



## India Qatar relations under the Modi government: Continuity and changes

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### Abstract

India and Qatar share historical and cultural ties that go back centuries, and it's have been evolving over the years; however, the relations have gained more significance in recent times. When the 16th Lok Sabha results were announced on 16 May 2014, Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser Al Thani, Prime Minister and Minister of Interior of Qatar (QPM) congratulated Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the phone. In a tweet thanking QPM, the Prime Minister said: "We will take India-Qatar ties to newer heights". The top ranks of Qatari authority back the PM in his endeavours. The current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken steps to strengthen the relationship between the two nations, building on the foundation laid by his predecessors. This paper explores the continuity and changes in India-Qatar relations under Modi's leadership looking at key areas such as trade, investment, energy, and defence. Further, to comprehend Continuity and changes in India-Qatar relations, this paper will focus on the political and socio-economic engagements between India and Qatar. It will analyse the various dimensions of their relationship, including head-of-state visits, diplomatic relations, cultural and educational exchanges, and counter-terrorism cooperation, as well as evaluate their agreements and disagreements in their relations in the pre- and post-2014 period. At the same time, there have been some differences and challenges, such as issues related to labour rights and the Gulf blockade of Qatar. Nonetheless, authorities from both the side are attempting to resolve these disagreements and move ahead.

**Keywords:** Counterterrorism, diaspora, diplomacy, energy, tourism

### Introduction

India-Qatar relations seem fuelled by energy and people-to-people engagements. More than seven lakh Indians live in Qatar, and Qatar meets roughly 40% of India's LNG needs. This connection has been excellent recently. A 2008 defence and security cooperation framework agreement call for marine training, joint exercises, and developing defence industrial hubs in both countries. Qatar has prioritised forging strong links with a growing economic giant like India as it broadens its external relationships, while New Delhi has prioritised improving partnerships with a Gulf state that excels in the region and beyond (PANT, 2023) [22]. Further, India and Qatar have a long-standing relationship of friendship and cooperation, driven by regular and meaningful dialogue at the highest levels of government. This strong bond of friendship has been further strengthened by the significant contributions of the large, diverse, and highly skilled Indian population living in Qatar. The two countries have been actively engaging in a range of sectors, leading to the steady growth of their cooperation.

The state of Qatar has always been significant for India. The Indian Subcontinent and the Arabian Peninsula have historically been neighbours due to their geographic proximity, marine linkages, cultural exchanges, and trading opportunities. India has been a geopolitical centre that has substantially shaped Qatar's foreign relations: from 1916 to 1971, Qatar was a British protectorate, and during this time it was informally a part of the British Indian Empire until 1947 (Onley, 2007: 11-60) [21]. Throughout most of the 20th century, India's relations with Qatar were dominated by a modest but thriving pearl import trade and the export of spices. The discovery of the Dukhan onshore oil field in 1940 and the country's first offshore field two decades later, followed by a sharp rise in global oil prices, significantly

enhanced Qatar's fortunes. As Qatar's economy grew, so did the number of expatriate workers in the country.

As Qatar gained its independence in 1971, India was one of just a few countries to immediately recognise it. In 1973, India also established relations with Qatar. After that period, both nations have been involved in an extensive range of diplomatic, commercial, defence, and cultural interactions. Since several high-level visits and the country's emergence as a popular tourist destination, bilateral relations between Qatar and India have expanded consistently over time. In 1999, 2005, and 2012, Emir H.H. Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani paid a visit to India. An official visit to Qatar in November 2008 by India's then-prime minister, Manmohan Singh, marked a significant turning point in the bilateral relationship between the two countries (MEA, 2016).

Over the years, trade between India and Qatar has become more diverse. India now exports cereals, machinery, and electronic goods to Qatar, while India imports hydrocarbons, plastics, and chemicals worth \$17 billion from Qatar. However, the most important part of the trade between the two countries is liquefied natural gas (LNG). India gets about 80% of its LNG from Qatar (Kumar, 2016) [15].

