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## Geographies of Influence: A Politico-Geographical Study of India–Middle East Region

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### Abstract

India's engagement with the Middle East has long been shaped by geography, dynamics, and the evolution of regional political space. This study examines the relationship through a politico-geographical lens. It focuses on how territory, maritime routes, migratory networks, and energy ties structure India's relations with key states across the region. Rather than viewing relations solely through policy statements or economic data, this paper highlights the spatial logics that guide cooperation, competition, and strategic adjustments. India's position on the Indian Ocean provides it with natural access to Gulf ports and chokepoints, creating a long-standing corridor of trade and movement. The large Indian diaspora in the Gulf creates an everyday geography of labour, remittances, and cultural presence. This paper argues that India-Middle East relations cannot be understood without situating them within broader debates on scale, territorial reconfiguration, and spatial interdependence.

**Key words:** *politico-geography, spatial logics, Middle East region, everyday geography, territorial reconfiguration.*



## Introduction

India's relations with the Middle East have evolved over time through a complex interplay of geography, history, and shifting politico landscapes (Amanat, 2012). These two regions have never been distant, separated by rigid borders; rather, they form overlapping spheres shaped by maritime routes, cultural exchange, and the constant movement of people across the Arabian Sea. Long before modern states consolidated their borders, traders, sailors, religious pilgrims, and craft communities travelled between western India and the Arabian Peninsula (Jain, 2019). This created a shared geography of contact. This contact later became the basis for diplomatic and strategic interactions. Using politico geography as an analytical framework, these old spatial connections appear not as background details but as underlying structures. These structures continue to influence contemporary relations. The Indian Ocean, with its open waters and dense network of trade routes, connects the subcontinent to the Gulf in a way that no land border ever could (Alpers, 2014) (Fig. 1). This 'maritime orientation' forms the first layer of India's enduring engagement with the region.



Fig 01: Antique Map of the Middle East by Smith (1809), (Source: <https://maps-prints.com/antique-maps-west-asia/9551-antique-map-of-the-middle-east-by-smith-1809.html>)

In the twentieth century, political changes in Asia and Africa gradually reshaped these relations. The decline of the Ottoman Empire, the rise of new national identities in West Asia, and the end of European colonial rule created a cluster of regional states whose boundaries did not always correspond to the old cultural geography (Palmer, 2011). India's independence in 1947 coincided with the rise of several Middle Eastern states (Mudiam, 1991). This parallel rise gave rise to a sense of shared experience. Early Indian leaders often spoke of anti-colonial solidarity. However subsequent policies were based on pragmatic assessments of distance, access, and security. The Suez Crisis of 1956, the gradual consolidation of Gulf monarchies, and the Arab-Israeli conflict added new layers of politico geography complexity (Florensa, 2014). These developments influenced India's diplomatic options. From a politico-geographic perspective, geography always remained the basis on which these options were evaluated. The proximity of the Gulf, its dependence on maritime trade, and the presence of Indian merchant communities in several port cities meant that New Delhi could neither isolate itself from the region nor view it merely as a distant theatre. 1970s, the discovery and expansion of oil production in the Gulf had made the region a major hub of global energy flows (Kubursi, 2015). India, seeking to stabilize its domestic economy and ensure reliable fuel supplies, naturally turned to the West. The Middle East, particularly the Gulf countries, has become an increasingly important partner in meeting India's growing energy demand over time (Matsuo et al., 2013). This shift also catalyzed the large-scale migration of Indian workers. In particular, migration from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and parts of northern and western India was a result of this catalysis. These patterns of mobility created a new form of spatial relationship that differed from traditional diplomacy. The presence of Indian workers in the Gulf gave rise to cultural, economic, and social ties (Weiner, 1982). This began to influence policymaking on both sides. Second half of the twentieth century, remittances flowing from Gulf economies significantly shaped the trajectory of livelihoods and development in parts of India (Oommen, 2016).



If we look at the Cold War period, we find that it structurally impacted India's relations with major powers. Concurrently, India's engagement with the Middle East largely followed its own rhythm. India maintained relations with Arab countries and furthered its relationship with Iran (Joshi, 2015). At the same time, it attempted to fine-tune its balance between domestic political debates, economic priorities, and security concerns (Pant, 2014). As a geographical observer, the Indian Ocean once again played a central role in shaping these choices. New Delhi closely monitored developments around key maritime chokepoints, particularly the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandeb. This was because the majority of India's energy imports flow through these narrow channels. Any instability in these waters could disrupt India's economy (Briscoe, 2005). This made maritime security and diplomatic access integral concerns, even as India faced internal economic constraints. India nevertheless continued to focus on West Asia, as the region's geographical location made it impossible to ignore (Kemp, 2012).

