a memorandum of understanding was signed for the creation of a corridor linking India and Europe through the Middle East, consisting of railway and shipping

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<sup>23</sup> Jack Dutton, "US, India, UAE, Israel Announce Creation of I2U2 Joint Business Coalition", *Al-Monitor*, 19 April 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/04/us-india-uae-israel-announce-creation-i2u2-joint-business-coalition>

<sup>24</sup> Manjari Singh, "India-UAE-Israel Relations".

lines, along with high-speed data cables and energy pipelines.<sup>25</sup> This project, still at an embryonic stage, is only the latest of several multilevel and multidimensional engagements that have allowed India and its Middle Eastern partners to better integrate and orient their national, inter-regional and global interests in a vast, potentially connected region

**“In the short to medium term, it is also relevant to observe how India’s (and even the UAE’s) independent stance with respect to the Russia-Ukraine confrontation will affect the nature of the I2U2.”**

from the Mediterranean (and Europe) to the Indian Ocean, passing through the Middle East. In this context, it is worth considering that projects under the I2U2 banner, as well as the India-Middle East–Europe Corridor, always involve the United States, which needs to present concrete initiatives to countries in the Middle East region that are eager to avoid a zero-sum game between Washington and Beijing. In the short to medium term, it is also relevant to observe how India’s (and even the UAE’s) independent stance with respect to the Russia-Ukraine confrontation will affect the nature of the I2U2.

Overall, amid the intensifying competition between China and the United States, players such as India, Israel and the UAE have decided to pay new attention to protecting their interests in order to avoid being marginalised in the geopolitical dynamics of the near future. In other words, India, Israel, and the UAE are working to create what may be a new transregional order in Asia.<sup>26</sup> ◆

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<sup>25</sup> Tiziano Marino, “The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor in Europe’s Indo-Pacific Strategy”, *The Diplomat*, 21 September 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/the-india-middle-east-europe-corridor-in-europes-indo-pacific-strategy/>

<sup>26</sup> Mohamed Soliman, “An Indo-Abrahamic Alliance on the Rise: How India, Israel, and the UAE Are Creating a New Transregional Order”, Middle East Institute, 28 July 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/indo-abrahamic-alliance-rise-how-india-israel-and-uae-are-creating-new-transregional>

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