

INDIA'S RELATIONS WITH SAUDI ARABIA AND UAE UNDER THE MODI GOVERNMENT

Sumant Kumar^a

ABSTRACT

India is home to the third-largest Muslim population, any internal policy changes affect Muslim voters including bilateral relations with neighbours and Gulf countries. Despite, several criticisms, the Modi government gained some objections over the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Population Register (NPR), and National Register of Citizens (NRC) issues at the national level. Nonetheless, the government has regained a second term in India. Modi's foreign policies not only made a new high in the bilateral relationship with Islamic countries in the Gulf, but amicability had changed significantly. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE in West Asia are rebuilding a new friendship era with India. After the decline of oil demand from the Western Countries, Gulf countries' expectations have increased to re-draw their approach towards New Delhi. Retrospectively, it also provided several opportunities from both sides (India and Saudi Arabia-UAE) to boost their ties including a joint naval exercise between the UAE and India, an invitation by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to Sushma Swaraj, the inauguration of a Hindu temple in the UAE by Narendra Modi as well as the Crown prince Mohammed bin Salman visit to New Delhi. These are a few steps from both India and Saudi Arabia-UAE sides to re-energize their relationship. Therefore, this paper discusses how the Modi government despite numerous challenges able to enhance a new era of the bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This research extensively covers the aspects of the economic, military, and strategic relationships which include both side visits and MoU.

Keywords: India, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bilateral Relations, Narendra Modi

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

India's relations with West Asia began in ancient times through the Indian Ocean towards the Arabia Sea and Mediterranean Sea, used mainly for trade purposes. Earlier the route between India and West Asia was connected to trade such as spices, jewellery, perfume, and cloth. Later, the promotion of Buddhism became the way to show the Indian message of peace, harmony, and 'Ahimsa' (noninjury) throughout the West Asian region. Many Muslim invaders conquered India and promoted Sufism culture in India, some invaders came to India to loot and destroy Indian culture, but a few also came to promote Islam and their culture. Interaction between the two regions promoted several contributions to the development of art, music, science, and literature which can be seen in the philosophy of Kabir, Akbar, Mahatma Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru. The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru believes that the two regions belong

^a Sumant Kumar (sumant4jnu@gmail.com) is an Assistant Professor at the Alliance School of Liberal Arts, Alliance University, Bangalore, Karnataka, 562106, India.

to a common civilization that has spread from the Indus Valley civilization to the Nile River Civilization (Heptulla, 1991).

The India-Saudi Arabia relationship developed in 1955 when King Saud came to New Delhi for a brief visit to meet Prime Minister Nehru to emphasize “a peaceful and non-militant approach to the issues which divide the world is an urgent necessity” (Mudiam, 1994). In 1955, Saudi King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz visited India to meet with Nehru to revive centuries-old friendly relations including economic and socio-cultural ties. High-level visits started since Indian independence to establish diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia. In return, Jawaharlal Nehru also visited Saudi Arabia in 1956. He conveyed his message to a large crowd stadium in Jeddah, which was the first time in Saudi Arabia's history, any foreign leader was allowed to do so (Kemp, 2012. P. 87).

Bilateral relations become stronger after the visit of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to Saudi Arabia in 1982. Another reciprocal visit was made by Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh in 2010 to sign the ‘Riyadh Declaration’ which raised the level from bilateral engagement to a ‘Strategic Partnership’. After that, Crown Prince, his Royal Highness Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister of Defence from Saudi Arabia visited India in 2014 to deepen ties in defence cooperation.

Similarly, India’s relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) began during the Harappan civilization (2500-2000 BCE). Archaeological evidence proves that India’s relationship with the UAE started in ancient times. The India-UAE relationship was based on economic trade including cloth, spices, and pearls. Since the 1970s, the oil boom in the Gulf region increased labour demands in which Indian labour found several opportunities in the UAE job market. However, during the cold war, India-UAE relations were affected due to tension over India-Pakistan disputes but after a decade the relationship improved again. Then, in 1981, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visited the UAE. Two decades later, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum (Vice President and Prime Minister) visited India in 2007 and 2010 respectively. Before Sheikh Mohammed’s visit, in 2006, King Abdullah made his historic visit to India for the signing of the ‘Delhi Declaration’ to improve the bilateral relationship (Kumar, 2017).