The early 1990s marked another period of change. India's eco-liberalization coincided with changes in the Middle East, such as the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War, the 1991 Gulf War, and the ongoing restructuring of the regional security system (Arafat, 2020). As opened economy, its external contacts became more diverse. At this time, the Middle East remained central to both trade and energy. Parallel to this, the governments of the Gulf countries began to diversify their economies (Callen et al., 2014). Large-scale exploration of non-oil sectors commenced, accompanied by substantial investments in infrastructure and services. These developments gave rise to a new area of cooperation in which geography and maritime access, labour flows, and logistics networks began to play an even more pronounced role. Indian ports, shipping lines, and service industries became more deeply integrated with Gulf markets, leading to the emergence of new investment patterns (Ardemagni, 2018).

Political geography helps uncover the deeper structures underlying these shifts. Instead of viewing India-Middle East relations through short-term policy decisions, a spatial perspective sheds light on the layers of territory, dynamics, and strategic scale that underpin the relationship (Monshipouri, 2019).

Territoriality, in this context, refers not only to land borders. It also includes maritime jurisdiction, exclusive economic zones, and broader spatial claims made by states in the Indian Ocean (Forbes, 1995). India's naval presence, its involvement in anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia, and its participation in regional security dialogues are all shaped by the recognition that control over space yields politico-geographical consequences (Upadhyaya, 2018). The Middle East located at the intersection of Africa, Asia, and the Mediterranean is similarly shaped by multiple spatial scales, each of which generates its own political pressures (Culcasi, 2010). Through the evaluation of relations through these interconnected spaces, one can understand why India's engagement with the region has persisted despite shifts in leadership, ideology, or global circumstances.

Looking back to 2020, this period has also witnessed significant diplomatic developments that further shaped India's relations with Middle Eastern states (Ahmad, 2020). High-level visits increased, defense cooperation expanded, and economic partnerships deepened. Yet, these developments did not occur in isolation. They were linked to broader changes in regional geography. The gradual rebalancing of Gulf foreign policies, evolving rivalries among regional powers, and efforts by Middle Eastern states to diversify their global partnerships created new opportunities for India (Soubrier, 2020). Unlike earlier times, when relations were often limited to energy, the early twenty-first century saw expanded engagement in areas such as infrastructure, food security, education, and technology.

Another important element in this emerging landscape was the changing perception of regional scale. India began to view the Middle East not as a collection of isolated states, but as part of a broader geographical region stretching from the eastern Mediterranean to the western Indian Ocean (Alpers, 2014). This perspective highlighted the interconnected nature of the Horn of Africa, the Gulf, and the Arabian Sea. All of these shape India's maritime and diplomatic strategies. It also emphasized the importance of maintaining stability with Iran and balancing relations across sub-regional boundaries without becoming embroiled in local rivalries.



Politico-geography, by focusing on these overlapping scales, emphasises how India manoeuvred within the region's complex spatial arrangements while maintaining its strategic autonomy.

In the late 2010s, India-Middle East relations had evolved into a multi-layered system. Diaspora communities continued to shape everyday interactions; maritime security remained a central priority; and economic ties expanded with new technological and development partnerships. These dynamics demonstrate why geographical analysis is essential to understanding the depth and direction of India's engagement with the Middle East. It emphasizes the flows, corridors, and strategic areas that underpin politico decisions.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To examine the historical evolution and contemporary patterns of interaction between India and the Middle East.
2. To assess how geography functions as a structural force, influencing politico-economic and strategic engagements between the two regions.
3. To study the Middle East as a politico-geographic region, examining its spatial boundaries, strategic subregions.

### **Methodological Statement**

This study adopts a politico-geographical approach to analyze the changing relationship between India and the Middle East. The method combines qualitative interpretation with contextual analysis to understand how geography, territoriality, and regional configurations shape diplomatic, economic and strategic engagement. A multi-scalar framework is used, examining interactions at the regional, sub-regional, and corridor levels to understand the layered nature of India-Middle East linkages. The study relies on secondary data, including academic literature, policy documents, government reports, maritime databases and energy maps. These sources help explore patterns of mobility, trade flows, diaspora distribution, and geopolitical alignments.

The study also incorporates thematic mapping and specialized visualizations to highlight the maritime routes, chokepoints, energy corridors, and labour migration networks that structure India's connections with the Gulf and the wider Middle East. A critical, specialised lens and discourse analysis guide the interpretation, allowing the study to move beyond descriptive accounts and focus on how specialised logics, such as access, proximity, scale, and territorial reconfiguration, shape strategic behaviour.

