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## Bridging The Sands: India-Saudi Arabia Relations During Nehru's Tenure – A Historical Perspective

Sanag Choephel, Dorji Kazi<sup>1</sup> and, Prof. Dr. Nagalaxmi M. Raman<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Assistant, MA (IR), Amity institute of International Studies, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

<sup>2</sup>Director and Head, Amity institute of International Studies, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

### ABSTRACT

The article talks about India and Saudi Arabia relationship firmly established in centuries of cultural, religious, and economic interactions, with distinct stages emerging throughout the Nehru era (1947-1964) and beyond. During Jawaharlal Nehru's time, the country's diplomatic policy focused on anti-colonialism, non-alignment, and Afro-Asian solidarity. These ideals inspired India's initial relationship with Saudi Arabia, which began with the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1948. High-level visits, such as King Saud's historic visit to India in 1955 and Nehru's subsequent visit to Saudi Arabia in 1956, demonstrated a mutual desire for friendship and cooperation. However, important ideological differences prevented deeper political alliances. Nehru's support for secular Arab nationalism under Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser clashed with West Asia monarchy and foreign partnership, causing conflict.

The "Pakistan factor," resulting from Riyadh's strategic links with Islamabad, deteriorated tensions even further. India-Saudi Arabia relations expanded significantly following Nehru's death, particularly during the Cold War. Liberalization of the economy in India, as well as Saudi Arabia's efforts to diversify, have offered chances for greater cooperation in energy, trade, labor, and defense.

This historical analysis demonstrates how Nehru's tenure of cooperation, driven by common cultural legacies, economic interdependence, and geopolitical realities, have established a strong cooperation between the two nations that is India and Saudi Arabia, the quick shift of the world politics scene.

**Key words:** India-Saudi Arabia, Nehru, Arab nationalism, West Asia, Cold war.

### Introduction

Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership had a lasting impact in influencing India's interactions focusing on diplomatic relations with world politics, especially the Middle East and Saudi Arabia. His influence as a statesman was clear even before India's independence, as Nehru became the Congress Party's dominant voice on international matters by 1927, with his contributions affecting nearly every resolution on foreign policy (Bandyopadhyaya, 1984). Nehru's anti-colonial ideology and emphasis on non-alignment shaped the country's diplomatic course until his death in 1964. This legacy had a significant impact on India's early attitude to Saudi Arabia, a country with whom formal contacts were practically absent before independence.

When India gained independence, Nehru inherited a colonial-diplomatic heritage molded by British interests over the Middle East. The Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East at the time were managed by British India, with elites from future Gulf Arab republics specially educated in India or spending time on its western coastlines for business or entertainment (Onley, 2007). Until the early 1960s, the Indian rupee was legal tender in various Gulf countries, highlighting their economic connections. Indian soldiers also played an important role in British efforts throughout World War I, particularly in Gallipoli and Palestine, reinforcing the region's ancient ties to India. However, Nehru attempted to break free from this colonial legacy, challenging British-imposed zones of influence and imagining an anti-imperialist foreign policy (Kumaraswamy & Quamar, 2018). Despite India's longstanding ties to Islam and the Middle East, formal diplomatic contacts with Saudi Arabia were limited. At the time of independence, India had missions in several places (Cairo, Tehran, and Istanbul), with just a vice consul in Jeddah overseeing the welfare of Hajj pilgrims (India, MEA, 1949). Budget constraints and a lack of staff slowed the formation of missions in other parts of the region. The absence of diplomatic infrastructure resembled the lack of major political or economic connection between India and Saudi Arabia at the time (Kumaraswamy & Quamar, 2018).

India's connections with Islam and the Middle East date back centuries. Before Islam, Arab merchants traded with India, and the faith arrived shortly after the Prophet Muhammad's death. For years, pilgrims from India made up a large number of Hajj participants, and Indian kings and affluent merchants helped to maintain the Ka'aba and Mecca's Grand Mosque. In the pre-oil era, Saudi Arabia's economy depended primarily on donations and business produced by Hajj-related activities, with Indian traders and supporters playing a vital role in this ecosystem (Azaryahu & Reiter, 2015; Khalidi, 2009).

Despite their close cultural and economic links, Indian nationalists and Saudi officials had little political interaction. The Saudi state gained major British assistance during the Hejaz invasion in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which contained the holy cities (Mecca and Medina). Because Al-Saud relied on British assistance for state-building, open support for Indian nationalists could have angered its colonial backers. This dynamic resulted in a lack of cooperation between Nehru's anti-colonial ideas and the al-Saud's aims, contrasting clearly with India's more active involvement with Egyptian and Palestinian nationalists at the same time (Agwani, 1992). During the Hajj, certain Indian leaders, such as the Ali Brothers of the Khilafat Movement, had political ties with Arab-Palestinian groups in Saudi Arabia. However, these discussions were primarily centred on pan-Islamic solidarity and did not extend into meaningful involvement with the Saudi government (Kumaraswamy, 2010). In 1947, Nehru's Arab relations conference in Delhi included diplomats from Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and the Arab league, but saw the absence of Saudi Arabia. This highlighted the two nations' minimal political convergence at the time (Asian Relations Organization, 1948).

