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Delhi Declaration 2026 – India-Arab League Summit and India's West Asia Diplomatic Architecture

3 February 2026

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WHY IN NEWS

India hosted the second India-Arab League Foreign Ministers' Summit with all 22 member states of the League of Arab States participating. The summit adopted the Delhi Declaration 2026, notable for India explicitly condemning the Houthis and reaffirming the Arab Peace Initiative on Palestine while declining the Trump administration's "Board of Peace" proposal.

THE LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES — INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The **League of Arab States** (also called the Arab League) is a regional organisation of Arab-majority countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Founded in **Cairo on March 22, 1945** — three months before the United Nations — it has **22 member states** spanning from Mauritania in West Africa to the Gulf states and the Levant.

Key institutions:

Council of the Arab League: Supreme body; meets twice a year at foreign minister level

Arab Court of Justice: Judicial organ (advisory jurisdiction)

Arab Parliament: Advisory body (not a legislature)

Headquarters: **Cairo, Egypt** (moved briefly to Tunis during Egypt's suspension 1979–1989 following the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty).

Significance for India: The Arab world collectively represents India's most important external economic and strategic space — a belt stretching from Morocco to Oman that accounts for the majority of India's crude oil imports, hosts the largest Indian diaspora, and provides critical remittance flows.

INDIA-ARAB LEAGUE RELATIONS — HISTORICAL ARC

India and the Arab world share 5,000+ years of maritime and commercial history — the monsoon trade routes across the Arabian Sea predate written records. Modern diplomatic engagement formalised through bilateral ties with individual Arab states but multilateral engagement with the League as a body has been intermittent.

Key milestones:

- 1950:** Arab League supported India’s position during India-Pakistan war
- 1967:** India supported Arab states after the Six-Day War; opposed Israeli occupation
- 2002:** Arab Peace Initiative proposed at Beirut Summit — India expressed support
- 2016:** First India-Arab League Foreign Ministers’ meeting held in **Bahrain** — established structured ministerial dialogue
- 2026:** Second meeting hosted by **India** in New Delhi (a decade after the first)

THE FIVE PILLARS OF INDIA-ARAB ENGAGEMENT

India’s relationship with the Arab world rests on five structural pillars:

Pillar	Detail
Energy	Gulf states supply 60–65% of India’s crude oil imports; LNG imports growing
Diaspora	~9 million Indians in Gulf/Arab states; largest expatriate community in several countries
Remittances	~\$40 billion annually; top source of India’s foreign remittances
Trade	India-Arab League trade: \$240+ billion/year
Security	Counter-terrorism cooperation; maritime security in the Indian Ocean

The **Neighbourhood First**, **Act East**, and **Connect Central Asia** policies are well-known strategic frameworks, but India’s “**Look West**” or **West Asia policy** is equally critical — it simply lacks a branded name.

DELHI DECLARATION 2026 — KEY PROVISIONS

The **Delhi Declaration 2026** is the summit outcome document, addressing several active regional crises:

1. Yemen and the Houthi Question

India’s **explicit condemnation of the Houthis** (Ansar Allah) marks a notable diplomatic shift. India had previously maintained studied ambiguity — condemning attacks on shipping in the Red Sea while avoiding naming the perpetrators. The Delhi Declaration names the Houthis in the context of:

- Attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea (disrupting global trade lanes since late 2023)
- Destabilisation of Yemen and regional security
- Humanitarian crisis in Yemen (one of the world’s worst)

Why the shift? India's significant trade volumes pass through the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. Houthi missile and drone attacks on commercial shipping directly threaten Indian trade and the safety of Indian seafarers. The Indian Navy has already been deployed for escort operations in the area.

2. Israel-Palestine — Arab Peace Initiative Reaffirmed

India **reaffirmed support for the Arab Peace Initiative (2002)**, which proposes:

Full Arab state normalisation with Israel

In exchange for: Israeli withdrawal from all Arab territories occupied in 1967 (West Bank, Gaza, Golan Heights); establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital; just solution to the refugee question

India **declined to join** the Trump administration's proposed "Board of Peace" — a US-led mechanism for Israel-Palestine resolution that does not align with the two-state solution framework endorsed by the UN and Arab states.

This positioning — supporting the Arab Peace Initiative while refusing Trump's framework — reflects India's effort to maintain equidistance from US and Arab positions on the Palestinian question while keeping trade and diaspora interests secure.

3. Sudan, Libya, Somalia — Sovereignty and Non-Interference

On the three active African Arab states in conflict, the Declaration endorsed:

Sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sudan, Libya, and Somalia

Rejection of external interference

Support for UN-led diplomatic processes

India's interest: Sudan is an important source of crude oil; Libya (pre-civil war) hosted Indian infrastructure workers; Somalia's coastline is central to India's anti-piracy operations in the western Indian Ocean.

INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY TEST

The Delhi Declaration illustrates both the strength and the tensions in India's strategic autonomy doctrine:

The Houthi condemnation — India aligned with Arab states and the West (US, UK, France have conducted strikes against Houthi positions). This alignment serves Indian economic interests (Red Sea trade routes) but puts India in the same camp as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, potentially complicating ties with Iran (which backs the Houthis and is India's gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia via Chabahar).

The Palestine question — India declined the Trump "Board of Peace" but endorsed the Arab Peace Initiative. This keeps India aligned with the Arab consensus and the UN two-state framework while avoiding a full break with Washington.

The Russia-Ukraine dimension — The Arab League includes states with varying stances on Russia. India’s ongoing oil purchases from Russia (at discounts post-Ukraine war) have strained ties with the Gulf states, many of which support Western sanctions.

The result is a sophisticated balancing act — but one that is increasingly difficult to maintain as the geopolitical temperature rises.

INDIA’S WEST ASIA POLICY ARCHITECTURE

India’s engagement with the Middle East spans multiple frameworks:

Framework	Components
I2U2 Group	India, Israel, UAE, USA — “Middle East Quad”; focuses on technology, clean energy, food security
IMEC	India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor; announced at G20 New Delhi 2023; rail+ship corridor linking India to Europe via UAE-Saudi Arabia-Jordan-Israel
India-Gulf cooperation	Bilateral relations with GCC 6; 2 Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPA with UAE and Bahrain)
India-Iran ties	Chabahar Port (10-year agreement 2024); connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia
India-Israel defence	Defence partnership; Israel is India’s 3rd largest defence supplier (drones, radar, missiles)

UPSC RELEVANCE

League of Arab States (founded March 22, 1945, Cairo; 22 members; HQ Cairo); Delhi Declaration 2026; Arab Peace Initiative (2002, Beirut Summit); India-Arab League trade (\$240+ billion); Indians in Gulf (~9 million); remittances (\$40 billion); I2U2 Group (India-Israel-UAE-US); IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor; G20 New Delhi 2023); Bab-el-Mandeb Strait (connects Red Sea to Gulf of Aden); Houthis/Ansar Allah (Yemen).

India’s West Asia policy; strategic autonomy and its limits; Houthi condemnation and India’s Red Sea interests; Arab Peace Initiative vs Trump “Board of Peace”; India-Gulf economic interdependence; diaspora as foreign policy tool; IMEC geopolitical significance.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES:

Founded: **March 22, 1945**, Cairo

Members: **22**

HQ: **Cairo, Egypt** (moved to Tunis 1979–1989 during Egypt's suspension)

Egypt suspended: 1979 (after Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty); reinstated 1989

INDIA-ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT 2026:

Type: Foreign Ministers' level (not heads of state)

Participants: All **22 Arab League members** + India

Previous: 2016, **Bahrain**; 2026, **New Delhi** (India)

Outcome: **Delhi Declaration 2026**

DELHI DECLARATION 2026 — KEY POSITIONS:

Yemen: India **explicitly condemned Houthis** (shift from earlier ambiguity)

Palestine: India **endorsed Arab Peace Initiative (2002)**; rejected Trump "Board of Peace"

Sudan/Libya/Somalia: Endorsed sovereignty + rejected external interference

ARAB PEACE INITIATIVE (2002):

Proposed at: **Beirut Summit, March 2002** (during Arab League summit)

Key terms: Full Arab normalisation with Israel in exchange for Israeli withdrawal from **all 1967 occupied territories** + independent Palestinian state (East Jerusalem as capital) + just refugee solution

INDIA-ARAB WORLD ECONOMIC DATA:

India-Arab League trade: **\$240+ billion/year**

Indians in Gulf/Arab states: **~9 million**

Annual remittances from Arab states: **~\$40 billion**

India crude oil from Gulf: **60–65%** of total imports

KEY STRAITS AND CHOKEPOINTS:

Hormuz Strait: 33 km wide; controls Persian Gulf oil exit; ~20% of global traded crude

Bab-el-Mandeb: 29 km wide; connects Red Sea to Gulf of Aden; Houthi attacks here

Suez Canal: Egypt; connects Mediterranean to Red Sea; ~12% of global trade

INDIA'S WEST ASIA FRAMEWORKS:

I2U2: India + Israel + UAE + USA (technology, food, clean energy)

IMEC: India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (announced G20 New Delhi, Sep 2023)

Chabahar Port: India operates; 10-year agreement 2024 with Iran; US sanction risk

Abraham Accords (2020): UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco normalised with Israel (US-brokered); India not a party but benefits from new I2U2 geometry

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Operation Kaveri (2023): India evacuated ~3,800 Indians from Sudan during conflict

Operation Rahat (2015): Evacuated 4,640 Indians + 960 foreigners from Yemen

India-UAE CEPA (2022): First CEPA with Gulf country; signed in **88 days** (record pace)

India-Bahrain CEPA: Signed 2024; second Gulf CEPA

Red Sea crisis impact: ~15% increase in India's import costs (rerouting via Cape of Good Hope adds 10–14 days)

Sources: Business Standard, Insights on India

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