## **Discussion**

### **Historical Spatial Relations**

India and the Middle East have been connected for centuries through routes that predated the emergence of modern diplomacy (Tucker, 2009). These routes were not fixed lines on a map. They were habitats shaped by sailors, traders, pilgrims, and craft communities, who moved with the rhythms of the winds and seasons. Their journeys created a shared coastal world where ideas, goods, and people moved freely. This early mobility provided a sense of familiarity between the two regions that continues to influence relations today.

The Arabian Sea served as the primary platform for this contact. It served as a wide, open corridor connecting western India with the ports of Oman, Yemen, Bahrain, and the wider Gulf. Seasonal monsoon winds made travel predictable (Bishara et al., 2016). Ships departed from Indian ports when winds were favourable and returned the following season with fresh cargo. This pattern of movement encouraged continuous contact and helped build trust between trading groups on both sides. Long before the arrival of European powers, Gujarati, Konkani, and Malabari merchants already had strong networks in the region (Markovits et al., 2008). Their trade in spices, textiles, metals, and horses linked coastal societies creating a shared economic rhythm.

Along with this trade, cultural exchange also grew. Religious scholars travelled from India to the Arabian Peninsula, bringing with them texts and teachings (Qutbuddin, 2007). This movement shaped local traditions (Table 01).





Sufi travellers travelled along these coastal routes, leaving a spiritual influence on port cities. Arab traders who settled in western India brought their customs and adopted local practices. Over time, this fusion created 'hybrid cultural spheres' where languages, foods, and customs intermingled. 'Traces of these early interactions still remain in communities in Kerala and coastal Gujarat. These connections demonstrate how geography gave rise to long-lasting social ties that endured even after political changes.

Table 01: Expanded Historical Table of Religious-Scholarly Movements Between India and the Arabian Peninsula

Period	Region of Origin (India)	Transit Points	Destinations	Scholars / Traditions	Knowledge, Texts & Teachings Carried	Nature of Interaction	Long-Term Impact on Indo-Arab Religious Networks
8th–10th Century	Sindh, Gujarat	Debal, Cambay	Mecca, Medina	Early Islamic jurists, Hadith collectors	Early Fiqh manuscripts, Qur'anic commentaries	Participation in early Islamic learning chains	Integration of Indian scholars into Hadith isnads; early maritime Muslim networks
11th–12th Century	Malabar Coast	Kozhikode, Kollam	Jeddah, Hijaz	Scholars accompanying traders	Local exegetical texts	Informal knowledge exchange	Consolidation of trade-scholar networks in the Indian Ocean
13th–15th Century	Malabar, Gujarat	Indian Ocean monsoon routes	Hadramawt, Mecca	Sufi mystics & spiritual teachers	Sufi treatises (e.g., <i>Malfuzat</i> ), devotional poetry	Establishment of Sufi lodges, spiritual mentorship	Spread of Chishti and Qadiri influences into Arabian communities
16th Century	Deccan Sultanates	Surat, Goa	Mecca, Medina	Islamic philosophers, jurists	Hanafi legal texts, scholastic manuscripts	Participation in madrasa debates	Strengthened Indo-Arab scholastic connections in classical jurisprudence
17th–18th Century	Bengal, Awadh, Delhi	Surat steamship routes	Hijaz, Yemen	Ulama, scribes, historians	Manuscripts, tafsir works	Teaching in informal study circles	Circulation of Indian commentaries in Hijazi seminaries
19th Century (Early)	North India (Delhi, Lucknow)	Bombay steamships	Mecca, Medina	Reformist scholars (Ahl-i Hadith)	Hadith compilations, Arabic-Persian commentaries	Joint study sessions in Hijaz	Strengthened intellectual reform debates across regions
19th Century (Late)	Uttar Pradesh, Hyderabad	Bombay–Aden route	Mecca, Taif, Medina	Deobandi scholars & reformist teachers	Foundational Deobandi texts, scholastic commentaries	Close links with Hijazi teachers	Formalized Indo-Arab theological linkages; production of shared reformist education
Early 20th Century	Entire subcontinent	Karachi, Bombay	Hijaz, Yemen, Oman	Translators, teachers, jurists	Urdu–Arabic translations, biographical dictionaries	Institutional collaborations	Broader access to Indian scholarship in Arabian institutions
Mid-20th Century	Post-Partition India	Mumbai, Cochin	Saudi Arabia, Yemen	Scholar's teaching in new Islamic universities	Modern Islamic writings, educational curricula	Academic placements, translation roles	Foundational role in emerging Gulf religious education systems
Late 20th Century	Kerala, Uttar Pradesh	Air routes	Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE	Preachers, Quran teachers, community leaders	Contemporary Islamic literature	Diaspora-driven religious engagement	Formation of strong Indo-Gulf religious communities; circulation of texts back to India

**Source:** Author's compilation based on historical studies of Indian Ocean mobility, archival records, and scholarly works on Indo-Arab religious linkages.