The exponential growth of India's relations with Qatar (and other Gulf states) has been centred on seven major issues: Energy security, bilateral trade, the inflow of Indian expatriates to the region, maritime security, counterterrorism, two-way investment flow, and defence cooperation are among them. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014, the last two gained more attention. Energy security and Indian expatriates remain the most crucial aspects of bilateral relations. This highlights the complementary nature of relationships. India's

economic growth is dependent on gas produced in Qatar, whereas Qatar's economic development is dependent on Indian (and other) expatriates. In a nutshell, the complementary nature is evident in India's "look west" and the Gulf countries' "look east" policies.

The relationship has gained fresh momentum after Narendra Modi's election as India's prime minister in 2014. The two nations have kept up their cooperation in several sectors and have also taken several steps to increase it. Modi's initiatives have also attracted investment from Qatar and helped create new prospects for both nations.

### Research objectives and methodology

Considering the qualitative nature of the research, this study employs the qualitative methods, including published sources such as books, periodicals, public records, journal articles, various publications, document analysis and records by both the government have been used in this paper. Moreover, interviews of officials, scholars and experts that have been published in different newspapers and in research reports have been considered. The prime aim of the study is to explore the evolution of India-Qatar relations under the Modi government and the implications of the changes in the relationships for the two countries. It also analyses the various dimensions of their relationship, including head-of-state visits, diplomatic relations, cultural and educational exchanges, and counter-terrorism cooperation, as well as evaluate their agreements and disagreements in their relations in the pre- and post-2014 period. It further, examines the various aspects of the relationship, including political, economic, and strategic cooperation, as well as cultural and people-to-people links. It also analyses the implications of recent challenges in the relationship, such as the blockade of Qatar by the Saudi-led bloc and the recent diplomatic conundrum after the sentencing of eight Indian Navy veterans. And finally, the paper concludes by assessing the potential for further strengthening of India-Qatar relations.

### Modi's approach to India-Qatar relations

Before analysing Prime Minister Modi's approach to India-Qatar relations, it is essential to evaluate his foreign policy priorities and strategies towards the Arab Gulf States. Subsequently, we shall identify the significant policy shifts and changes that have occurred during his tenure.

Historically, India's engagement with the West Asia has evolved over time, shaped by its perception of its interests, national capacities, and the perception of its regional role. Initially, after gaining independence in 1947, India pursued a policy of open engagement with all actors in the region, actively involved in resolving regional disputes. However, after the Suez Crisis in 1956, India adopted a less interventionist strategy, deferring to regional allies like Egypt. This shift was influenced by limited projection capabilities and the emergence of the US-sponsored Baghdad pact, which favoured India's rival, Pakistan (Blarel, 2019) [5]. Also, during this period, India has been heavily dependent on Iraq and Saudi Arabia for its petroleum requirements. During the 1970s, India formed alliances with emerging Gulf States such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Iran to ensure a consistent oil supply for its economic growth. During this period, there was a notable increase in the number of Indian workers migrating to the Gulf States, resulting in the remittance of funds back

to India. The oil crisis in October 1973 prompted the Indian government to align its Middle Eastern policies with its oil and trade interests, as well as to safeguard the welfare of its expanding diaspora in the region. As a result, India entered into bilateral agreements with Iraq, UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait to secure stable oil prices and maintain an uninterrupted supply of oil (Jain, 2008; Mansingh, 1984: 372) [13].

In the early 1990s, structural shocks such as the Gulf War and the Oslo Peace Process provided India with diplomatic leeway to reorient its Middle East policy. This led to the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel, a country that India had previously neglected due to concerns about estranging Arab partners and its domestic Muslim population. This policy shift was significant and marked a departure from India's previous approach to the region (Kumaraswamy, 2010) [17]. Furthermore, India's growing economy, boosting global influence, and acquisition of nuclear weapons in the 1990s have contributed to its emergence as a significant export destination and investment hub for the Gulf States. India's imports from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) experienced significant growth, rising from \$2 billion to \$108 billion from 2000 to 2013 (Department of Commerce 2016–2017).

