

# India's Stance on Hamas-Israel War: Unambiguous on Terror, Principled on Palestine

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## ABSTRACT

Hamas is an Islamist militant group based in the Gaza Strip. Its main goal is to continue fighting against Israel and is intended to secure support for the Palestinian cause from the international community. After the events of October 7, 2023, the Iranian regime and its proxies launched a multi-front attack on Israel. For Israel, this poses a serious threat, prompting a strong military response that includes extensive bombing and targeted actions against key leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah. India unequivocally condemned this terrorist attack in Israel, calling it an act of terrorism, and is also providing humanitarian assistance to the people in Gaza. India supports Israel and calls for a peaceful end to the conflict, stressing the importance of diplomacy and dialogue rather than violence.

## INTRODUCTION

October 7, 2024, marks the second year of the deadly terrorist attack by Hamas in Israel. The attack resulted in the deaths of around 1,200 innocent civilians, including many women and children, and 251 individuals were taken hostage. Currently, 97 hostages are still being held by Hamas, with 64 of them believed to be alive; 33 hostages have been confirmed dead (The New York Post). From Israeli perspective, it was an unprovoked act of terrorism against civilians, and its retaliation is justified as Israel has the right to exist and defend itself. The immediate objective of Israel is to eliminate Hamas, secure the release of hostages and to bring back Gaza under its control. On the other hand, this design by Hamas to destroy Israel has proven to be almost suicidal, as the people of Gaza witnessed an unprecedented and unparalleled casualties and destruction. According to the Hamas-run health ministry, around 42,175 Palestinians are killed and 98,336 wounded and so far 1.9 million people have been relocated. At the same time,

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Iran and its proxies such as Houthis, Hezbollah, and militias in Syria and Iraq launched different fronts against Israel. Iran has now witnessed how Hamas is decimated, and Hezbollah is crumbling as its aspiration to destroy Israel is nothing but a perilous nightmare.

Militarily, Israel has inflicted severe damage on Hamas. Israel has not only assassinated its top leaders but also ruined the Hamas weapons, manpower and infrastructure, including a huge network of underground tunnels across Gaza which was used by the Hamas for military operations and as hideouts. Hamas is now demanding a ceasefire and the release of its cadres in Israeli prisons in exchange for the release of Israeli hostages. Mediation initiatives undertaken by the United States, Egypt, and Qatar have not produced any favorable outcomes. Meanwhile, in July 2024 the Israeli parliament passed a resolution that “firmly opposes the establishment of a Palestinian state west of Jordan. The establishment of a Palestinian state in the heart of the Land of Israel will pose an existential danger to the State of Israel and its citizens, perpetuate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and destabilize the region” (The Times of Israel). At the UN speech on 27 September 2024, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said his country seeks a “demilitarized” and “de-radicalized Gaza”. He further asserted that “Israel will keep fighting until surrender of Hamas, lay down its arms, and release all its the hostages”. (Netanyahu’s UN Speech, 2024)

## HAMAS AND GAZA STRIP

Hamas is also known as “the Islamic Resistance Movement” and the *de facto* governing authority of the Gaza Strip emerged in 1987 as an alternative to the secular Fatah movement in Palestine. The 1988 charter of Hamas is rooted in a blend of Palestinian nationalism and violent Islamist Jihadism. This ideology is committed to the destruction of Israel. In 2017, it released an apparently less extreme version of its political agenda. This mentioned a Palestinian state on territories captured in 1967 as “a formula of national consensus” yet it continued to emphasize its dedication to the objective of destruction of Israel. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s Hamas involved in sabotaging the Oslo

peace process by using violent attacks including suicide bombings in Israel.

In fact, Hamas entered politics in 2005, and won a landslide victory in Palestinian Legislative Council election in January 2006. In June 2007, it gained complete control of the Gaza after a violent conflict with Fatah. Hamas established an authoritarian regime, promoting Islamization in the Gaza Strip and suppressing dissent, while maintaining its war with Israel. Hamas favouring armed resistance, Fatah preferring to negotiate. As a result, together with Egypt, Israel tightly restricted movement and access into the territory, and western governments avoided contact with Hamas. During this period, Hamas received ideological, military, financial, logistical and diplomatic support from Turkey, Iran and Qatar and other support from Algeria, Sudan and Tunisia and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah. For decades, Hamas has steadily improved its military capabilities and tactics, evolving from guerrilla and suicide attacks to acquiring sophisticated weaponry and air defense systems. Between 2007 and 2021, Hamas engaged in four wars, which took place in 2008–2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021. Additionally, Hamas has constructed numerous underground tunnels within Gaza, primarily for storing its weapons, providing hiding places, and targeting Israeli forces. (Abuamer, Majd 2024)

On Israeli side, Israel has conducted four major military operations in the Gaza Strip: ‘Operation Cast Lead’ from December 27, 2008, to January 18, 2009; ‘Operation Pillar of Defense’ from November 14 to 21, 2012; ‘Operation Protective Edge’ from July 8 to August 26, 2014; and the ‘Israel-Hamas conflict’ from May 10 to 21, 2021. These actions were taken to stop the ongoing rocket attacks that threatened Israel’s security. On October 7, 2023, a meticulously planned attack by Hamas took place, as reported by the New York Times. During talks between Hamas and Israel regarding a ceasefire in 2021, Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar covertly sought to enlist the support of Iran and Hezbollah for the October 7, 2022, attack. The attack, which ultimately occurred on October 7, 2023, was orchestrated by Yahya Sinwar, the *de facto* leader of Hamas and subsequently, he was killed by Israel on October 18, 2024.