The rise of Islam further strengthened these networks. Muslim traders from Arabia and Persia found welcome in western Indian ports (Tibbetts, 1957). Indian merchants began to find stable and large-scale markets across the Gulf. Pilgrimage routes also strengthened these connections. Many Indian Muslims travelled by sea to the holy cities of Arabia.



Their journeys often involved extended stays in port cities, allowing them to establish new contacts with local societies. These activities were not short-term exchanges. They shaped family histories, business partnerships, and community ties that endured for generations.

European expansion in the Indian Ocean altered the balance but did not break the relationship. The Portuguese, Dutch, and British attempted to control trade routes (Chaudhuri, 1992). However, they relied increasingly on existing local knowledge for navigation in the region. Indian and Arab sailors continued to play a central role in maritime traffic. Despite being controlled by colonial powers, port cities remained active hubs. In many cases, colonial rule strengthened India-Middle East relations as new shipping routes, telegraph lines, and administrative policies further connected the two regions (Thomas, 2018). The advent of steamships significantly reduced travel times, and the establishment of regular passenger routes promoted greater mobility (Fig. 02).



Fig 02 *Steamships*. (Source of image: Mitchell, 2016).

In the nineteenth century, Indian merchants had a prominent presence in Gulf cities like Muscat, Manama, and Basra (Fuccaro, 2014). They operated shops, managed trading warehouses, and formed vital links between regional and global markets (Kavoossi, 2020).



Many of these families-maintained ties with their home regions in India. They sent remittances, arranged marriages, and supported local religious institutions. Their presence began to shape politico relations by making economic cooperation essential and ongoing. Gulf rulers often relied on Indian merchants for loans and commercial stability (Peterson, 2001). These exchanges fostered trust that subsequently significantly influenced diplomatic relations.

Labour migration also flourished during this period. Western India, particularly Sindh, Gujarat, and the Konkan coast, travelled to the Gulf countries for jobs in pearl mining, fishing, construction, and port services (Rajan et al., 2019). Their mobility further strengthened India's connection with the region. These early labour movements were not driven by large-scale contracts or modern recruitment systems. Instead, they developed through kinship networks, community connections, and opportunities created by demand in the Gulf port economies (Vadlamudi, 2016). This pattern later paved the way for large-scale labour migration flows in the second half of the twentieth century.

The early twentieth century saw new forces emerge in the region. The decline of the Ottoman Empire reshaped political boundaries in West Asia, and new nation-states began to emerge. At the same time, British influence in the Gulf brought India closer to the region administratively. This was because many Gulf affairs were managed through British India. This created a unique politico geography in which Indian officials oversaw parts of Gulf governance. Although this control ended with the end of British rule, its legacy influenced the early diplomatic environment between India and several Gulf countries after independence.

A shared history of movement meant that Indians were not strangers in the Gulf countries. Familiarity with many cultural practices helped them adapt easily. Gulf governments also often prioritized Indian workers due to long-standing ties. This long-standing social cohesion facilitated the smooth development of bilateral relations. Even when political circumstances changed, the presence of a large expatriate community served as a stabilizing factor.

Communities maintained religious associations, cultural clubs, and business groups, keeping relations dynamic.

Maritime geography continued to shape these historical ties. Key routes, such as the Strait of Hormuz, gained strategic importance as Indian oil imports increased (Abraham, 2013). The stability of these waters was vital to India's economy, and this concern brought India into intense discussions on regional security. The need to protect routes that had been used for centuries led to the development of naval cooperation, anti-piracy operations, and maritime dialogue. Ancient routes have now become central to modern strategic thinking.

### **India's Strategic Geography and the Gulf Access**

In India's context, the Indian Ocean's location is not merely a physical feature. It is a strategic asset that influences India's relations with its neighbours and distant regions (Kumar, 2020). The Indian Ocean connects India with Africa, West Asia, and Southeast Asia, making these connections part of its natural geographic horizon (Boss, 2009). The Indian Ocean Rim is a broad arc of countries that surround the ocean and rely on it for economic activity. India is located at the centre of this arc. Its ports serve as gateways to major sea routes passing through the region (Fig. 03). These routes facilitate the movement of goods, energy, and people. They also pose security concerns, as instability in any part of the rim can impact the entire network. India's location enables it to monitor these developments and respond as needed. The country's strategic choices often reflect this need to balance opportunity and risk.