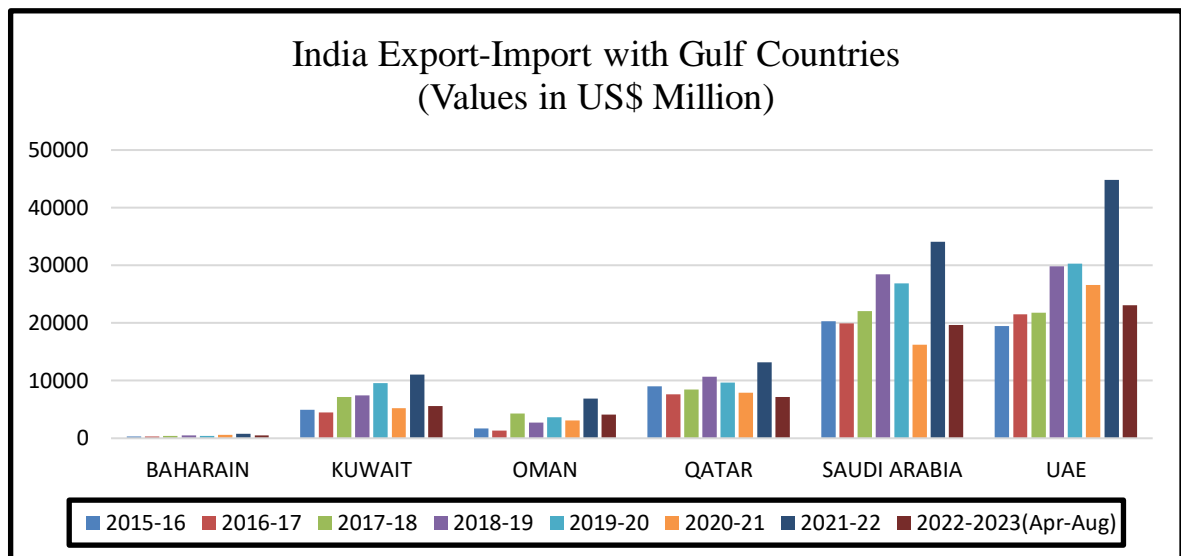
To understand the trends of India's relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, this paper is divided into six broader themes, covering all the recent development in bilateral relations. The six broader themes are economic and commercial relations, cultural relations, the Indian community in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, collaboration against the Covid-19 Pandemic, defence cooperation, and internal issues and international response. Indian relations with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are based on economic and commercial relations and to boost the relations other factors are playing a very significant role. Indian communities residing in both countries belong to diverse religious backgrounds such as Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Sikh. Thus, the cultural factors are important and highlighted how both countries have a strong bond with Indian culture. The reason to include the Covid-19 phase in the paper, during that phase economic and commercial relations were halted but other friendship relations continued which also bring closer to the trilateral relationship. Recent development in defence cooperation is enhancing India’s position at the international level in which both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are supporting India in defence relations to fight terrorism as well as strong bonding to enhance security ties. The last section is put in

this paper to highlights the challenges of India. Even though, the Modi government's affiliation with the right-wing Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) discriminated against Muslim populations in India nonetheless able to take support from the Muslim nations.

SAUDI-UAE RELATIONSHIP UNDER NARENDRA MODI

Rising energy demand pulls India toward the West Asian region. India's involvement with Saudi Arabia is motivated by energy security. Saudi Arabia supplies 18 per cent of India's crude oil and 30 per cent of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG). Both nations wanted to exchange their expertise for a complementary and interdependent strategic alliance. After assuming power centrally, the Modi government enhanced diplomatic connections with Gulf nations (Prime Minister's Office, 2019). Modi's 'Think West' approach created strong bonds with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Modi's visit to the UAE in August 2015 was the first Prime Minister's visit in the last 34 years. In 2019, Modi received the highest civilian honour for improving relations with the UAE. Modi also received the highest civilian honour from Saudi King Mohammad bin Salman, indicating India's rising prominence among Gulf countries. Saudi Arabia also boosts economic, security, and defence partnerships with India. Saudi King Mohammad bin Salman India's visit increased the Hajj quota from 1,70,000 to 2,00,000 and also assure Saudi investments in India worth \$100 billion (Strategic partnership is a new high in Saudi-India ties, 2020).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited several countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Israel to foster a relationship with West Asian countries. Saudi Arabia and the UAE play a dominant role as both have occupied their position as India's fourth and third-largest trade partners. Most of this trade has been developed in the energy and industrial sectors. India's major economic ties with Gulf countries include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Graph 1 below shows India's exports and imports with Gulf countries.

Graph 1: Source Ministry of Commerce (India) Trade Statistics - Commerce

The large Indian diaspora in the region is one of the significant reasons for growing and strengthening economic relations with West Asian countries. It is estimated that around 2.5 million Indian expatriates are living in Saudi Arabia and about 3.5 million in the United Arab Emirates (At 18 million, India has the world's largest diaspora population, 2021). In 2018, Indian expats' remittances to India were \$11.2 billion from Saudi Arabia alone, \$4.6 billion from Kuwait, \$4.1 billion from Qatar, \$3.3 billion from Oman, and \$13.8 billion from the UAE (The important role of Indian diaspora in the country's Gulf policy, 2019; Hussain, 2017).

Modi's October 2019 visit to Riyadh was notable since the country inked a 'Strategic Partnership Council' (SPC) Agreement, revealing that India is one of Saudi Arabia's key partners. Political, security, culture, and society will be led by both nations' foreign ministries; economy and investment urged by India's commerce and industry minister to the Saudi energy minister (Prime Minister's Office, 2019).