## ISRAEL AND ARAB NORMALIZATION PROCESS

For decades, Israel's formal relationship exists with immediate neighbors, particularly with Egypt and Jordan. Many Arab countries have never waged a war with Israel, and some even shared both clandestine business and defense ties and never made public. Despite a non-stop conflict with the Hamas, Israel worked to build diplomatic ties with Arab League countries, leading to the signing of the Abraham Accords in August 2020. This agreement was signed between Israel and four Arab nations: the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. The Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia which is coming closer to Israel, "called for an immediate halt to the escalation of conflict between Palestinians and Israel" due to pro-Palestinian public sentiments and solidarity in the region and subsequently, it suspended dialogue with Israel. Citing the progress of the normalization linking with IMEC, at the UN speech, PM Netanyahu said that "IMEC as a "blessing" and a project that will turn Israel into "a bridge of peace and prosperity between these continents," eventually "creating a new Middle East". (Netanyahu, Benjamin, UN Speech, 2023). In this year, at the UN speech PM Netanyahu "showed two maps, one map of a blessing and other a map of curse. The map of blessing "shows Israel and its Arab partners forming a land bridge connecting Asia and Europe. Between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, across this bridge, we will lay rail lines, energy pipelines, and fiber optic cables, and this will serve the betterment of 2 billion people". He further said it is "a bright blessing—a future of hope". He has linked the 7 October attack as curse for normalizations and said that "It's a map of an arc of terror that Iran has created and imposed from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean. Iran's malignant arc has shut down international waterways". "It cuts off trade, it destroys nations from within, and inflicts misery on millions" and "a dark future of despair". (Netanyahu, Benjamin, UN 2024)

## INDIA'S CHANGING POLICY TOWARDS WEST ASIA

India recognized Israel in 1947. But it maintained only consular-level relations for over forty years,

mainly due to domestic electoral politics in India, dependence on Arab countries for energy resources and non-recognition of Israel's existence by most of its Arab neighbours. India is one of the few countries that has ambassadors in both Tel Aviv and Ramallah. After the end of Cold War, for its own economic and strategic interests, India's policy towards West Asia has evolved significantly since the 1990s. The Non-Aligned policy of India is now seen as inadequate for pursuing these objectives. On January 29, 1992, India and Israel set up embassies in each other's capitals. In 1974, India was the first non-Arab country that "recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people". Additionally, in 1988, India became the first country to formally recognize Palestinian statehood. Indian governments have consistently supported the PLO, keeping in mind the feelings of India's large Muslim population. When Yasser Arafat, the leader of the PLO and President of the Palestinian National Authority, pursued a peaceful resolution to the conflict, India maintained its backing for "a two-State solution". This solution aims for the Palestinian people to have their own independent country with secure borders, while also respecting Israel's security needs. On May 14, 2024, India backed Palestine and voted at the UN to allow it to become a full member instead of just a "non-member observer state". (The Economic Times)

Israel has always been supported and provided emergency weapons and intelligence to India in the past, particularly during India-Pakistan war in 1971 and Kargil war in 1999. The steady growth of Pakistan-backed Islamic militancy against the state of India bolstered its interest in building strong ties with Israel, which also faced threats from Islamic terrorism. This led to a growth in security and intelligence cooperation, and slowly, political and diplomatic relations improved. Israel became one of India's top arms suppliers. The partnership goes beyond just buying and selling; they have also worked together on many joint projects, including initiatives under the Make-in-India projects over the years. Today, both collaborate in defence, strategic, counterterrorism, cooperation and intelligence and security-related areas and trade, science and technology and innovation and also in the area

of agricultural technology and water resource management for ensuring food and water security. The bilateral trade between India and Israel is reaching over USD10.77 billion (excluding defence) in 2022-23 (MEA). Currently, approximately 26,000 Indian nationals are employed in various sectors of the Israeli economy. In 2022, India and Israel began talks about a framework agreement to make it easier for Indian workers to find temporary jobs in Israel. This agreement was finalized in November 2023, and so far, 4,825 Indian workers are in Israel under this agreement. (Lok Sabha, 8 August 2024)

For the first time, Narendra Modi government renewed India's West Asia policy and de-hyphenated the Israel-Palestine issue and non-combined visit to Israel and Palestine. He became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel in 2017, and Netanyahu has also visited to India in 2018. The meeting of both the leaders symbolises their personal closeness. Further, Prime Minister Modi has invited Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas before his visit to Israel. The growing bilateral tie between India with Israel is not at the cost of Palestine's interests. For both, India has become a reliable and trusted partner. Prime Minister Modi also received the highest civilian honour the "Grand Collar of the State of Palestine" from Palestinian during his visit to the Palestine.

