

Manmohan Singh's Visit to Saudi Arabia

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Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh embarked on a three-day visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from February 27 to March 1, 2010 at the invitation of King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz. He was accompanied by Ministers for Health and Family Welfare, Petroleum and Natural Gas, Commerce and Industry as well as the Minister of State for External Affairs along with a number of other senior officials. This visit came four years after the landmark visit of King Abdullah who had been the Chief Guest at India's Republic Day in 2006.

Remarking on the 'special significance' of his visit and possible collaboration with Saudi Arabia, the Prime Minister noted that "there is great scope for opening new frontiers of cooperation in the areas of security, defence, science and technology, space, human resources development and knowledge-based industries."¹ He also emphasised the vital importance of the Gulf region for India's security and prosperity.

In a rare honour bestowed on the visiting dignitaries, an unprecedented welcome was accorded to Mr. Manmohan Singh. King Abdullah, who by virtue of being the custodian of the two Holy Mosques holds a pivotal position in the Islamic world himself received the Prime Minister and participated in the entire welcome ceremony. King Abdullah's brother and Second Deputy Premier and Defence Minister, Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz and the entire Saudi Cabinet was also present to receive him at the airport. Mr. Singh was accorded a grand reception at the imposing Al-Rawadah Palace. This visit, the first by an Indian premier in 28 years, dominated headlines in the Kingdom's newspapers which described it as 'historic'.

The last Indian Prime Minister to have visited Saudi Arabia, a country which accounts for 20% of Indian energy imports², was Indira Gandhi in 1982. It has generally been felt that her visit should have been followed up on. But India's preoccupation with developments in South Asia given how the situation was emerging in the post-Cold War era, served as a delaying factor. On the other hand, the Saudis had their own concerns in a volatile Middle East and also in the face of threats to the House of Sauds.

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Manmohan Singh's visit is hence seen as making up for lost time and bolstering the relationship.

This could be evidenced throughout the visit as the two sides signed ten pacts which included an Extradition Treaty, an agreement on the transfer of sentenced prisoners and an agreement on setting up a Joint Investment Fund. Agreements were also signed in the fields of research and education, information technology and science and technology as well as peaceful uses of outer space. Both the countries also pledged to increase their flow of investments to each other and enhancing bilateral trade. In the energy sector, both decided that a strategic energy partnership based on complementary principles and interdependence should be strengthened. Saudi Arabia also agreed to increase the supply of crude to India to 40 million tons a year - or about 770,000 barrels a day – up from 25.5 million tons a year.³ In addition, India invited Saudi Arabia to participate in its crude storage facilities. The visit culminated in the signing of the Riyadh Declaration in which both the countries decided to boost their relationship from one of cooperation to one of a strategic partnership covering security, economic, defence and political areas.

Besides holding a meeting with King Abdullah, the Prime Minister was also invited to address the Shura Council and the Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry. Speaking at the latter, Manmohan Singh encouraged Saudi Arabia to invest in various sectors in India, with special reference to construction, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, health, agriculture, energy, telecommunications, tourism and other service sectors that had strengthened the Indian economy. He said: "Our economy has grown at an average annual rate of over 9% in the last few years. Despite the global economic slowdown, we hope to achieve a growth rate of over 7% in the current financial year. We expect to get back to the growth level of about 9% per annum within two years. Our domestic saving rates are high, and can support investment rates of as high as 38% of our GDP. India is an economy with a huge market, and a young and expanding workforce."⁴ Institutional arrangements such as the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement, Bilateral Investment Protection Agreement as well as efforts for India-Gulf Cooperation Council Free Trade Agreement to facilitate bilateral trade and investment were also pointed out during the address. This invitation to invest in India coincides with Saudi Arabia's own search for avenues other than the US and the west at large to make investments.

With regard to Pakistan, the Prime Minister in his address to the Majlis-al-Shura or the Saudi Consultative Council insisted that India seeks a cooperative relationship with Pakistan for permanent peace as both

countries are bound together by a shared future. He assured the audience that India is willing to walk the 'extra mile'⁵ to open a new chapter in relations with Pakistan provided that it acts decisively against terrorism. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also disclosed that he had asked King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz to use his good offices to persuade Pakistan to stop "abetting terrorists" on Indian soil.⁶ India perhaps hoped that growing evidence of collaboration between al-Qaeda and Taliban may have sensitized the Saudi Kingdom to the repercussions of Islamabad's alleged policy of using terrorist groups to promote its strategic goals. Furthermore, the request was seen as India's growing confidence in its ties with the Arab kingdom which has historically been close to Pakistan.