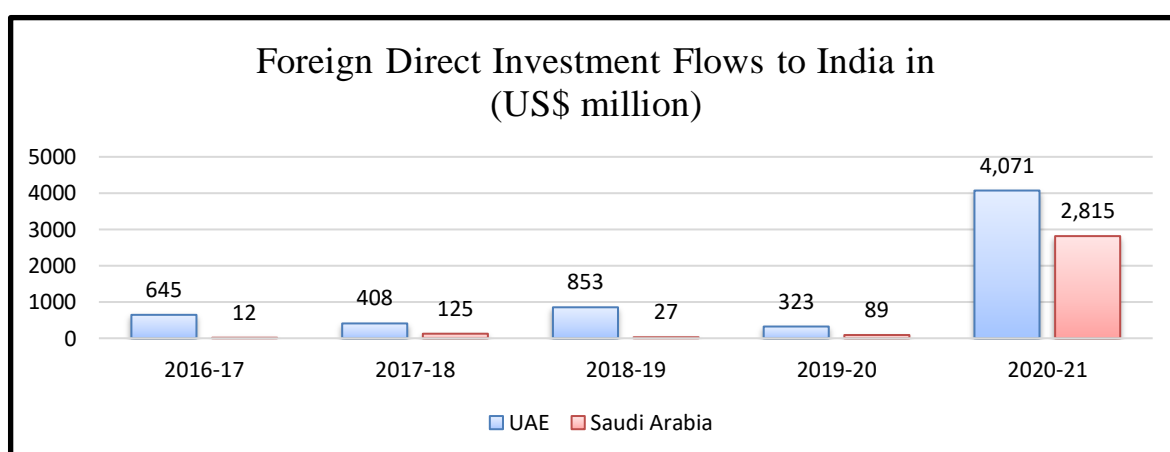
Saudi Arabia has also launched its 'Vision 2030' in which a high-level partnership council was initiated. Both India and Saudi Arabia signed twelve MoUs namely in security, civil aviation, defence, combating trafficking of narcotic drugs, and medical petroleum in small and medium-scale sectors. Modi's milestone visits to meet Crown Prince HRH Mohammed Bin Salman in 2016 and 2019 also boosted bilateral relations through the Strategic Partnership Council on political-security-socio-cultural and economics and investment. The UAE was looking forward to cooperating with Modi's initiatives, which include 'make in India,' 'digital India,' 'skill India,' 'swachh bharat (clean India),' 'smart cities,' and 'startup India,' which would provide foreign investors various opportunities to participate in India. Similarly, the Saudi Arabia counterpart too has embarked upon a reform program as part of their Vision 2030" (Prime Minister's Office, 2019). The visit of Army Chief Gen. M.M. Naravane to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in December 2020, was again remarkably noted when military cooperation reached a high-level partnership with the signing of several MoUs to enhance military cooperation.

ECONOMIC AND COMMERCIAL RELATIONS

Saudi Arabia is the fourth largest trade partner of India after China, the United States (US), and the UAE. Saudi Arabia is the eighth largest market in the world for Indian exports. Around 18 per cent of crude oil and 30 per cent of LPG are imported by India from Saudi Arabia. In 2014, Dharmendra Pradhan [MoS (IC) for Petroleum and Natural Gas] visited Saudi Arabia, which was the second bilateral energy talk with Abdulaziz bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, [Deputy Minister of Petroleum & Mineral Resources MoS (IC)]. In FY 2019-20, bilateral trade with Saudi Arabia was \$33.07 billion, up from \$23.83 billion in 2018-19. In the previous year, India's imports from Saudi Arabia climbed by 12.18 per cent, comprising a 29 per cent gain in imports and a 3 per cent rise in exports. 4.23 per cent of India's FY 2019-20 commerce was with Saudi Arabia (India and Saudi Arabia share a tried and tested friendship, 2020). According to the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA), 476 Indian firms, including L&T, TATAs, Wipro, TCS, TCIL, Shapoorji & Pallonji, own \$1.5 billion in joint ventures in Saudi Arabia. Most of these firms have construction, IT, software development, management and consulting, telecom, and medical licenses. Companies like OYO, Delhivery, Firstcry, Grofers, Policy Bazaar, and Paytm, are joining SAGIA to access the Saudi market (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019).

Graph 2 below demonstrates foreign direct investment flows to India from 2016 to 2021. Saudi investment in India in the year 2016-17 was \$12 million and increased to \$125 million in the years 2017-18. The investment picked up its momentum in 2020-21 valued at \$2,815 million. Similarly, the UAE foreign direct investment flows to India also increased several folds compare to the year 2017-18 which was only \$125 million but in the year 2020-21, it has increased sharply to \$4,071 million. There have been several companies from Saudi Arabia and the UAE involved in the investment in the Indian sectors.

Graph 2: Source Reserve Bank of India



Saudi Arabia is presently the 39th largest investor in India with \$315 million, according to the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) (India and Saudi Arabia share a tried and tested friendship, 2020). ARAMCO, SABIC, ZAMIL, E-holidays, and Al Batterjee Group have invested billions of dollars in Indian Start-ups including OYO, Delhivery, Grofers, FirstCry, Paytm, Ola, and PolicyBazaar (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019). The Research and Development Centre is set up in Bangalore by Saudi's Giant SABIC Petrochemical which made more than \$100 million in

investment in 2013 (Hussain, 2017). Saudi Armco and the UAE's ADNOC together invested \$44 billion in the Maharashtra refinery. Al-Fanar invested in a 300 MW power facility in Gujarat. Saudi Armco and Mumbai-based GumPro inked an MoU to build up a drilling fluids plant. Armco plans to purchase 20 per cent of Reliance Industries Limited's Oil and Chemicals in 2019. Saudi's Public Investment Fund (PIF) plans to spend \$1.5 billion on India's Jio telecom and digital services. PIF owns 2.32 per cent of Jio (Singh, 2020).

