

## India's External Affairs Minister Embarks on Diplomatic Mission to Strengthen Ties with Iran

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### Introduction

As tensions continue to escalate into the West Asia region, India's External Affairs Minister (EAM), Dr Jaishankar, departed for Iran for a two-day official visit from 14 to 15 Jan. As per the itinerary, Dr Jaishankar met his Iranian counterpart and President Raisi to discuss bilateral, regional, and global issues. The visit testifies engagement between India and Iran, even as the Iranian government faces backlash from Israel, United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). It has, thus, raised questions for the timing and purpose of the visit.

### An Analysis of Indo-Iran Relations

India and Iran share robust cultural and historical ties, fostering goodwill through enhanced diplomatic relations that promote cultural exchanges, tourism, and interpersonal connections. Iran's significant role as a provider of crude oil ensures India's energy security, while India significantly contributes to Iran's economic stability. The strategic location of Iran makes it crucial for India, notably exemplified by the Chabahar Port, offering a strategic gateway for trade and access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan. This close relationship facilitates expanded bilateral trade and economic collaboration, encompassing joint ventures, investments, and partnerships in infrastructure, agriculture, and technology. Collaboration with Iran assists India in addressing regional security concerns, including counterterrorism, and aligning with India's strategic goals of promoting stability. Positive relations and robust diplomatic ties provide valuable support on regional and international stages, leveraging India's influence.

### The visit

This was the first Minister-level visit to Iran from India since the beginning of the Gaza crisis on 07 Oct, and since Iran joined the BRICS grouping on 01 Jan. Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra visited Tehran on 26 Nov to participate in the Foreign Office Consultation. Iran recently included India in the list of countries whose citizens will not require a visa to travel to Iran.<sup>[1]</sup> India's also announced its decision to include Farsi as one of the nine classical languages in the country's New Education Policy. India's engagement with Iran has remained on track despite continuous criticism of Tehran by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, who have accused Iran of activating proxies across West Asia that are posing a tough challenge to Israel and the US.<sup>[2]</sup>

The EAM during the visit expressed his pleasure at being back in Tehran. His constructive exchange of views with Dr Amir-Abdollahian, the foreign minister of Iran covered various aspects of bilateral engagement and discussions on global and regional issues. The regularity of high-level interactions between the two countries was brought out indicating the strong foundation provided by the leadership of respective countries who gave guidance and fostered opportunities for substantive cooperation. The discussions encompassed political, economic, and cultural aspects, with a focus on enhancing people-to-people contacts. Regional connectivity, particularly through the International North South Transport Corridor, and India's involvement in the Chabahar port project were key topics. India reiterated its commitment to

the Chabahar project and proposed a long-term roadmap. Accordingly, India and Iran signed an agreement on the further development of the Port.[3]

Perspectives on regional and global issues were exchanged including the recent events in West Asia. The Indian EAM reiterated India's unwavering stance against terrorism and emphasized the need to avoid civilian casualties in conflict situations. The humanitarian crisis in Gaza was a focus and on the issue of Palestine, the EAM echoed India's support for a two-state solution. The maritime security concerns in the Indian Ocean, with recent threats to commercial traffic by Houthi rebels, was also highlighted, impacting India's energy and economic interests. According to reports, Jaishankar is said to have delivered a message from the U.S. to Iran, urging Tehran to utilise its influence in aiding in halting Yemeni attacks on Israeli vessels.[4] Throughout the discussions with Jaishankar, Iranian officials appear to have reiterated their position on the events in the Red Sea.[5] The EAM acknowledged Iran's recent membership in BRICS and their collaboration in multilateral organizations, expressing confidence that the exchanges would boost bilateral cooperation and mutual understanding of regional and global issues. During the meeting the EAM said that both India and Iran were concerned about the recent developments in West Asia and emphasised the need to prevent further escalation of violence and hostilities.[6]

Further the Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian warned the US and the UK 'to stop the war' against the Houthis during a press conference with his Indian counterpart in Tehran on January 15. He reiterated the false Houthi narrative that the Houthis only target Israeli ships. He added that the Houthis will stop their anti-shipping attack campaign when the Israel-Hamas war ends.[7] To sum up, though on a friendly note both sides expressed their points of view without hesitation.

