

## MODI'S TRIP TO UAE: IMPLICATIONS ON PAKISTAN

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi travelled to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) from February 13-14, 2024, on an official visit.<sup>1</sup> This was his seventh visit to the UAE since taking office in 2014. The latest visit ahead of the Lok Sabha elections in India appears to be aimed at galvanising the support of approximately 3.5 million Indian diaspora in the UAE through the inauguration of the first Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi, which is the largest in the region. The visit's agenda was to directly engage, support and energize the BJP's vote bank from the region by further deepening and showcasing the strategic economic cooperation between New Delhi and Abu Dhabi.

### Flow of Finances and Information Gathering

The nature of the agreements signed during PM Modi's visit to UAE appeared to strengthen the trust and ties between the Indian community in UAE and their country of origin. The majority of the agreements inked during the visit were designed to facilitate the flow of finances and information-gathering between India and its nationals living in UAE. This included: the Bilateral Investment Treaty; MoU on Cooperation in Digital Infrastructure Projects; Agreement on inter-linking of the instant payment platforms - UPI (India) and AANI (UAE); and the Agreement on inter-linking domestic debit/credit cards - RuPay (India) with JAYWAN (UAE). With the ease of transfer of funds, investments and business opportunities, popular support for PM Modi in the UAE is expected to

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of External Affairs India, "Prime Minister's departure statement ahead of his visit to UAE and Qatar" press release, February 13, 2024, [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37619/Prime\\_Ministers\\_departure\\_statement\\_ahead\\_of\\_his\\_visit\\_to\\_UAE\\_and\\_Qatar](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37619/Prime_Ministers_departure_statement_ahead_of_his_visit_to_UAE_and_Qatar)

grow. However, with an extension of such services overseas, India would also be able to gather data and information from the UAE, which could compromise UAE's financial services and information. For the flow of such services, measures for regional connectivity were also agreed upon in the UAE.

### **Regional Connectivity from Ports, Trade Routes to Warehouses**

Agreements were also concluded between New Delhi and Abu Dhabi to advance regional economic connectivity. Ahead of the visit, Rail India Technical and Economic Service Limited and the Gujarat Maritime Board signed agreements with Abu Dhabi Ports Company, the exclusive developer and regulator of ports and related infrastructure in Abu Dhabi. This would allow the development of similar port infrastructure at both ends of the trade route. The Inter-governmental Framework Agreement between the UAE and India concerning Cooperation for the Empowerment and Operation of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor also saw some initial development to foster economic connectivity. There appears to be a chain of economic initiatives that PM Modi has undertaken during his visit to the UAE. From port development, to route development, to developing warehouses in the UAE.

During the visit, PM Modi inaugurated the 'Bharat Mart' at the Jebel Ali Free Zone. 'Bharat Mart' is expected to be a platform for all Indian exporters of small, micro and medium sectors to showcase their products under one roof by 2025. 'Bharat Mart' is intended to rival the Chinese warehouse shopping centre called 'Dragon Mart.'<sup>2</sup> The thrust of PM Modi's words and actions in the UAE was focused on ensuring that the Indian nationals in the UAE chose him in the upcoming elections for the sake of India's future. However, these mega projects would take a decade before reaching an operational capacity. Nevertheless, these initiatives would play an important role in shaping a favourable environment for his re-election campaign. PM Modi, during this time in UAE, not only signed agreements for the Indian community in UAE but also engaged with the Indian diaspora.

### **Engagements for the Future of India**

At the Zayed Sports City stadium in Abu Dhabi, PM Modi engaged with about 40,000 audiences including Indians and Emiratis.<sup>3</sup> In his address, he placed a strong emphasis on phrases in his native language to convey his ideas for the future of India once re-elected. Such as '*Viksit Bharat 2047*,' which is the BJP's comprehensive vision plan to transform India into a developed country by 2047

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<sup>2</sup> "Bharat Mart: All About India's Mega Project In Middle East," NDTV, February 15, 2024 <https://www.ndtv.com/feature/bharat-mart-all-you-need-to-know-about-indias-mega-project-in-middle-east-5054510>

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of External Affairs India, "Prime Minister's interaction at the Indian Community Event - AHLAN MODI in UAE" press release, February 13, 2024, [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37622/Prime\\_Ministers\\_interaction\\_at\\_the\\_Indian\\_Community\\_Event\\_\\_AHLAN\\_MODI\\_in\\_UAE](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37622/Prime_Ministers_interaction_at_the_Indian_Community_Event__AHLAN_MODI_in_UAE)

and '*Vishwabandhu*' which implies that India is a friend and a well-wisher of the whole world. Such phrases were at the core of his message to strengthen his direct connection with the Indian community to impact his electoral campaign positively. He particularly engaged with the youth (the future of India) at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi (IIT-D) Abu Dhabi campus.<sup>4</sup> Engaging with the expats and the youth was also extended to the religious and spiritual realm with a view to mobilizing their support for the BJP's electoral campaign among the diaspora in UAE.