The India-UAE economic connection is also growing significantly in numerous sectors. There are 1068 weekly direct flights between India and the UAE. Both countries seek reciprocal gains. In the 1970s, trade investment was \$180 million and in 2019-20, it reaches \$59 billion whereas in 2021-22 it increased to \$61 billion (Department of Commerce, 2022). After China and the US, the UAE is India's third-largest commercial partner (UAE is India's third-largest trading partner, 2016). The UAE is India's second-biggest importer. Both countries decided to create an Infrastructure Investment Fund after Prime Minister Modi's 2015 visit to the UAE. It aimed to reach \$75 billion to fund infrastructure investment in India's railroads, ports, highways, airports, industrial corridors, and parks.

Nearly \$29 billion in products have been exported from India to the UAE between 2019 and 2020. During the same period, India's major import from the UAE is crude oil amounting to 21.83 MMT (UAE is India's third largest trading partner, 2016). India is also exporting several goods such as precious stones and metals (gems and jewellery), sugar, fruits, vegetables, tea, meat, and textile items, as well as engineering and machinery items. In the fiscal year 2019, the UAE invested approximately \$10 to \$11 billion in the Indian market (Embassy of India, Abu Dhabi, UAE, 2020).

Hence, the UAE is now India's 9th largest foreign direct investor (FDI). The UAE invested in India's services sector at 15.78 per cent sea transport at 8.80 per cent, power at 8.34 per cent and construction (infrastructure) activities at 7.15 per cent, and townships, housing, built-up infrastructure and construction-development projects (7.08 per cent) (Embassy of India, Abu Dhabi, UAE, 2020) as mentioned in Table 1.

Table 1: UAE's investments in India are Concentrated Mainly in Five Sectors

Sectors	Shares
Services Sector	15.78%
Sea Transport	8.80%
Power	8.34%
Construction (Infrastructure) Activities	7.15%
Construction Development: Townships, Housing, Built-Up Infrastructure and Construction-Development Projects	7.08%

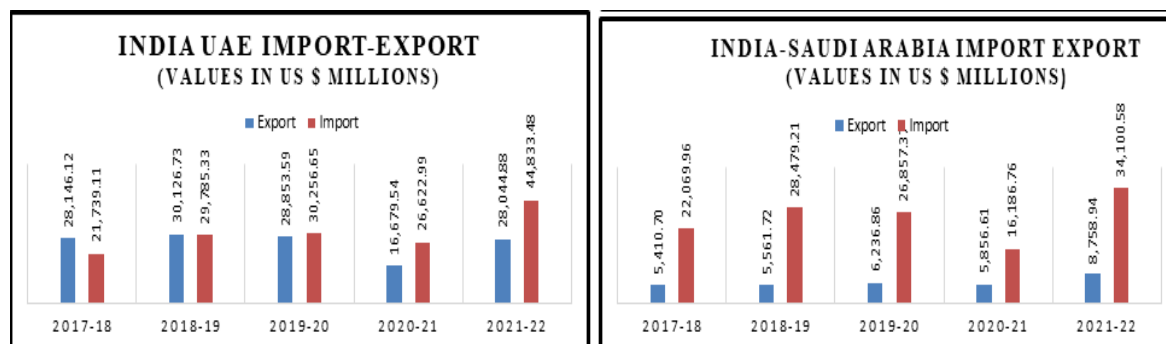
Source: *Embassy of India, Abu Dhabi, UAE*

Numerous companies from the UAE such as EMAAR, Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (Adia), Dubai Ports World (DP World) Lulu Group, Abu Dhabi's National Petroleum Construction Company (NPCC), Ras al-Khaimah (RAK), KEF Holdings, EMKE Group, have invested in Indian ports, terminals, transportation and logistics businesses, Special Economic Zones for cement, building materials, textiles, engineering products, consumer electronics, renewable energy sources, luxury hotel, mall, building offshore platforms and tile manufacturing.

Taj Group of Hotels and other Indian enterprises investing in the UAE tourism, hospitality, catering, health, retails, and education. Hinduja Group has Ashok Leyland manufacturing operations in Ras-al-Khaimah. Apollo Tires, Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services Limited (IL&FS), Zee Entertainment, and Birla Institute of Technology & Science (BITS) Pilani (India) opened their international campus in Dubai in December 2007. PCM Strescon Overseas Ventures Ltd. designed and manufactured sleeper carriages for Etihad Rail. In 2005, Merrill Lynch reported 33000 Indian millionaires in the UAE (Bharadwaj, 2011).

Graph 3: Source: Ministry of Commerce (India)

Table 2: India's Total Import (US\$ million)					
Year	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Growth	465,580.99	514,078.42	474,709.28	394,435.88	613,052



India-Saudi Arabia-UAE imports and exports include around 99 goods. Table 2 shows that in the year 2017-18 India's total export-import account for \$465,580.99 million which increased by 10.42 per cent in the year 2018-19 to \$514,078.42 million. Similarly, Graph 3 also indicates that the India-Saudi Arabia-UAE import and export also increased. The UAE exports in the year 2017-18 were \$28,146.12 million which increased to \$30,126.11 million in the year 2018-19. Similar growth has been noticed in Saudi Arabia's export in the year 2017-18 which was \$5,410.70 million which increased by \$5,561.72 million in the year 2018-19. Between 2019 and 2020, India's total export-import accounted for \$474,709.28 million which decreased by -16.19 per cent in the year 2020-21 to \$394,435.88 million. Additionally, the graph shows the fall in the year 2020-21 towards India's export-import with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Subsequently, in the year 2021-22, India's total export-import again increased by 55.43 per cent to \$613,052 million, similar growth with Saudi Arabia and the UAE with India.