In its effort to convince Saudi Arabia to refrain from any reconciliation with the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Prime Minister said: "The people of Afghanistan have suffered for too long and they deserve an atmosphere of peace and the opportunity to pursue a life of dignity and hope." Mr. Singh asked the international community to support all sections of Afghan society that wish to work towards the emergence of Afghanistan as a modern, stable and sovereign nation and insisted that "no sanctuary should be given to those who promote terror, violence or instability in the country."⁷

A passage in the Riyadh Declaration which said that the two leaders "expressed their full support for the efforts aimed at helping Afghanistan to develop its infrastructure and achieve social and economic development"⁸ was also seen as Saudi endorsement of Indian presence in Afghanistan. The Declaration also backed the Afghan Constitution – a document that the Taliban do not recognise.

With regard to the Middle East crisis, both leaders expressed hope that the peace process would be resumed in accordance with UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and the Arab Peace Plan. This would help lead to the establishment of a "sovereign, independent, united and viable Palestine State in accordance with the two-state solution."⁹ They also noted that continued building of settlements by Israel is a stumbling block for the peace process and Manmohan Singh made it clear that India's relations with Israel would not come at the expense of India's ties with Palestine. In a clear reference to Israel and Iran, he also stressed that regional and international efforts must focus on making the Middle East and Gulf regions free from all nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction.

These comments however, were not taken well at home and have been criticised for not taking Israeli concerns into account. It is also being said that Saudi Arabia is following a dual policy as it has taken strong action

against Al-Qaeda but has done nothing to curb 'charities' which have been funding terrorist organisations in other countries. While India's relationship with the US came at the expense of Iran, there are concerns that its ties with Saudi Arabia would be at the expense of Israel which has been helping India in many fields, particularly defence and counter-terrorism.

Some media reports also suggest that after the US, Saudi Arabia is now trying to play a role in bringing India and Pakistan to the negotiating table. Manmohan Singh's visit has reportedly led to the understanding that Saudi Arabia can play an important role in defusing tensions between the two nuclear neighbours. This understanding was hinted at by the State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shashi Tharoor when he said that Saudi Arabia can be an interlocutor between India and Pakistan. However, this was not well received in India and Mr. Manmohan Singh had to clarify in Parliament that there has been no deviation in Indian policy since Saudi Arabia has only been requested to persuade Pakistan to give up its policies of "entertaining terrorism."

It is interesting to note that All Parties Hurriyat Conference Chairman Mirwaiz Umar Farooq had also visited Saudi Arabia prior to the Indian Prime Minister and had welcomed any possibility of Saudi Arabia playing a role in the resolution of the Kashmir issue. Following Manmohan Singh's visit, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi was also invited to visit the Kingdom by Saudi Foreign Minister Saud-al-Faisal. The invitation was extended to take Pakistan into confidence regarding the cooperation sought by India to normalise its relations with Pakistan. Mr. Qureshi was assured by the Saudi Foreign Minister that ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are deep-rooted and both the countries are bound by religion, history and culture. He also stated that the Kingdom's relationship with India could never come at the cost of its relationship with Pakistan. It was also agreed that both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan would consult each other on issues concerning the situation in Afghanistan.¹⁰

In the aftermath of the London Conference, the prospect of reconciliation with the Taliban in Afghanistan has undoubtedly made India feel concerned. In this backdrop, India has stepped up its efforts to make a common cause with important stakeholders. Whether it is Saudi Arabia's tensions with Al-Qaeda, Chinese concerns of militancy in the Xinjiang province or Russia's disapproval of the notion of 'good' and 'bad' Taliban, India is ensuring that the right issues are brought to the surface. However, it has to be kept in mind that the Taliban movement is an indigenous one and peace in Afghanistan would remain a dream without taking them on board – something that the London Conference clarified. As far as the

phenomenon of terrorism is concerned, the only solution remains the resolution of all outstanding issues and addressing the grievances of people, without which the relevant land becomes a breeding ground for extremists.

Notes & References

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- ¹ "PM embarks on visit to Saudi Arabia", *Times of India*, February 27, 2010.
 - ² "PM's Saudi visit attempt to make up for lost time", *Times of India*, February 28, 2010 .
 - ³ "Saudi Arabia to nearly double oil supply to India", *Arabain Business.com*, March 1, 2010, at <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/582569-saud-arabia-to-nearly-double-oil-supply-to-india>
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 - ⁵ "India ready to walk extra mile if Pak acts against terror: PM", *Times of India*, March 2, 2010.
 - ⁶ "Persuade Pakistan to stop terrorism, PM urges Saudi", *Times of India*, March 2, 2010.
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 - ⁸ "Saudi Arabia 'OK' with India's Afghan presence", *Times of India*, March 4, 2010.
 - ⁹ "Riyadh Declaration: A New Era of Strategic Partnership", *Ministry of External Affairs, India*, at <http://meaindia.nic.in/>
 - ¹⁰ "Qureshi, Saud discuss bilateral relations", *Daily Times*, April 4, 2010.