India has a deep historical linkage with all the countries in West Asia. In the last few years, India and West Asia, which India calls it extended neighbour is getting closer to moderate Arab Nations. Bilateral trade and economic and defence relations have progressed rapidly with UAE and Saudi Arabia. The bilateral trade touched USD 52.76 billion with Saudi Arabia, USD85 billion with UAE, USD 4.52 billion with Israel (non-defence) and USD 1.7 billion with Bahrain in the year 2023-24. Further, the Abraham Accords 2020 helps India to build a deeper strategic, economic, diplomatic with Arab countries. The first quadrilateral grouping known as I2U2 emerged out of this accord comprised of India, Israel, the UAE, and the US. In addition to it, the launching of India Middle East Europe Economics Corridor beginning from India to the Middle East region and a Northern Corridor connecting to Europe from Middle East through vast rail, road, and sea routes along with energy

pipelines and high capacity fiber-optic cables. This help in creating regional integration and increased cooperation which are driven by mutual trust, peace, stability, prosperity and regional unity. From Indian perspective, member countries are valuable partners for India accelerating India's economic modernization and expanding its strategic footprint in the region. Other corridors, such as the Chabahar port and the International North South Transport Corridor to Central Asia are also significant from economic and strategic point of view. Appreciating PM Modi's efforts for elevating a more close and friendly ties with Arab nations, the highest civilian awards has been conferred to him by Saudi Arabia, (King Abdulaziz Sash) the UAE (Order of Zayed) and Bahrain (King Hamad Order of the Renaissance), respectively.

## INDIA'S POSITION ON ISRAEL AND HAMAS

On 7 October, 2023 attack by Hamas on Israel has stunned the world. PM Modi is one of the first leaders in the world to clearly show his support for Israel and tweeted on October 7: *"Deeply shocked by the news of terrorist attacks in Israel. Our thoughts and prayers are with the innocent victims and their families. We stand in solidarity with Israel at this difficult hour."* In another tweets he expressed "People of India stand firmly with Israel in this difficult hour. India strongly and unequivocally condemns terrorism in all its forms and manifestations". The spokesperson of MEA, Arindam Bagchi "reiterated India's position on Israeli-Palestinian conflict, calling for resumption of direct negotiations" toward a "sovereign, independent, and viable state of Palestine living within secure and recognized borders, side by side, at peace with Israel."

PM Modi expressed his deep sadness on Twitter about the loss of lives in the bombing of al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza. He also conveyed to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas sympathy for the innocent people of Gaza. On 22 October, 2023 India dispatched "70 tonnes humanitarian assistance including 16.5 tonnes of medicines and other equipment to Palestine". Though President of Palestine Authority Mohammad Abbas is in Ramallah and has no control over Gaza. At UN, India also reiterated its principal position on

Palestine and remained abstain from the U.N. General Assembly vote for a humanitarian truce and early release of remaining hostages. In other words, India has reiterated that it recognizes the Palestinian Authority, not the Islamist Hamas regime of Gaza. So far, Government of India has engaged in discussions with several world leaders, including head of the states of Israel and Palestine. India has also shared its views through statements and joint communications in international forums like the **United Nations, G20, BRICS**, and the **Voice of Global South** Summit regarding the ongoing conflict between Hamas and Israel. (Lok Sabha, February 02, 2024)

### INDIA'S OWN STAKES IN THE REGION

In recent years, the relationship between India and West Asia has expanded beyond the traditional areas of trade, energy, and diaspora. There is an increasing focus on new areas of cooperation. These areas include artificial intelligence, maritime security, cyber security, space exploration, civilian nuclear efforts, renewable energy, food security, and improving connectivity. With India's expanding economic influence, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have increasingly viewed India as an appealing investment destination. Notably, the UAE made its first investment in India's strategic oil reserves and exploration activities. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia announced USD 100 billion investment, while the UAE's confirmed USD 75 billion for investments in various sectors in India. High-level visits have been exchanged between leaders from West Asia and India, reflecting the strengthening ties. During G20 summit in New Delhi India has extended its invitation to UAE, Oman, and Egypt. Moreover, India signed strategic partnership agreements with Israel, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Iran, irrespective of their regional rivalry, while also maintaining a balance between its interests and values.

## CONCLUSION

The MEA has said, "It is important that the conflict doesn't take a wider regional dimension and we urge that all issues be addressed through dialogue and diplomacy." With significant strategic interests in the region, India might face potential disruptions across various sectors from trade and energy security to the welfare of its expatriate workers, if the war spread into the region. India has consistently upheld its firm stance on Israel-Palestine conflict and neutrality in intra-regional rivalries in the region. But today, India stands at a crossroads where it can turn its strategic influence into a force for lasting peace in West Asia. India's strong relationships with Israel and Arab states present a unique opportunity to initiate meaningful dialogue for conflict de-escalation and a ceasefire. However, peace has not been possible in near future until fully victory of Israel.

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