CULTURAL RELATIONS

India's cultural connections peaked under Narendra Modi. Both sides have conducted several cultural trips. In February 2018, Sushma Swaraj (Former Minister of External Affairs of India) and King Salman inaugurated the India Pavilion. On International Yoga Day in November 2017, sports activities and Yoga festivals were held in Riyadh. In the years 2018 and 2019 on International Yoga Day, a large number of Saudi citizens participated including diplomats, journalists, and the Indian immigrant population. During the Covid-19 pandemic, chief guest-Minister of State, AYUSH & Defence Shri. Shripad Yesso Naik telecasted a live yoga webinar session on “Post Covid-19 Era – Health & Humanity Impact on Human and Societies” (Ayurveda, Yoga to help deal with post-Covid-19 problems: Shripad Naik, 2020). On the 150th Mahatma Gandhi anniversary, several events culminated in 2019 to unveil the Mahatma Gandhi bust at the Embassy of India in Saudi Arabia. On 14 November 2019, the Embassy commemorated the 550th Shri Guru Nanak Dev Ji anniversary. On India's 71st Republic Day in 2019, Saudi Shura Council Member and India-Saudi Arabia Parliamentary Friendship Committee Chairman Dr Abdullah Al-Harbi sponsored Bhangra performances in Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam. Indian diaspora is an acquired intrinsic component in Arab cultures, they are playing a very important role to bridge the connectivity between two countries and promote cultural relations. Cultural connections depend heavily on bilateral visits and interaction (Rekha, 2019). Every year a large number of Indian Hajj pilgrims made their visit to the two holiest cities in Islam-Mecca and Medina. A total of 99,914 people in 2014 went to perform Hajj, the ratio increased to 124,852 in the year 2017 and 139,987 in 2019. Years 2020 and 2021 hajj were cancelled due to the Covid-19 Pandemic (Haj Committee of India, 2023).

India's cultural relations with the UAE began in 1975 and it has increased in every cultural aspect. Both countries have signed 'The Cultural Agreement of 1975' to provide regular cooperation in the field of culture (Kumar, 2017a). Presently around 3.3 million Indians are in the UAE. Thus, the interest of Emirati society in Indian culture is quite visible. Every year several cultural events and performances were organised by India in the UAE to promote cultural ties such as celebrating republic day, international yoga day, and Mahatma Gandhi Jayanti. On the 5th International Day of Yoga, around 4000 yoga participants demonstrated at Umm Al Emarat Park Abu Dhabi and other 3500 participants at Jahili Public Park (Abu Dhabi celebrates International Yoga Day, 2020; Embassy of India, Abu Dhabi, UAE (2020a) Indian theatres and cinemas are also quite popular among UAE citizens, and several commercial screens of Hindi, Malayalam, and Tamil films were telecasted in Cinema Hall including telecasts of TV/Radio channels. Narendra Modi in 2015 visited the UAE to re-energize cultural relations. During his visit "Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces also visited India in February 2016, the Executive Programme for Cultural Cooperation (EPCC) 2016-18 was signed" Embassy of India, Abu Dhabi, UAE (2020b). During the Abu Dhabi Festival, the year 2018-Indian Music & Art Foundation event was organised in UAE. Village Industries Commission (KVIC) of India on the 150th Mahatma Gandhi birth anniversary celebrated at Jumeirah, Etihad Towers, the Embassy in collaboration with *Khadi* (an Indian cloth, made by hand from a natural material such as cotton), organized a special Fashion Show for promoting *Khadi*. The embassy of India in the collaboration with Indian Community on the 550th Guru Nanak Dev Ji's birth anniversary performed several programmes. On 10 January 2019 '*Vishwa Hindi Divas*'

was celebrated in UAE. Indian diverse linguistic and cultural societies with enthusiasm for maintaining social and cultural activities in the UAE to reduce the gap between the two societies. Indian communities are culturally very active in UAE. India Social and Cultural Center, Abu Dhabi Malayalee Samajam, Kerala Social Center, Indian Islamic Center, Indian Social Center, and Indian Ladies Association are registered in Abu Dhabi/Al Ain. Several worship places are also set up by the UAE government for non-Muslims. A Hindu temple is in Dubai and many more churches were also located throughout the emirates; people can perform their religious practices but not in public places.

INDIAN COMMUNITY IN SAUDI ARABIA AND THE UAE

The Indian community is the largest expatriate community in Saudi Arabia (The Times of India, 2017). As of the year 2020, around 2.6 million Indians are living in Saudi Arabia. The Indian community has maintained high respect due to their sense of discipline, abiding by the law, honesty, and kindness. Indian community's contribution to the development of Saudi Arabia is highly respectable. Due to that, in 2013, King Abdullah extended the grace period for overstaying Indian expatriates to grab the opportunity in jobs without leaving the country. Saudi government provided benefits to 70,000 Indians by issuing documents to travel to India. Embassy of India, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (2020). Modi's visit to Saudi Arabia made another improvement which increased the Hajj pilgrimage quota for Indians to 2,00,000, earlier it was 1,36,000 in 2019 and 24,975 in 2014 (Saudi Arabia increases India's Haj quota to 2 lakhs after Modi-Salman talks, 2019). India became the first country to conduct Hajj online with the signing of the Annual Bilateral Hajj Agreement in 2020.