In 2005, India implemented a strategic Look West policy aimed at strengthening its ties with its West Asian neighbours. West Asian countries have often been regarded as extended 'and 'proximate neighbours. India aims to prioritise the restoration of stability and democracy in the region to safeguard its vital interests. These interests encompass the well-being and security of its expatriates, ensuring a stable supply of energy and food security, protecting investments and projects, promoting the peaceful use of nuclear energy, addressing maritime security concerns such as piracy, and being mindful of the sensitivities of its large Muslim community (Chakrabarti, 2013) [8].

Scholars hold varying perspectives on Modi's foreign policy towards West Asia. According to Chatterjee (2019) [10], over the past seventy years, India's policy towards West Asia has lacked a clear regional focus. Instead, it has been reactive and aimed at avoiding displeasing any countries in the region. To protect its strategic energy interest, India has chosen to react to developments in the region rather than proactively engage with it.

Despite some improvements under Narendra Modi's government, India's foreign policy towards the Middle East remains largely unchanged. He further argues, India's approach to the region remains focused on bilateral relations with individual countries rather than a regional approach. The government has prioritized closer ties with the Gulf Region due to energy security and the large number of Indian expatriates living there. Despite Modi's extensive travel in the region, his engagement remains primarily bilateral (Chatterjee, 2019) [10].

PANT (2023) [22] for example argues that the Modi government has made significant progress in its foreign policy approach towards the Middle East. India has successfully cultivated robust diplomatic ties with Gulf Arab States, leveraging its adeptness in diplomacy and flexibility. He goes on, India's engagement with the region has evolved beyond energy and diaspora connections, taking on a more strategic nature. The formation of the I2U2 mini lateral includes India, Israel, UAE, and the US. Furthermore, the recent declaration of the India-Middle

East-Europe Economic Corridor during the G-20 summit demonstrates India's dedication to improving economic well-being and tackling infrastructure challenges in the region (PANT, 2023) <sup>[22]</sup>. Additionally, Anas (2021) <sup>[1]</sup> claims that under Modi, India has begun making decisions within its tight balancing acts by giving priority to its relationships based on its interests, such as the significance of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel in all West Asian relations. India has also presented itself as a "security provider" in the Indo-Pacific region, which Gulf States and their Western security allies would appreciate more than the expansion of Iran, Turkey, and Russia in the region (Anas, 2021) <sup>[1]</sup>.

Another part of Modi's Gulf policy has been multiple and repeated visits to the Gulf countries to strengthen and deepen existing business relationships. Modi concentrated his emphasis on the Gulf with the obvious purpose of improving government-to-government ties by expanding on existing high-level business contacts. One explicit goal was to convince Gulf sovereign wealth funds to invest in Modi's ambitious domestic infrastructure and manufacturing initiatives. In another departure from previous Indian governments, both INC and BJP, Modi advocated for closer strategic partnerships with Gulf States to solve national security issues such as terrorism. India and Qatar signed an agreement for intelligence and counter-terrorism cooperation (Blarel, 2021) <sup>[21]</sup>. And finally, to shift the historical factors of India's Gulf Relations, such as uninterrupted energy supply and the safety of Indian workers, the Modi government has sought to enhance non-oil trade volume and replace energy dependence with trade interdependence. Recent trade diversification patterns indicate that both parties have begun to look beyond the oil trade. The Gulf nations' economic diversification ambitions require India's economic, technical, and human resource assistance, which has been emphasised in recent bilateral discussions (Anas, 2021) <sup>[1]</sup>.