Nehru's vision for Indian foreign policy prioritised anti-colonial unity, secularism, and non-alignment, principles that frequently differed from Saudi Arabia's traditional, monarchy-led political framework. Nehru's support for secular Arab nationalism, particularly under Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, clashed with Saudi Arabia's connection with the West and rising leadership in pan-Islamism. This ideological gulf, combined with Saudi Arabia's expanding relations with Pakistan, presented additional obstacles to genuine bilateral cooperation (Kumaraswamy & Quamar, 2018).

Nehru's reign saw the start of India's diplomatic interaction with Saudi Arabia, although on a small scale. Differences in governmental objectives and foreign forces overshadowed the two nations' historical links, which were based on cultural and religious contacts. While Nehru's anti-imperial legacy influenced India's foreign policy, Saudi Arabia's reliance on British support and alliance with pan-Islamic organisations hampered further engagement. These early meetings lay the groundwork for future relations, but the substantial ideological and geopolitical differences of the time would continue to impact Indo-Saudi dynamics for decades.

## **Nehru's Vision of Nation-Building and Non-Alignment**

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership during India's early years of independence focused primarily on addressing the diverse difficulties of nation building. Partition had left the country severely damaged, with communal riots killing nearly a million people. Fostering intercommunal harmony and constructing an inclusive India that celebrated its vast religious, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural variety became critical for Nehru. 500 princely states were integrated into the India Union at the same time which necessitated a combination of diplomacy, political compromise, and forethought. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel led this massive endeavour, which was crucial in establishing India's territorial and political unity (Ahluwalia, 1974).

On the global stage, Nehru faced a rapidly polarising world as a result of the Cold War. Even before independence, Indian nationalists had opposed the idea of collaborating with imperial nations, as indicated by their unwillingness to cooperate with imperial Japan during World War II (Basu et al., 1999; Puri, 1977). Following independence, Nehru institutionalised this notion by pursuing a non-aligned foreign policy that tried to separate India from the bloc politics of the United States (Capitalist) and USSR (Communist). Unlike Switzerland's neutrality, Nehru's NAM (non-alignment movement) was an advanced strategy to preserve independence while pushing for Afro-Asian solidarity in the face of colonialism and external oppression.

Despite his appreciation for the US and its democratic traditions, Nehru criticised Washington's approach of controlling communism through military partnerships (Gopal, 1991). This firm attitude drove Nehru closer to the Soviet Union, resulting in stronger Indo-Soviet relations during Nikita Khrushchev and Nikolai Bulganin's 1955 visit. The Soviet Union became a crucial partner to support India's progress (Singh, 1989).

The cooperation between India and USSR affected its involvement in global crises such as Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1966), while also strengthening its commitment to non-alignment. However, this foreign policy stance unintentionally hampered relations with Saudi Arabia. Despite long-standing religious, cultural, and commercial relations, India and Saudi Arabia found themselves on opposing sides of Cold War geopolitics, with Saudi Arabia siding with the United States. Regional instability and conflicting goals limited significant interaction between the two countries during this time.

## **Nehru's Anti-Colonial Vision**

The British colonial rule in India played a great part in Nehru's attitude and influence in the world politics, which shaped his foreign policy and international relations approaches. In 1945 the United Nations invited India to join as a founding member, and its membership grew from 51 to 115 by the time Nehru died in 1964. As a result, confronting colonialism became important to his worldview. Nehru's sympathy for anti-colonial movements went beyond India, particularly towards the Arab world, which had also suffered from European colonisation, having a lasting impact on their nation-building processes (Agwani, 1976). The shared history of colonialism motivated Arab nationalist leaders to support India's independence fight. Since the 1920s, the Indian National Congress has supported Arab nationalist movements (Agwani, 1976).

Nehru, committed to socialism from his youth, viewed the Arab kingdoms with skepticism because of their feudal style of government (Mudiam, 1994). His political thought was based on state-driven economic reforms and modernisation, prompting him to seek partnerships with countries with similar ideals. Nehru's devotion to secularism, which he saw as a critical component of the post-colonial state, influenced his foreign policy. His secular-nationalist agenda in India was reflected in his hunt for like-minded leaders abroad, particularly in the Middle East, but with limited possibilities. Turkey's NATO membership and Iran's dependence on the United States made them less tempting to Nehru (Leffler, 1985; Summitt, 2004; McGlinchey, 2013).