India's western coast has long been a natural link with the Middle East. From Mumbai to Kochi, ports face the Gulf of Mannar. This orientation has influenced India's historical relationship with West Asia and will continue to do so. Most of India's energy imports pass through this corridor. India has historically sourced around 55–60% of its crude oil from the Middle East prior to 2020. Its maritime routes are the backbone of India's economic stability. Even minor disruptions here can impact domestic markets.



This is why this region is the centre point of India's strategic thinking.

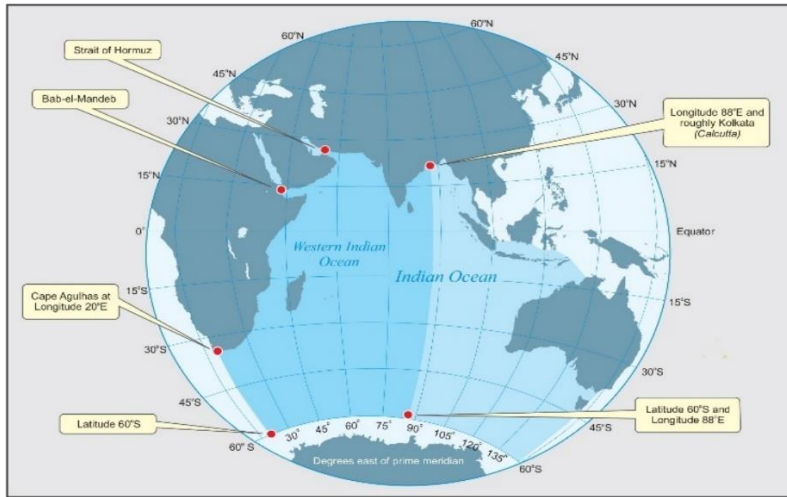


Fig 03: India's Interests in Western Indian Ocean (Source: Venter, 2017).

The security of these western routes depends on two maritime chokepoints: the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al-Mandeb (Fig. 04). The Strait of Hormuz lies between Oman and Iran. It is narrow, but carries a large portion of the world's oil exports (Jafari, 2012). For India, this route is crucial because most of its imported crude oil comes from suppliers in the Gulf. Ships must pass through the Strait of Hormuz before crossing the Arabian Sea to Indian ports. Any tension near the Strait, whether politico or military, is a matter of concern for New Delhi. India frequently monitors developments in the region because any blockage or conflict there could impact its energy access.

The Bab al-Mandeb lies to the west between Yemen, Djibouti, and Eritrea. It connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden (Okbandrias, 2017). Ships travelling from the Suez Canal to the Indian Ocean pass through this narrow channel (Fig. 4). India's trade with Europe and parts of Africa depends on this route. When piracy became a major threat off the coast of Somalia in the late 2000s, the Bab al-Mandeb came under renewed attention. Indian ships faced threats, and the government increased naval patrols to protect ships in the region. This experience demonstrated how a distant blockade can impact India's security planning. These blockades also highlight the broader geopolitical importance of the westward-bound sea routes.

These routes are not merely transportation routes; they are strategic locations where power, economy, and security are intertwined (Fig 05).

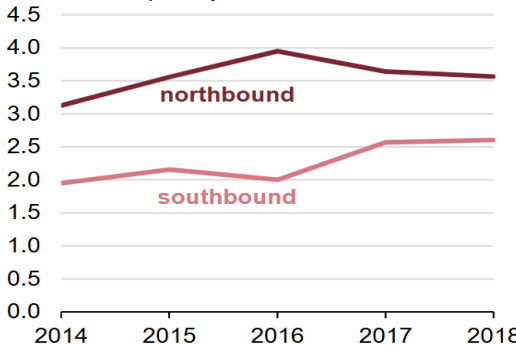


Fig 04: Bab el-Mandeb and Strait of Hormuz.

(Source: <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=41073>)

#### Total petroleum and LNG flows through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (2014-2018)

**crude oil, condensate, and petroleum products**  
million barrels per day



**liquefied natural gas (LNG)**  
billion cubic feet per day

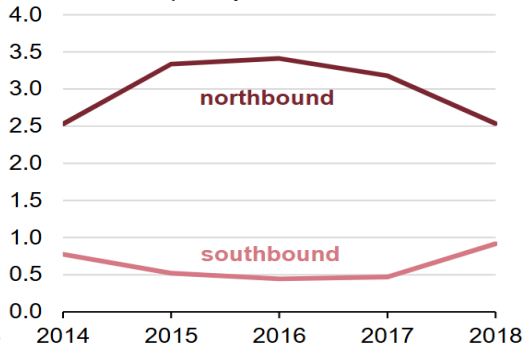


Fig 05: Bab El-Mandeb Potential (Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, Inc., Suez Canal Authority, and International Group of LNG Importers (GIIGNL)).