### **Bilateral relations under the Modi government**

When the 16th Lok Sabha results were announced on 16 May 2014, Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser Al Thani, Prime Minister and Minister of Interior of Qatar (QPM) congratulated Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the phone. In a tweet thanking QPM, the Prime Minister said: "We will take India-Qatar ties to newer heights". The top ranks of Qatari authority back the PM in his endeavours. In this regard, as part of India's "Look West" strategy, the Modi administration has been working to improve relations with Qatar since 2014.

In 2015 (Arora, 2015) <sup>[2]</sup> and 2016 (PTI, 2016b) <sup>[24, 25]</sup>, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with his counterpart, Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, at high-level summits. The price per unit of Qatari gas was cut in half because of these meetings, which were good for India. In addition, Qatar waived India's \$2 billion debt for failing to deliver the volume of gas that was previously agreed upon (PTI, 2016a) <sup>[24, 25]</sup>.

### **Economic relations and trade**

Trade is a major factor in the ties that bind countries together. LNG, a fuel on which India relies heavily and of which Qatar is the primary source, is at the heart of the ties between New Delhi and Doha. India's current import dependency on natural gas stands at approximately 50%.

Despite efforts by the government to enhance domestic production, the country's import reliance is expected to increase in the future due to the government's focus on boosting natural gas consumption Sharma (2023) <sup>[26]</sup>. Furthermore, India, the largest LNG importer, has a long-term contract with Qatar for the import of 8.5 million tonnes per annum (MTPA) of LNG. Additionally, Qatari gas has a significant share in India's LNG purchases from the spot market. India aims to increase the share of natural gas in its primary energy mix to 15% by 2030, which will lead to a substantial increase in LNG imports. In FY2022-23, India's total imports from Qatar were valued at \$16.81 billion, with LNG imports alone accounting for \$8.32 billion, or 49.5%, an analysis of official trade data shows Sharma (2023) <sup>[26]</sup>.

While talking about commerce and investments, so in 2021-22, India and Qatar had a bilateral trade of US\$ 15.03 billion. India exported US\$ 1.83 billion worth of goods to Qatar, while Qatar exported US\$ 13.19 billion worth of goods to India. Qatar's exports to India mainly consist of LNG, LPG, chemicals and petrochemicals, fertilisers, plastics and aluminium articles, while India's exports to Qatar include cereals, copper articles, iron and steel articles, vegetables, fruits, spices, and processed food products, electrical and other machinery, plastic products, construction materials, textiles & garments, chemicals, precious stones and rubber. India was one of the top four destinations for Qatari exports in 2021, and it was also one of the top three sources of Qatari imports during that same year (Embassy of India, Doha, 2022). The amount of trade between the two countries is \$15 billion, the majority of which is comprised of LNG and LPG exports from Qatar worth more than \$13 billion (Subramanian, 2023) <sup>[28]</sup>.

Beyond commerce, India also actively sought to expand its relationship with Qatar. During Modi's 2016 trip to Qatar, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to work together on cyber security, defence, health, tourism, energy and cooperation and mutual assistance in custom matters.

Another significant area where India turns to the Gulf States for FDI in its developing market is investments. The Modi government is concentrating on the infrastructure sector and promoting India as a potential centre for global manufacturing. In this regard, Modi encouraged Shaykh Al Thani to invest in urban infrastructure development in India, hoping to attract Qatari sovereign wealth funds (SWF). In exchange, Modi promised to facilitate the movement of skilled labour to assist Qatar in attaining the declared goals of the Qatar National Vision 2030, including expertise in assuring the successful operation of the FIFA World Cup in 2022.