Nehru discovered a potential partner in Egypt, particularly when the Free Officers Movement deposed the monarchy in 1952, bringing Gamal Abdel Nasser to office. Nehru's support for Nasser's secular and socialist vision for Egypt grew stronger, particularly during the Suez Crisis. Nehru criticised the British and French while supporting the decision to nationalise the Suez Canal by Nasser. His affection for Nasser was obvious in

their tight personal and political ties that went beyond formal diplomacy (Marwah, 1973). Nehru's support for Nasser, particularly during the Suez War, was a watershed point in Indian foreign policy because it demonstrated his hostility to Western imperialism (Mudiam, 1994).

### **Geopolitical Struggles and Diplomatic Tensions**

In the post-independence era, India's Middle Eastern foreign policy was influenced by broader geopolitical factors, such as its relations with significant players such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. Jawaharlal Nehru, developed a non-alignment policy, but the complex political dynamics in the Arab world, including the growth of Pan-Arabism, particularly under Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, had far-reaching ramifications for India's regional engagement. India's Middle Eastern policy evolved, distinguished by its affiliation with Egypt, but not without conflicts, particularly with Saudi Arabia, as the area navigated inter-Arab rivalries and the broader Cold War background.

One of the key aspects of India's Middle Eastern diplomacy was its early emphasis on Egypt as a regional leader. For quite some time in the 1950s, Cairo was simultaneously recognised to Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, by Indian ambassadors reflecting the financial constraints which limited India's diplomatic reach (Agwani, 1976). As a result of this Cairo-centric strategy, Egyptian ideas strongly influenced Indian policies, mostly the information from the Arab–Israeli conflict. Nehru's alliance with Nasser, which was founded on a similar commitment to non-alignment, irritated other Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. Nasser's pan-Arabism, which aspired to unite Arab states under a common regional identity, was met with rejection from monarchies like Saudi Arabia, who saw Nasser's philosophy as a direct danger to their political stability (Heimsath & Mansingh, 1971).

The dispute between India's backing for Nasser and Saudi Arabia's political priorities was most visible during the Yemeni Civil War (1962-1970), when Egypt and Saudi Arabia backed opposite parties. Nehru's bold backing for Egypt in this crisis enraged Saudi Arabia, which considered Nasser's philosophy as destabilising and threatening to Arabian Peninsula monarchs (Agwani, 1976). As a result of India being unduly allied to Egypt its partnership or cooperation with major parts of West Asia and Saudi Arabia in order to build better relations was hampered (Heimsath & Mansingh, 1971).

Despite the difficulties, Nasser's ascent to power following the 1956 Suez Crisis resulted in a brief period of peace between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Initially, Saudi Arabia appeared more amenable to Nasser's pan-Arab rhetoric, with King Saud even considering joining with his aim for regional union (Cordesman, 2003). In 1955 the Afro-Asian conference held in Bandung, saw the participation of Saudi Arabia and Egypt in broader Middle Eastern debates and also the involvement of NAM, which strengthened its connection with Nasser's Egypt (Kahin, 1956). However, Nasser's increased proximity to the Soviet Union in the mid-1950s produced a divide, as Saudi Arabia, along with other Arab rulers, harboured serious fears about Soviet ambitions in the region, notably over their attitude on Islam and the Muslim community (Yodfat, 1983; Rubinstein, 1979). This move in Egyptian foreign policy further separated Saudi Arabia from Egypt. Nasser's affiliation with Moscow defied Saudi Arabia's long-standing preference for Western ties (Podeh, 1995).

As Egypt became more closely connected with the Soviet Union, Saudi Arabia began to prioritise pan-Islamism as a counterbalance to Nasser's pan-Arabism. This ideological change led to the foundation of the World Muslim League in 1962 under the leadership of King Saud, which aimed to unite Muslim countries on religious grounds, rejecting the secular nature of Nasser's pan-Arabism (Dawn, 1960). Nasser's interventionist methods in Yemen, as well as his goal to expand Egyptian influence in the area, particularly in Sudan and Yemen, generated concerns among Arab rulers, who feared that Nasser's ambitions would destabilise their regimes (Dawisha, 1975; Lefebvre, 1993). Saudi Arabia, along with other monarchs, began to position itself as defenders of Islam against Egypt's secular, pan-Arabist movements. This ideological conflict between Arab

republics and monarchies increased throughout the 1960s, ending in the Arab Cold War, in which Egypt and Saudi Arabia competed for Arab world leadership (Hudson, 1970).

