



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

# How long could India remain neutral regarding the Middle East crisis?



The escalation of the crisis in the Middle East happened at a critical time for India, whose government has been holding the middle ground regarding the conflict in its neighbourhood and a region of great economic significance.

Close to a billion Indians **start voting** today for the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament, and after 7 phases over the next 45 days, the results will be known on June 4.

PM Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition has an unassailable lead and every chance of winning another term.

Iran's massive air attack on Israel coincided with the very end of the campaign, so Modi's government's very balanced and neutral position on the matter was partly a consequence of the sensitive moment before the elections.

Throughout his term, Prime Minister Modi has shown that Indians are very conscious of global affairs, particularly their nation's increasingly influential position on the global stage. As a result, the escalation of the Middle Eastern situation became a major domestic issue.

"The BJP's rule has infused diplomacy with a sense of national purpose and transformed it into one of the key dimensions on which citizens evaluate their government", **said Rohan Mukherjee**, professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

## Strong economic ties with both conflicting parties

However, India has much deeper reasons for sticking firmly to a neutral position on the Iran-Israel conflict. Even though Iran's direct attack on Israel was unprecedented in the recent history of the region, in principle, India seeks to stabilise the situation and refrain from conflict.

Both Iran and Israel are of immense importance to India's economic interests, and New Delhi has had a long and close diplomatic history with both countries.

India has large investments in Israel. Its company, for example, is a co-owner and developer of the port of Haifa, one of the busiest in the region. Large businesses are conducted in the sphere of new technologies, the semiconductor industry, and the pharmaceutical sector.

On the other hand, Iran is one of the largest exporters of oil to India but also the leading market for Indian exports of rice, tea, sugar, as well as chemical and pharmaceutical products.

## The Indian government directly links economic aspect with its policy towards the region after Iran's attack on Israel

Even with the significant economic interests that connect India with both conflicting states, it would still be naive to assume that they alone determine the position of a large state with strong regional and global ambitions, such as India.

However, the Indian government directly links this aspect with its policy towards the region after Iran's attack on Israel.

"Policy interventions will only come after we understand the issues traders are facing. Based on that exercise, whatever is needed definitely government will address that", said Sunil Barthwal, India's Trade Secretary.

## A test for the new government

Such an extremely pragmatic attitude of the government towards the Iran-Israel conflict is definitely sincere and reflects the actual position of the Indian government, but it is also the result of the pre-election context in which it was given.

Following the elections and the almost-definite new victory of PM Modi and his coalition, the government in New Delhi will be put to the test and pushed to clarify its position on the Middle East crisis.

First, this will require its internal ambitions to play a far larger role not only in Asia but also globally.

Indian economic and political interests have been threatened by the escalation that started on October 7 and Hamas's terrorist attacks on Israel. At that moment, PM Modi gave strong and open support to Israel, thereby pulling some of the global support to Israel's side.

The later overspill of the conflict to the broader region, caused by the actions of pro-Iranian groups, primarily the Houthis in the Red Sea region, threatened India's interests even more.

### **It has been difficult for India to maintain its impartial position in the aftermath of the Iranian attack on Israel**

The impact on oil prices, difficult navigation through frequent corridors towards the Mediterranean, particularly the safety of tens of thousands of Indians working in the Middle East are factors that make it difficult for India to be indifferent to the overall crisis.

It has been difficult for India to maintain its impartial position in the aftermath of the Iranian attack on Israel.

It will be even more difficult after the Israeli military response to an Iranian attack when all of India's important Arab partners in the region will be reluctant to support Israel.

## **Is India distancing itself from Iran?**

On the other hand, New Delhi could not expect to maintain its increasing role in the

regional and global frameworks if it continues to act as a bystander, insisting on bothsidesism.

India and its future government (with renewed legitimacy) will have a chance to demonstrate leadership in the regional framework, but with the condition of distancing themselves from Iran.



*It will be difficult for New Delhi to maintain its role in the BRICS alliance, where it is a partner with Russia and recently admitted Iran as the generators of the 2 biggest current global crises*

Iran's role in destabilising the Middle East is crucial, from the launch of Hamas attacks on Israel through the constant actions of Hezbollah, and particularly from the beginning of Houthi attacks on merchant ships and the blockade of the corridor through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal.

Iran's attack on Israel last week was the point at which India's policy towards the region needed to get a definition, which it does not have now.

It will be difficult for New Delhi to maintain its role in the BRICS alliance, where it is a partner with Russia and recently admitted Iran as the generators of the 2 biggest current global crises.

India's increasing influence is not compatible with its current dual neutrality towards the crises in Ukraine and the Middle East. In particular, it is not compatible with its ambitions to turn its economic and security performance into leadership in the Indo-Pacific, the broader Middle Eastern region, and globally.