### **Strategic and defence relations**

India has strong military ties with Qatar, where they have maritime defence cooperation to combat terrorist threats. Further, they maintain a strong and multifaceted relationship, with defence cooperation as an integral part of the agenda. Qatar's small population and strategically precarious placement amid potentially hostile neighbours mean that the country must rely on outside aid to protect its territorial sovereignty in the event of armed conflict. But India's military forces are among the strongest and most capable in the world. The Indian Navy, often regarded as among the world's best, provides frequent training and assistance to its island neighbours. Furthermore, the Indian

government has invested heavily in Qatar's gas industry, making the country's security a priority for both countries (Kute, 2022) <sup>[18]</sup>.

As a sign of friendship, India provides training opportunities in its defence institutions to Qatar. Additionally, both countries regularly participate in the biennial Doha International Maritime Defence Exhibition and Conference (DIMDEX) in Qatar, as well as exchange visits from naval and coast guard vessels. Defence cooperation has been called a "pillar" of ties between India and Qatar. The India-Qatar Defence Cooperation Agreement, which was signed during Prime Minister Singh's visit in November 2008 and renewed for another five years in 2018, was a big step forward. The agreement is carried out by the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee (JMCC), which conducted its fifth meeting in Doha on November 27-28, 2019 (Embassy of India, Doha, 2022). The agreement included reciprocal visits as well as training for the Qatari Emiri Naval Forces (QENF) by India. In this regard, Ships from the Indian Navy and Coast Guard visit Qatar on a regular basis. Last year, QENF delegations took part in two maritime drills in India. Zair Al Bahr, a joint naval exercise, has been conducted twice (Subramanian, 2023) <sup>[28]</sup>.

As previously stated, defence and security cooperation between India and Qatar have grown dramatically during Modi's leadership. His Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) government is eager to expand security cooperation, particularly with Gulf nations in countering terrorism and counter-radicalization. In this regard, India and Qatar have declared their commitment to cooperate in the fight against terrorism and its financing. Through diplomatic interactions, the two countries have discussed how to best collaborate in order to effectively combat terrorism and its associated activities. Counterterrorism cooperation is a priority for India, as the country has experienced multiple terrorist attacks in recent years, some of which have been financed through illegal money transfers from abroad. Joint operations in battling terrorism have also been discussed as an option. In this regard, India and Qatar established a partnership to combat terrorism in 2015, at both the bilateral level and within the multilateral system of the UN. Through regular dialogue, information sharing, intelligence analysis, and personnel training, the two nations sought to increase their level of cooperation in the area of security and counterterrorism. And in 2016, a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed to enhance the exchange of intelligence on money laundering, terrorism financing, and other illegal activity (Priya, 2023) <sup>[23]</sup>.

In 2019, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar, spoke with Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the phone on counterterrorism cooperation and India's participation in the OIC. The Economic Times reported "The Prime Minister stressed that terrorism remains a major threat to international stability. He emphasised the need for fast and visible action to eradicate all kinds of terrorism and any support for it. the Prime Minister added that India attached tremendous significance to further improving her relations with Qatar, which is our close ally and with which we share an extended neighbourhood." As a result, both India and Qatar have expressed enthusiasm for partnering up to prevent terrorism and to cut off financial support for terrorists.

### **Cultural and people-to-people cooperation**

The cultural connections between India and Qatar have a long-standing history, spanning several centuries. Regular cultural exchanges between the two nations have played a significant role in fostering closer relationships among their people. Additionally, there is a strong presence of Indian culture and art in Qatar, with numerous Indian artistes performing at events organized by community organizations affiliated to the Indian Cultural Centre (ICC). The Qataris also admire Indian films and documentaries, as they are shown at the annual Film Festival of Doha Film Institute. The ICC has also organized large-scale festivals titled 'A Passage to India' in November 2013; March 2015 and April 2016, to showcase India's rich cultural diversity and celebrate important figures like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (MEA, 2016). In 2019, Qatar provided co-sponsorship for India's resolution at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to designate June 21 as the International Day of Yoga. The Indian Embassy in Qatar hosted a yoga session at the National Museum of Qatar as part of their celebratory events. In 2019, India-Qatar Year of Culture was commemorated through the organisation of more than 45 cultural events including exhibitions, fashion shows, art displays, dance performances, musical concerts, etc. in Qatar. The Indian community in Qatar is sizable. A dedicated Labour and Community Welfare Wing has been established to cater to the requirements of the Indian community. Additionally, a Joint Working Group on Labour and Manpower Development exists between the two nations.

