

India-Arab Relations

India has traditionally enjoyed close and friendly relations with Arab countries. These relations date back to ancient times. There are important Indian investments in countries stretching from Oman to Egypt, Sudan and beyond. There have been cultural ties with the region throughout history. Much of our external trade passes along the Suez Canal, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. India's staunch commitment to the Palestinian cause, common views on major international developments and strong economic and commercial relations form the foundations of India-Arab relations today. Our total bilateral trade with the Arab countries is over US\$ 110 billion and the region is home to 4.5 million Indians and caters to 70% of our energy imports.

India's institutionalised ties with Arab League have further strengthened India's relations with Arab countries and this is exemplified by the exchanges that have taken place between India and Arab League in recent years.

Institutional relationship

India and the League of Arab States (commonly referred as Arab League) signed an MOU institutionalizing the process of dialogue between the two sides during the visit of Special Secretary (East) to Cairo in March 2002. The first round of India-Arab Political Consultations took place during this visit. The MOU expresses the keenness of the two sides to "promote and develop the traditional relationship of friendship and cooperation between India and the Arab States". It also provides for annual meetings between EAM and ALSG during the opening session of UN General Assembly in New York "as mutually convenient" and alternatively in New Delhi and Cairo "whenever necessary" and visits/meetings between senior officials from both sides to exchange views on issues of common interest on regional and international arenas. The MOU identifies areas of joint economic cooperation, and interaction with bodies affiliated to the Arab League. India has also been accorded special status at the Arab League, which enables it to attend the Arab League Council meetings and have access to certain documentation.

The next two rounds of Consultations were also held in Cairo – in May 2003 and in June 2004. The fourth round of consultations was held in New Delhi in May 2007 and the fifth round was held in Cairo in August 2010. The talks were headed by Secretary (East) from the Indian side and by the Chief of the Cabinet of the Secretary-General of Arab League (AL), from the AL side.

During the then ALSG Amre Moussa's visit to India in December 2008, a Memorandum of Cooperation was signed for the establishment of Arab-India Cooperation Forum (AICF). The MoU signed in December 2008 is to

expire in five years and is to be renewed after that. The Action Plan for the Forum includes:

- Establishment of annual mechanism for Political consultations,
- Annual Arab-India Partnership conference with Arab-India exhibition and Arab-India symposium on its sidelines,
- Annual conference of heads of Universities in India which have departments of Arab/West Asia/Middle East Studies as well as in AL member states,
- Arab-India festival in AL member states on regular basis and annual heritage festivals in India.
- Bilateral exchange of experts in SME sector,
- Bilateral investments in energy sector including joint ventures,
- Senior official level dialogue mechanism for energy cooperation,
- Training of Arab diplomats in FSI and Arab professionals under ITEC,
- Establishment of Chairs of Arab-Indian learning in Arab and Indian universities,
- Building of a database of digitalized Arabic manuscripts,
- Enhancing media cooperation and annual bilateral exchange of journalists.

In December 2010, Indian Ambassador in Cairo was designated as India's Permanent Representative to AL in view of India-Arab League cooperation reaching a new level after the signing of a Memorandum of Cooperation for the establishment of Arab-India Cooperation Forum (AICF) in December 2008.

Visits

The Deputy Secretary General of AL Ahmed Benhelli visited Delhi in February 2010 to jointly inaugurate the 2nd Arab-India Investment Projects Conclave, held under the aegis of India-Arab Cooperation Forum in New Delhi during which he had met MOS (EA) and Secretary (East).

The First Meeting of the High Level Joint Committee, Arab-India Cooperation Forum was held in March 2012 as per the MoU signed in 2008. Participants in the meeting were the Troika of the Arab Summit (currently Qatar, Libya and Iraq), Secretary (East) and AL Secretariat (represented by the Deputy Secretary General Amb. Ahmed Benhelli).

Some activities envisaged in the Action Plan for cooperation between India and AL which have been implemented include the following:

- India hosted first India-Arab Cultural Festival in New Delhi in December 2008. The Second Cultural Festival is to be held in an AL member state in 2013.

- India has hosted two India Arab Investment Projects Conclaves so far – both in New Delhi in April 2008 and February 2010. UAE hosted the third conclave in May 2012.
- Diplomats nominated by Arab League are being trained regularly in FSI (11 such diplomats/officials have attended PCFD courses of FSI so far).
- On 2 October 2009, Indian Mission in Cairo organised at AL premises a symposium on Mahatma Gandhi and a photo exhibition on the life of Mahatma Gandhi

A delegation led by Dr. Khaled Habbas, Adviser to Secretary General of the Arab League visited India in June 2013 for a meeting with JS(WANA) to finalise the revised drafts of Memorandum of Cooperation of Arab-India Cooperation Forum and the Executive Programme of Arab-India Cooperation Forum. The revised documents are expected to be signed during the current calendar year.

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