Presently, the Indian expatriate community presence in the UAE is 3.42 million (COVID-19: Indian missions in UAE open online registration for its citizens who wish to fly home, 2020). Indian community in the UAE is the largest ethnic group mostly from Indian states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh. At present Indian community profile in the workforce is categorised as blue-collar, white-collar, and professional businessmen. The percentage of the blue-collar category is 65 per cent, around 20 per cent belong to white-collar, and the other 15 per cent are professionals and businessmen. Indian community played a very significant role in the economic development of the UAE.

COLLABORATION AGAINST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Even during the Covid-19 pandemic both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Saudi Crown Prince had telephonic conversations to ensure coordination and for maintaining support for the Indian Community in Saudi Arabia (NDTV India News, 2020). They also convened G20 Virtual Summit on 17 March 2020 to ensure that health and food security do not affect during the pandemic. External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar appreciated Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud for taking care of the Indian community in Saudi Arabia. Including Shri. Piyush Goyal (Minister of Commerce & Industry) spoke to Dr Majid Al Qasabi (Saudi counterpart) about maintaining food, and health supply chains and trade commitments during the Covid-

19 pandemic. Both countries not only support each other by ensuring the flow of food, medicines, and other essential items but also shared their national experiences on how to manage the Covid-19 pandemic.

Large-scale repatriation was conducted during Covid-19 by the Indian government to bring back the Indian community to their home. Under this Mission “78 Vande Bharat Mission flights in 4 phases have taken 15855 Indian citizens back to India including 200 charter flights have repatriated 35201 Indian citizens” Embassy of India, Riyadh (2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic, excellent cooperation was provided by Saudi authorities to the Indian community with free healthcare facilities. Under this cooperation around 1777 Indian healthcare, professionals returned to Saudi Arabia to perform their duties to fight Covid-19. UAE government immediately after the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic sent an aid plane to India containing 7 metric tons of medical essentials to curb it. UAE medical aid was used to assist more than 7,000 medical professionals to combat the virus, “the UAE has provided more than 348 metric tons of aid to over 34 countries, supporting nearly 348,000 medical professionals in the process”(OCHA Services, 2020). All this support shows that the two countries have closer ties in 'collective leadership' and 'coordinated actions' (Industry leaders to participate in UAE-India Healthcare Conference, 2020). While giving medical aid to India His Excellency Dr Ahmed Abdul Rahman AlBanna, UAE Ambassador to India, said:

“The UAE is committed to extending critical support to nations seeking to bolster their fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. UAE assistance to India comes in recognition of the profound and brotherly ties our two countries have shared throughout the years.” “Combating COVID-19 has become a primary global concern, and we act out of our conviction that strengthening the efforts of other countries to contain the virus is a pressing necessity,” (UAE and India discuss bolstering bilateral ties and offsetting Covid-19 impact, 2020).

Dubai Health Authority (DHA) and India regularly enhanced their cooperation in the medical area during Covid-19. DHA also helps to provide essential medical healthcare facilities to the Indian community residing in the UAE. Dr Puri (Indian Consul General) extended gratitude to Humaid Al Qutami (Director General of the Dubai Health Authority) for this effort (Dubai and India to collaborate further on healthcare amid Covid-19, 2020). 'UAE-India Healthcare Conference 2020' was conducted to discuss how world-class medical services will be provided to the common man during the Covid-19 pandemic. The webinar was conducted by the Embassy of India in Abu Dhabi and the Consulate General of India in Dubai, in association with the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) and Invest India (Industry leaders to participate in UAE-India Healthcare Conference, 2020). Dr AlBanna further stated that strategic relations and cooperation will not be reduced even during the pandemic. The UAE government will do all such efforts to maintain the continuous flow of food and health supplies to the Indian Community in the UAE (UAE and India discussing bolstering bilateral ties and offsetting Covid-19 impact, 2020). India in cooperation has sent a group of nurses and healthcare workers to UAE to combat the virus (Swarajya, 2020). Several flights were organised from both sides for the safe return of the Indian Community to India. Cooperation is made from both sides in the sector of civil aviation, food security, energy, and health.

DEFENCE COOPERATION

In the present time, India and Saudi Arabia's cooperation is no longer restricted to oil-energy trade but to other areas such as defence, maritime security and counterterrorism. Narendra Modi took advantage to enhance India's cooperation with Saudi Arabia in the area of military. It was the first time in 2015 when the Indian Air Force made its first staging visit to Saudi Arabia, which continued with the first bilateral naval exercise in 2018 and conducted a joint naval exercise with Saudi Arabia. Subsequently, Narendra Modi made his visit to both Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Taneja, 2020). In 2019, National Security Advisor Ajit Doval's visited Riyadh and explained to India's counterpart on Kashmir issues for the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir. Doval's visit to Saudi Arabia not only intensify security engagement but also counterterrorism in both regions (Ningthoujam, 2019). Both countries not only have security threats on land, air, and sea but also in cybersecurity. India and Saudi Arabia signed MoU in February 2014 and conducted NSA-level security talks to enhance the new area of cooperation and engagement. Modi and King Salman both jointly condemned terrorism and agreed to exchange their intelligence to stop money laundering which has been wildly used to finance terrorist activity (Hussain, 2017).