This highlights the growing cultural relationship between India and Qatar.

### **Recent challenges in the relationship**

The diplomatic crisis in Qatar that erupted in June 2017 presented two primary challenges for India: firstly, maintaining trade relations with Qatar, and secondly, the facilitation of evacuation for the significant population of Indian migrant workers in the case of an additional deterioration of the situation (Siyech, 2019) <sup>[27]</sup>. The Indian government described the dispute as an internal matter between Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States and India kept doing business with Qatar during the Saudi-led blockade in 2017–2021.

Other challenges happened when the state of Qatar issued a summons to the Indian Ambassador in response to statements made by two spokespersons of the Bhartiya Janata Party regarding Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), which were deemed controversial. Qatar was the first country to object and demand a "public apology" from India. As a result, the hashtag #BoycottQatarAirways has gained traction among Twitter users in India.

Another issue which has been reported was the allegations of espionage by Indian Navy officers in Qatar. In August of 2022, a group of eight former Indian naval personnel employed by Dahra Global Technologies and Consultancy Services were apprehended in Qatar on allegations of engaging in espionage activities. And they were sentenced to death on October 26 by the local court in Qatar (TIMESOFINDIA.COM, 2023) <sup>[30]</sup>. In response External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar stated "We are deeply shocked by the verdict of death penalty and are awaiting the detailed judgement. We are in touch with the family members and the legal team, and we are exploring all legal

options." PANT (2023) <sup>[22]</sup> suggests that this decision will have significant implications for the foundations of the strong relationship between the two countries, provoking India to reconsider the long-term sustainability of this relationship.

This diplomatic challenge requires strategic analysis and thoughtful consideration. Scholars and experts suggest that India should consider the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, relevant international precedents, and the broader context of India-Qatar relations. India can address its issues through diplomatic dialogue, political initiatives, legal appeals, or a combination of these approaches (Jinnah, 2023) <sup>[14]</sup>.

Notwithstanding what has happened, Officials and Scholars in India believe that there is no reason to be pessimistic about the further blossoming of mutually beneficial ties with friendly GCC States.

### Conclusion

India's bilateral relations with Qatar have been important due to the presence of over half a million Indian nationals residing and employed in the country. Currently, this reinforced by an increasing interconnection of political and security relations that yield mutual advantages. Furthermore, the trade relationship between the two nations is significant, with liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports being a major component. Qatar has also made significant investments in India, including a \$1 billion investment in Reliance Retail. The defence sector is another important area of cooperation, with India providing training to Qatari forces and a defence cooperation agreement signed in 2008. The close relationship is further highlighted by high-level visits from leaders like Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Vice Presidents Dhankar and Naidu, and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar further emphasising the closeness. Additionally, PM Modi is putting efforts towards fostering bilateral ties and investing resources towards the development of the partnerships.

Finally, it is anticipated that India and Qatar will continue to strengthen their bilateral ties. Soon, Qatari investments may increase in India, particularly in infrastructure and development projects, as well as downstream energy projects. There is also potential for Indian companies to invest in Qatar's specialised sectors, such as information technology, human resource management, biotechnology, pharmacy, and higher education. Expanding security and defence cooperation is likely to continue. Cyber and maritime security, coastal safety, and hardware-based military-to-military exchanges are expected to advance. Additionally, "the bilateral relationship can be strengthened through sustained education sector cooperation. Many Western universities are in Qatar, which is an attractive feature for Indian students seeking a quality education abroad without the long distances and high cost of living in the West" (Siyech, 2019) <sup>[27]</sup>.

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