The westward-bound sea routes serve multiple purposes for India. First, they ensure a stable energy supply. Oil and gas imports are crucial to India's economy, with the majority of these coming from producers in the Gulf. Second, these routes support India's export markets.



Goods from Indian factories travel through these waterways to Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. Third, these sea routes support the large Indian diaspora in the Gulf. Workers travel along these routes, and the movement of people adds a social dimension to their strategic importance.

India's security planners understand that these routes must remain open and secure. This awareness has shaped naval policy. India has made significant investments in its Western Naval Command, enhanced port infrastructure, and strengthened maritime surveillance (Limaye, 2017). Cooperation with regional partners has also increased. Joint exercises with Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia reflect shared concerns about maritime stability. These developments demonstrate how geography encourages India to build relationships that protect its interests. Geography also motivates India to maintain stable relations with various parties. This strategy helps keep sea lanes open and reduces the risk of becoming embroiled in regional rivalries. Another important factor is the growing importance of islands and coastal features. The Lakshadweep Islands provide India with a forward position in the Arabian Sea (Shankar et al., 1997). These islands help monitor maritime traffic and secure western routes. India has upgraded its facilities there to improve communications and surveillance (Bouchard, 2019). These steps support broader strategic goals by strengthening the country's presence in critical maritime areas.

Many geopolitical scholars believe that India's strategic geography remains unchanged, but rather its meaning shifts in response to regional and global developments. Sea lanes remain constant, yet the actors and interests surrounding them change. Through these changes, India's position in the Indian Ocean region ensures that the Middle East will always remain central to its strategic imagination.

### **The Middle East as a Politico-Geographic Region**

The Middle East's geography is shaped by deserts, mountains, rivers, and coastlines. These physical features influence the interactions and distribution of power among states (Hall, 2018). The region is not homogeneous. It comprises several subregions, each with its own political and economic character.



The Gulf or Arabian Peninsula forms a subregion (Fig. 06). It is dominated by oil-rich monarchies such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (Moritz, 2020). Coastal access is crucial here. Ports located along the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman serve as gateways for trade and energy flows. The interior deserts act as natural barriers between states. Tribal and historical patterns also influence the formation of political boundaries. This combination of geography and politics creates a unique environment. India must proceed cautiously to maintain relations here, a point that has long been felt.

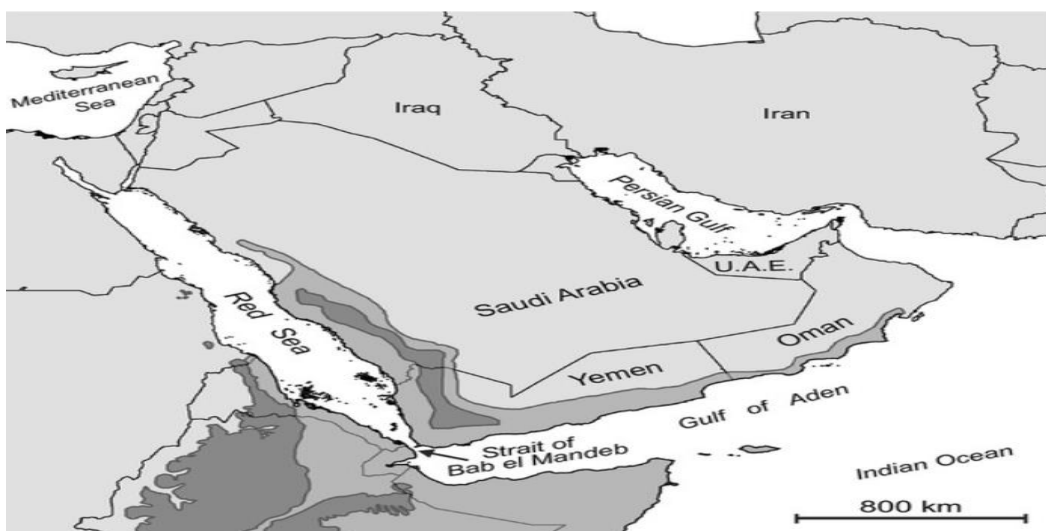


Fig 06: Map of the Arabian Peninsula & surrounding area (Source: Portik et al., 2015)

The Levant, comprising countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel, forms another subregion (Fig. 07). Mountain ranges, river valleys, and coastal plains shape settlement patterns here. These physical features have historically influenced trade, agriculture, and migration (Calculli, 2015). Political boundaries are often disputed and have changed over time. Conflicts and alliances in the Levant have a significant impact on the broader Middle East (Cottam, 1989). India's engagement with this subregion is limited compared to the Gulf, but it remains important for both strategic and economic reasons.

The Horn of Africa, although outside the traditional Middle East, is closely connected through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (Fig. 08).



Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea serve as maritime gateways to the Arabian Peninsula. Piracy, migration, and trade in this corridor impact India's maritime interests. Its geography connects the Middle East to the wider Indian Ocean, creating both opportunities and risks for the Indian frame. The security of this maritime region has long been a concern for both regional and extra-regional powers.



Fig 07: Levant Region (StepMap. (2014). *The Levant*.

(Source: <https://www.stepmap.com>)



Fig 08: Horn of Africa

Source: <https://horn-of-africa-map/>

The Gulf subregion is dominated by energy geography (Fig. 09). Oil and gas fields are concentrated in specific areas, often near the coast for easy export. Pipelines, refineries, and shipping terminals shape the spatial organization of states. Control over these resources provides countries with both economic and politico advantages. India is heavily dependent on Gulf energy, so understanding this geography is essential. Any disruption to production or transportation has a direct impact on India's energy security.

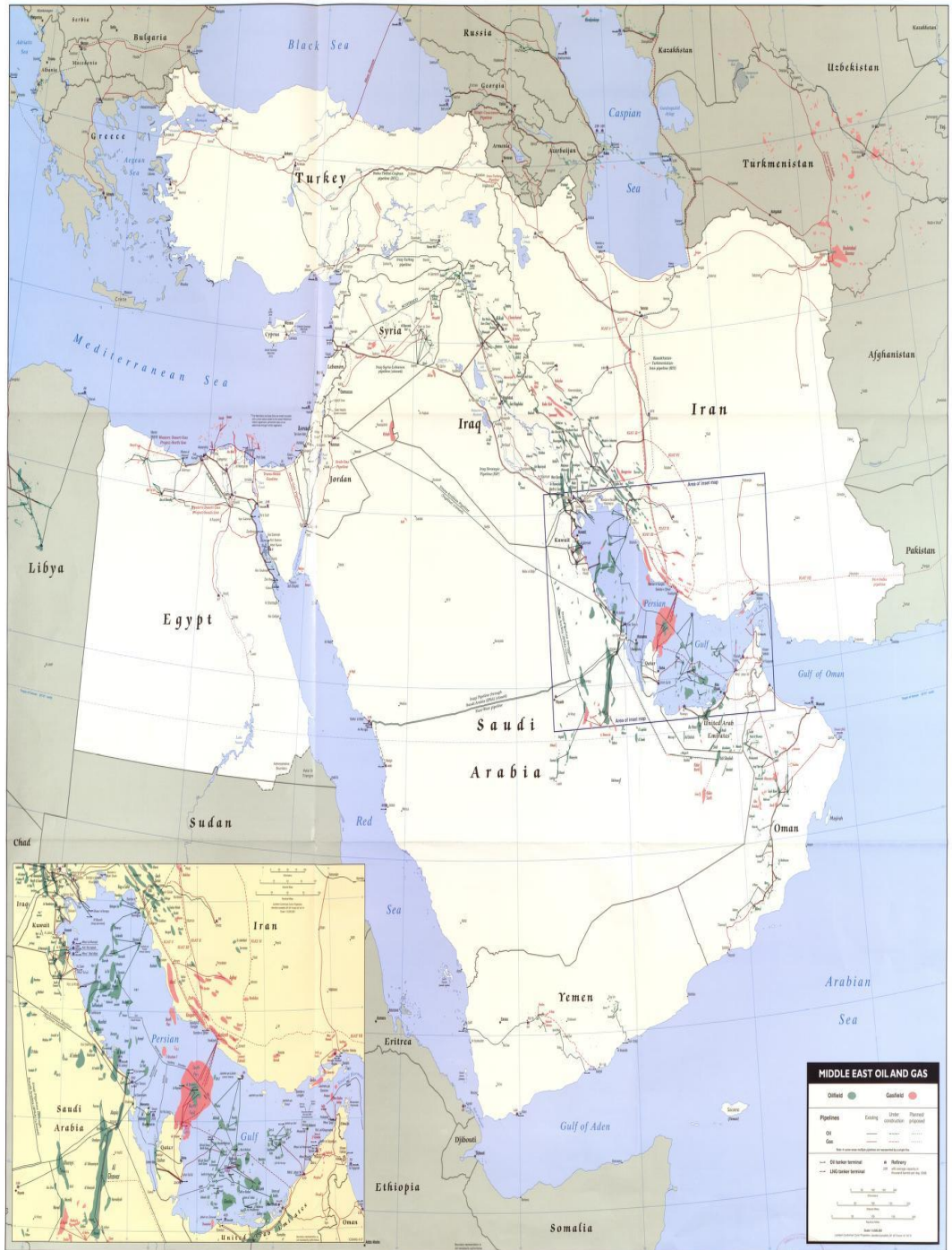


Fig 09: Middle East oil and gas. (USDA, 2007)



## **Politico-Geography Matters: Corridors, Routes, and Mobility**

Regional geopolitics interacts with geography. Rivalries between states, alliances, and security networks are influenced by the location of resources, coastlines, and population centres. Conflicts often centre around strategic corridors, ports, or energy infrastructure. India must consider both physical and human geography when building relations with the Middle East. Geography does not determine policy, but rather defines the platform on which political action takes place.