Before Modi visited Riyadh, the US instantly imposed sanctions to target Lashkar-e-Taiba, (a Pakistan-based terrorist organization responsible for the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks) (Panda, 2016). India and Saudi intelligence agencies were working together to collect data and exact information to track the movement of the suspect including their financial activity which is a procession through money laundering. One of the major improvements noticed with the signing of 'Extradition Treaty and Agreement on Transfer of Sentenced Persons', Riyadh has handed over several suspects including Syed Zabiuddin Ansari alias Abu Jundal (involved in several terrorist activities including the 26/11 attack in India). These deportations are a clear example of strong cooperation between two countries to fight terrorism and security issues. Saudi Arabia also decided to work together with India for buying and manufacturing defence equipment under the Joint Committee on Defence Cooperation (JCDC) (Basu, 2019).

India's defence cooperation with the UAE is steadily increasing with a high level of exchange in Service Chiefs, and military education. The annual Defence Dialogue was conducted to discuss security and defence issues. Defence collaboration increased after the appointment of a permanent resident Defence Advisor (DA) in March 2013. Since then both countries have led numerous Ministerial level Joint Defence Cooperation Committees (JDCC). In 2016, Manohar Parikkar became the first Indian defence Minister who visited the UAE and discussed strengthening military cooperation and selling and manufacturing Military equipment. In 2016, the Indian Air Force and the UAE Air Force conducted a joint air exercise. MoS for Defence Subhash Bhamre also visited to expand the defence cooperation in 2017.

Further in March 2018, both India and UAE Trilateral Air Exercise on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). Indian Navy Ships also participated in the maiden IN-UAEN bilateral exercise named Gulf Star 1 and IN including Coast Guard port call to Abu Dhabi and Dubai along with association with PASSEX.IN (navy exercise ships) biennially participated in International Defence Exhibition (IDEX) and Naval Defence Exhibition (NAVDEX) held in Abu Dhabi. In 2018, Def Expo was organised by India in which three different delegations from the

UAE participated in it. Similarly, in 2019 a large delegation from the Ministry of Defence (MoD) of UAE visited Aero India organised in Bangalore. The same year Vice Chief of Air Staff, IAF, and their delegation visited Dubai to participate in the 9th Dubai International Air Chiefs' Conference and Dubai Air Show (Embassy of India, 2020). Modi's government invited Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan as Chief Guest for Republic-day in 2018. Around 14 pacts were signed between Delhi and Dubai. India's relationship with UAE upgraded with a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) which robust defence and energy ties. In this pact, according to Modi, they "have added growing new dimensions to our relationship" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020). One significant progress was when both countries signed the MoU to enhance Defence Industry cooperation in the field of defence manufacturing and technology which will include defence studies, research and development, innovation, and public-private cooperation. India's Reliance Defence Limited already has signed a strategic MoU with the Emirates Defence Industries Company (Chaudhury, 2018). "Indian Defence Industry Global Outreach for Collaborative Partnership: India-UAE Defence Cooperation" and a webinar and Expo was conducted in 2020 for defence cooperation (Webinar and Expo on UAE-India defence cooperation held, 2020).

INTERNAL ISSUES AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

Since Modi became the prime minister of India in the year 2014, the crime rate sharply increased all over India against the Muslim community such as hate crimes, mob lynching, individual attacks, and harassment (Ayyub, 2019; National Herald 2019; India Today 2017). Several new laws one after another were implemented such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the National Population Register (NPR), the National Register of Citizens (NRC), the ban on illegal cow slaughter, Triple Talaq and so forth. A huge debate arises on the implementation of NPR, NRC, and CAA as many of the non-BJP states denied implementing CAA, NPR, and NRC observing that it will create a communal environment. The first state was Kerala which passed resolutions in their legislative assemblies requesting the Central government to repeal the Act. The constitutional validity of the CAA was challenged by many states so it can be reconsidered by the Supreme Court (The National Population Register has no proper legal backing and may be ultra vires, 2020). In response, the Central government commented that laws have been implemented to deport illegal Bangladeshi migrant workers from India or detain them. Around 1.9 million undocumented migrants were identified in Assam state. Questions were raised on what to do with them. Several Muslim names came under the NRC list but they proved that they have been residing since independence or even earlier. For instance, a retired army officer Mohammad Sanaullah served in the Indian army for 30 years but still, his name was on the NRC list. Additionally, several other cases emerged in which the name of the son or daughter was on the NRC list but not the Father and Mother's name (Jacob, 2019).

Undocumented Muslims fear that they will be segregated and put in detention camps or be deported to Bangladesh because they lost their document in natural disasters such as a flood, cyclones, fires or torrential rain. Insecurity among the Muslim community was created throughout India which led to several protests all overstate. Recently, the Indian government made an amendment to grant citizenship to Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Parsis, and Sikh migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, but not to Muslims. Whatever changes the ruling government is making

are affecting the Muslim population and violating the country's secular constitution. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom criticised the law as going against "India's rich tradition of secular plurality" and demanded to sanction Amit Shah (Indian citizenship law discriminatory to Muslims passed, 2019).

The lack of response from the Indian government toward the Rohingya Muslim refugees did not go unnoticed. For years, the Rohingya Muslims have been seeking asylum in India. However, the BJP government led by Modi strongly opposed any asylum to the Rohingya because they were Muslims.