### Religious (In)tolerance

Over the years, the BJP government has nearly perfected its temple politics, which remained the most dominant theme during PM Modi's visit. PM Modi inaugurated the first and largest Hindu temple *Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha* (BAPS) in Abu Dhabi.<sup>5</sup> The opening of a Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi was to bond with the Indians in UAE religiously view an eye on the next Lok Sabha elections in India. This inauguration came within three weeks after PM Modi had inaugurated a Hindu temple *Ram Mandir* in Ayodhya built on the land of the centuries-old Babri masjid, demolished by a BJP-led Hindutva mob. At home, the inauguration of the *Ram Mandir* in the election year is clearly a calculated move to secure the votes of the majority Hindu voters. Such tactics and the temple politics were now extended to the UAE.

Furthermore, the inauguration of Hindu temple in a Muslim-majority country amid the war between Israel and Hamas showed religious tolerance of the Muslim country, i.e., UAE. On the contrary, PM Modi's government has been actively demolishing religious places of Muslims and Christians to build Hindu temples in India. The recent opening of Hindu temples at home and in Abu Dhabi would further encourage and energise the BJP Hindu nationalist groups and sympathizers to continue to subject Muslims and other minorities in India to various types of violence and oppression.

### Impact on UAE

The UAE has already experienced Hindu nationalist fervour during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic when maligning Islam and Muslims in India for spreading COVID-19 had caused serious concerns in many GCC countries including, the UAE. The Kuwaiti and Emirati governments and Arab intelligentsia condemned this culture of hate and bigotry against Muslims and Islam. The verbal condemnation was followed by actions against those Indians who were using social media outlets

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<sup>4</sup> Ministry of External Affairs India, "Prime Minister interacts with first batch of students from IIT Delhi- Abu Dhabi Campus" press release, February 13, 2024, [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37621/Prime\\_Minister\\_interacts\\_with\\_first\\_batch\\_of\\_students\\_from\\_IIT\\_Delhi\\_Abu\\_Dhabi\\_Campus](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37621/Prime_Minister_interacts_with_first_batch_of_students_from_IIT_Delhi_Abu_Dhabi_Campus)

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of External Affairs India, "Prime Minister's departure statement ahead of his visit to UAE and Qatar" press release.

(Facebook & Twitter) for the purveyance of hate speech. Over a dozen Indian expatriates were deported, while many had received notices to refrain from posting against any community, religion, caste and creed. This shows that the aspects of BJP's electoral politics engaging in the UAE to galvanise the Hindu nationalists could possibly impact the security and safety of the UAE.

### **Implications for Pakistan**

PM Modi's visit to the UAE, particularly the inauguration of the Hindu temple, is to show Pakistan that the UAE is becoming more tolerant of India, Modi and Hinduism as they have accepted Israel after the Abraham Accords 2020. The UAE's approach in the emerging world order is driven by a sense of pragmatism and complex interdependence. PM Modi's inroads into the free trade zones demand Pakistan extend its CPEC-related Special Economic Zones (SEZs) to UAE in order to facilitate the Pakistani business community there and open further economic opportunities for trilateral cooperation between the UAE, Pakistan and China. China, as Pakistan's partner in CPEC, is already a strong economic competitor against India in the UAE. This provides Pakistan leverage and an advantage as compared to India which is yet to develop its export centres in free trade zones.

Observers believe that PM Modi is likely to score yet another victory in the upcoming elections in India. During his next tenure, it is likely that India will even more actively engage with Muslim governments such as the UAE as well as its diaspora in the region. This might elevated India's role in the UAE; however, it may not directly impact Pakistan as both Islamabad and Abu Dhabi share historically strong foundations of multidimensional relations including economic, business, investment, defence, cultural, religious, diplomatic, energy and especially mutually beneficial people-centric ties in the form of large chunk of UAE's workforce. However, as the changing geopolitical environment has inflated the role of middle powers, Pakistan would need to proactively engage with the UAE regardless of the India factor. UAE, being a new member of BRICS, a grouping that Pakistan is eyeing, and IMEC, offers a valuable example of how to tread carefully through bloc politics in the era of great power contestation. Furthermore, Pakistan's geo-economics framework with UAE's Vision 2030 could open opportunities for deep, lasting and growing cooperation. Pakistan and UAE ties have explored great depths, nevertheless, trustworthy and reliable relations can be taken to further horizons with a visionary approach and growing demands of the future.

### **Conclusion**

PM Modi's visit to the UAE and his engagements to put India on the path of development make him the key person for the continuation of such a trajectory. This would likely make the people in India and abroad believe in the necessity for his re-election. The initiatives such as the economic

interconnectedness in terms of the flow of finances, trade routes and goods for the warehouses further put Mr. Modi at the forefront as the provider of economic opportunities for the Indian diaspora in the UAE. This has helped him make a stronger connection with the Indian community in the UAE. However, what remained the most prominent aspect of PM Modi's visit to the UAE was temple politics, which has helped him strengthen his electoral campaign in India and abroad. The inauguration of a Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi after inaugurating a Hindu temple over the land of demolished centuries-old mosque in Ayodhya depicts the distinct drift in PM Modi's India and his mistreatment of Muslims and minorities at home. This beacons the need for the international community to recognise the disturbing trends in India and refresh its understanding of PM Modi, his politics, and the political exclusiveness of the BJP that only services Hindu nationalists at home and abroad.