Economic geography is deeply intertwined with energy, as well as trade and infrastructure (Bridge et al., 2020). Gulf countries have invested in ports, free zones, and industrial zones to diversify their economies. India's exports of textiles, food, and technology products depend on these hubs (Akhavan, 2020). Connectivity through sea routes and airports enables India to connect directly with the region. Geography facilitates some connections more quickly and affordably, while others are hindered by deserts, mountains, or political instability.

From a cultural geography perspective, Gulf cities are home to a large number of Indian expatriates. Their presence builds social and economic bridges between India and host countries (Gardner, 2010). Cities such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha have significant Indian communities (Kohli, 2014). These communities influence bilateral relations and support India's strategic and economic goals.

Sea corridors have long been the backbone of India-Middle East exchanges. Monsoon winds created predictable cycles, enabling seasonal flows of goods, people, and information. This regularity enabled the consolidation of early commercial networks. However, debate continues as to whether such predictability hindered innovation or facilitated adaptive strategies by merchants and government officials. Indian merchants often diversified routes to mitigate seasonal or political risks, indicating agency within geographical constraints.

Labour mobility has been another important factor. By the mid-twentieth century, Historians and political geographers have debated the impact of this mobility on state policy.



One view suggests that migration was purely an economic phenomenon driven by push-pull factors. Another perspective considers the role of policy frameworks, remittance networks, and diaspora institutions in structuring migration. Evidence suggests that both interpretations are correct. Migrants were attracted by economic opportunities. But their patterns were shaped by employer networks and social institutions. This demonstrates that corridors are not merely physical pathways; they are socio-political structures mediated by governance and human action.

Energy transport is a central topic of debate in understanding westward corridors (Firat, 2016). The politico dimension of these routes has been widely debated. Corridors are not neutral; they are embedded in power relations.

Control over sea routes influences trade, migration, and strategic mobility. India's engagement with the Gulf states reflects this theory. Diplomatic relations, defense agreements, and maritime exercises are closely linked to the security of the corridor. Some analysts argue that this militarization risks escalating regional tensions. Others argue that active engagement stabilizes trade routes and protects national interests. Historically, the Indian approach has emphasized the latter, balancing the need for security with the need to avoid conflict.

## **Conclusion**

India-Middle East relations have been shaped by centuries-old historical, geographical, and strategic interconnections. This paper highlights how physical geography, maritime corridors, labor mobility, energy flows, and social networks collectively shape bilateral relations. Geography provides the platform. Human capacity, institutional frameworks, and policy choices determine the direction and sustainability of these interconnections. Evolving strategic ties underscore the dynamic nature of India-Middle East relations. Energy cooperation, diaspora engagement, maritime security, and institutional frameworks combine to create a multifaceted relationship. Here, geography sets limitations, but strategic planning allows India to transform potential vulnerabilities into opportunities.



The historical continuity of corridors, combined with flexible and adaptable policy measures, strengthens resilience and promotes interdependence. The geography of interdependence illustrates how physical space, economic flows, and social networks intertwine to structure bilateral relations. Spatial reconfigurations shaped by technological, economic, and policy changes highlight the importance of adaptive strategies. India's approach integrates energy security, trade facilitation, diaspora engagement, and maritime presence. This demonstrates a productive combination of geography and policy.

### **Conceptual Notes**

1. This study highlights the spatial character of India–Middle East relations and emphasizes how geography shapes political, economic, and cultural interactions.
2. The meaning of a place is always determined by perspective and historical experiences. What is "West" from an Indian perspective is "East" for the West. Therefore, geography is never just about coordinates; it is also the result of perspectives, experiences, and cultural memory.
3. Geographical truths exist in many ways. A river, hill, or landscape holds different meanings for different communities.
4. Local landscape memories also challenge formal cartography. Maps, policies, and state boundaries may create lines, but local community memory interprets and often transforms those lines.
5. Regions acquire meaning through historical interaction.
6. Geography is not just a 'place' but also an 'experience.' Understanding a landscape means not only study its physical features but also engaging with the experiential layer created by people's daily practices and the meanings they have inherited.



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## Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Author Contributions (CRediT)

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