On 5 August 2019, the Government of India revoked Article 370 the special status (limited autonomy, granted under the Indian Constitution to Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), and annulment of Article 35A, (which allowed the J&K legislature to define permanent residents of the state). Home Minister Shah announced that "the government was bifurcating the state into two Union Territories – Jammu and Kashmir, which will have a legislature, and Ladakh, which will be without a legislature" (Roche, 2019). Revoking Article 370 from Jammu and Kashmir, further complicated India-Pakistan relations. Moreover, the Indian government was also worried that after the US withdrew their soldiers from Afghanistan, the Taliban with the help of Pakistan will again train terrorist groups to disrupt peace in J&K. However, Pakistan denied all allegations and strongly condemned India for terrorist support including "illegal steps" to abolish the special status for Jammu and Kashmir. "As the party to this international dispute, Pakistan will exercise all possible options to counter the illegal steps," Pakistan's foreign ministry said in a statement (Srivastav, 2019).

The Pakistani government immediately broke diplomatic relations with India and took an offensive approach to gain international support on Kashmir issues, including expelling the Indian High Commissioner from Pakistan, halting cross-border trade, and initiated to reach out to China, the US, the United Nations, and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). On the Kashmir issue, Princess Hend al-Qassimi of the UAE expressed dissatisfaction with the issues of rising Islamophobia among Muslims in India. She tweeted on 4 May 2020, "I miss peaceful India," she also directed the Indians living in the UAE as "openly racist and discriminatory" and reminded them that there will be penalties and punishment for hate speech and even expulsion.

The BJP government's mistreatment of the Muslim population in India was debated across the Islamic World. The OIC urged India to take vital steps to protect the rights of Muslims living in India. India has maintained its reputation in the Gulf countries as Modi has received the highest civilian award from Saudi Arabia and the UAE and was invited as a guest of honour at the annual Organisation of Islamic Cooperation meeting in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, in March 2019 (PM Modi conferred Saudi Arabia's highest civilian honour, 2016; PM Modi honoured with UAE's highest civilian award, 2019). However, the poor treatment of Muslim minorities may damage or affect the reputation of India. India responded to the third-party mediation and criticism levelled against India that the "Kashmir issue as an 'internal' matter of India", terror activity in the country, and the security of the people is the primary reason to abolish the special status of J&K (Kashmir is India's internal matter, says UAE envoy, 2019). Presently, neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE is interested to interfere in the Kashmir issues but they show their concerns towards the Muslim community. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) also did not give any weightage to the issues and President Joanna Wroniecka refused to make any comments.

The treatment of the Muslim population by the ruling BJP political party is always a debatable issue at the international level. Recently, one of the BJP party members Nupur Sharma, and Naveen Jindal BJP spokesperson made critical remarks and insulted Prophet Muhammed, which created an immediate response from Muslim nations such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Iran, and Indonesia join hands against India. It made a huge outrage and international embarrassment that affected trade relationships between import and export. Indian citizens who are residing in that country also face humiliation and boycotts. Muslim countries summoned an Indian envoy, boycotted Indian products & shops, and demanded a public apology and immediate suspension of the leader who insulted Muslim feelings and show religious hatred. The OIC, based in the Saudi city of Jeddah, also condemned the remarks. Vice President Venkiah Naidu during his visit to Qatar faces a protest against India. However, India has said that the remarks were made by "fringe elements" and did not reflect the government's opinion (Nair, 2022). However, Muslim people itself made protested in many states, and some states, groups clashed also noticed. It is clear that any changes in domestic issues not only affect the Indian Muslim population but also it can deteriorate the relationship with Muslim countries.

CONCLUSION

The Narendra Modi government always prioritized the "Neighbourhood First" policy and had only a limited interest in West Asia countries until 2015. However, the Modi government's 'Think West' has also been varyingly labelled as 'Look West', 'Act West' or 'Link West' policy gradually tilted towards the West Asian countries for energy demand, foreign direct investment, and to receive support in counter-terrorism activities. Modi government from 2015 onwards made several visits to West Asia countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, Jordan, Oman, Bahrain, and Israel to show active diplomatic ties and developed a degree of trust from New Delhi. Modi's government knows that their highly ambitious infrastructure development plans and "mega industrial manufacturing corridors" require a huge investment. Thus, the Modi government urged sovereign wealthy Gulf nations to invest in Modi's ambitious infrastructure and manufacturing plans.

Modi's government is affiliated with the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party. Before Modi, there have been other prime ministers from the Bharatiya Janata party who never quibbled the Muslim nation in its foreign policies because it was against their ideology and political agenda. However, Modi's 'Think West' made a significant turn in outreach activities with Muslim countries especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE which have been driven by a rational consideration based on economic and security ties. Modi's government not only played a key role as a skillful political entrepreneur but also took advantage of geopolitical developments in the West Asian countries to attract foreign investments for India. India's bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia and the UAE has seen several ups and down due to the Indian government's changes in domestic policies. In the past few years, India's relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been strengthening in defence, security cooperation, counterterrorism, and combating religious fundamentalism. Both countries show their desire for a strategic alliance that includes long-term investments in India through a prism of trade, investment, and technology. Nevertheless, the Modi government's domestic political agenda, and especially policies are still seen as discriminatory

towards the Muslim minority, which has gradually been criticized by civil society within the West Asian countries and Gulf states (Blarel, 2022). No matter how strong the relationship is between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, it is still connected by a very weak thread, which can snap at any time if it hurts their religious sentiment of Muslim nations.

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