After the defeat of Egypt in 1967 which came to be known as the Six-Day War, pan-Arabism weakened, signalling Nasser's decline in regional importance. Despite being in power until his death in 1970, Nasser's ambition for Arab unification failed, and pan-Islamism, championed by Saudi Arabia, began to take hold as the region's dominating intellectual force. Saudi Arabia's shift towards pan-Islamism was further reinforced with the help of Pakistan, which, alongside Saudi Arabia, sought to promote Islamic brotherhood as a challenge to secular Arab nationalism (Singh, 1977). This transition was a crucial turning point in Middle Eastern geopolitics, as Arab monarchies increasingly looked to Islam as a unifying force, while secular Arab republics such as Egypt and Syria struggled with internal divides and external threats (Kerr, 1965).

India's Middle Eastern policy during this time was significantly impacted by its complex relationship with Pakistan. As Pakistan became a prominent actor in the Arab-Islamic bloc, particularly through its membership in organisations such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), India found itself confined by its rivalry with Pakistan. The Indo-Pakistan rivalry, notably over the Kashmir problem, has overshadowed cooperation among other countries in the area with India, including Saudi Arabia (Kumaraswamy, 2010). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, India's relationship with Pakistan affected its ability to adopt a more balanced and autonomous approach to the Middle East as India's Diplomatic policy was viewed based on its relationship with Pakistan (Weinbaum & Khurram, 2014).

Nehru's Middle Eastern foreign policy was influenced by strategic goals, ideological alliances, and geopolitical realities. India's early alliance with Egypt and backing for Nasser's pan-Arabism strained partnership with Saudi Arabia and other regional kingdoms. However, the changing dynamics of the Arab world, particularly the emergence of pan-Islamism and the demise of pan-Arabism following Nasser's loss, have paved the way for a shift in regional power structures. India's complex connections with Pakistan, as well as its place in the larger Cold War environment, made it impossible to conduct an autonomous and effective Middle East strategy. The legacy of this time would continue to shape India's approach to the region for decades to come.

## Conclusion

India-Saudi Arabia relations under Jawaharlal Nehru (1947–1964) were influenced by long standing historical, cultural, and economic links, but they were also limited by ideological differences and significant geopolitical issues. Even though Saudi Arabia and India had centuries of religious and commercial links as well as socio-economic interdependence, there was little diplomatic interaction in the early years after independence, mostly because of Nehru's different foreign policy objectives. His ideology of secular nationalism, non-alignment, and anti-colonialism frequently put Saudi Arabia's monarchical system, its strategic partnership with the West, and its developing relations with Pakistan at odds with India.

The initial diplomatic interactions, including the formation of formal diplomatic relations in 1948 and the significant trips of King Saud to India in 1955 and Nehru to Saudi Arabia in 1956, showed an eagerness to promote mutually beneficial partnerships. However, deeper political and ideological divides hindered the formation of a strong bilateral partnership. Nehru's support for Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arab nationalism stood in stark contrast to Saudi Arabia's conservative dynasty and its dedication to pan-Islamism. This ideological divide was made worse by rising Cold War factors, with India leaning toward the Soviet Union and Saudi Arabia aligning with the Western alliance.

The 'Pakistan factor' has strained India-Saudi relations. Saudi Arabia's developing strategic alliance with Pakistan, particularly in military and religious matters, creates diplomatic challenges for India. Riyadh's stance toward Pakistan in multilateral forums along with the Islamic Cooperation placed some difficulties for India to build a firm foothold in the Arab world. Furthermore, the regional battle between pan-Arabism and pan-

Islamism, which led to the Arab Cold War, India was in a difficult situation, since its backing for Nasser's Egypt was viewed as a threat to Saudi interests.

Despite these challenges, the fundamental features of Indo-Saudi relations, including economic and cultural exchanges, have remained intact. The historical involvement of Indian merchants and pilgrims in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, along with the use of Indian rupee in the Gulf until the 1960s, and India's contributions to the building of Saudi infrastructure all demonstrate long-standing socioeconomic relations. While official diplomatic engagement was restricted, historical links ensured that India-Saudi relations did not completely deteriorate.

Following Nehru's term, Indo-Saudi relations shifted gradually, notably as India liberalized its economy in the 1990s and Saudi Arabia moved to diversify beyond oil dependence. Strategic cooperation in energy, trade, counterterrorism, and defense has since grown, establishing India and Saudi Arabia as significant allies in the twenty-first century. Today, both countries realize the need of developing bilateral relations, going beyond ideological disagreements to prioritize mutual economic growth, regional stability, and strategic security objectives.

Nehru's tenure as Prime Minister of India and his foreign policy legacy continues to impact India's attitude towards the Middle East, laying the groundwork for modern diplomacy. While ideological and geopolitical differences characterized Indo-Saudi relations throughout his term, their fundamental economic and cultural interdependence laid the groundwork for future cooperation. The connection, which was once hindered by Cold War politics and regional crises, has now matured into a strategic collaboration that reflects dynamic trends in global diplomacy and economic interconnectedness.

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