The EAM expressed his condolences to President Ebrahim Raisi on behalf of India regarding a recent terrorist attack in Kerman in which 100 people were killed.[8] The President spelt out his expectations from India specifically on two issues, Israel's war in Gaza and India's investments in Iran. Raisi thinks that India can play a greater role. He wants India to speak to Israel, to use its influence, and to force them to end the bombings in Gaza. To quote a statement released by the President's office "It is important for India to play a role in ending the bombings, lifting the blockade of this region and realizing the rights of the Palestinian people". President Raisi is not happy with the progress. He wants India to speed up the ports development and to compensate for the delays.[9] He did not say what kind of compensation, though, but his choice of words conveys impatience. The President described the crimes committed by the Zionist regime in Gaza as clear examples of war crimes and crimes against humanity and clarified, that stopping the attacks on Gaza, punishing the Zionist regime and fulfilling the rights of the Palestinian people is the only way to return stability and security to the region, and it is important for India to play a role in ending the bombings, lifting the blockade of this region and realising the rights of the Palestinian people.[10]

The EAM also held a meeting with the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, who is expected to visit India in a few days.[11]

India's decision to conclude the visit at a time when the West Asia crisis is looming large and when the Houthis are disrupting trade is significant. The world sees Iran as providing support to the Hamas and the Houthis and, hence, the visit did raise questions. Iran has been accused by several countries, including the US and its allies, of providing support to both groups in the form of political, financial, and military assistance. Tehran has denied directly arming these groups

but acknowledges providing moral and political support,<sup>[12]</sup> which is debatable. Iran does not command or control the Houthis, but it is possible that they share intelligence with them. US Navy SEALs seized Iranian-made missile parts and other weaponry from a ship bound for Yemen's Houthi rebels in a raid last week.<sup>[13]</sup> This clearly is contrary to what Iran claims.

Hence, the visit by the India EAM signals India's stance and the ability to still engage with Iran despite the world's opinion, which does not necessarily indicate alignment with or endorsement of Iran's alleged activities. The former firmly brought out the situation and also flagged India's stance. The message of 'no compromise' was clear. India wanted Iran to resolve the situation to which the Iranians did not seem to respond. The engagement with Iran is to maintain diplomatic and economic ties for various reasons, including geopolitical interests, economic cooperation, and regional stability. India's logic for being with Iran might be driven by factors such as energy partnerships, connectivity, economic opportunities, and strategic considerations. Possibly, India follows a policy of diversifying its diplomatic relations to avoid over-dependence on any single country. Connecting with Iran provides India with additional diplomatic options and flexibility in its foreign policy. It reflects a pragmatic approach to international relations, considering a variety of factors to meet its strategic and economic interests while navigating complex geopolitical dynamics. It needs to be seen that despite the blame game on Iran for its support to the Hamas and the Houthis, the Indian EAM flagged both issues during his meetings in Iran, displaying a diplomatic courage of the highest order. This visit was in the backdrop of US' and UK's attacks on the Houthis. India and Iran, have a lot to achieve together. There is a need to look forward toward areas of convergence, where both countries have a mutual understanding of each other's common interests and further work together to achieve the same. The assertive diplomacy being practiced by India, emphasising on standing by its neighbours and friends and focusing solely on fulfilling its national interests, is a refreshing change.<sup>[14]</sup> It is certain that both nations stand to gain from each other.

While the EAM was still in Tehran, Iran launched missiles at Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan targeting Mossad, ISIS, and Jaish-al-Adl. The US condemned these actions. Iran justified the missile strikes as a response to terrorist groups violating its territory. Additionally, the Houthis attacked a US-owned vessel, showing their determination until Israel ceases the conflict. In response to attacks on their hideouts by the USA and UK, the Houthis engaged a US destroyer with a missile but it was destroyed by a US fighter aircraft.

## **Conclusion**

The recent visit of Dr Jaishankar to Iran highlights the enduring strength of bilateral relations amid escalating tensions in West Asia. India's commitment to maintaining diplomatic and economic ties with Iran was evident during the visit, which covered political, economic, and cultural dimensions. Despite international concerns about Iran's alleged support for certain groups, India's engagement reflects a pragmatic approach to international relations. The visit signifies India's diplomatic courage and its dedication to safeguarding commercial interests in the Arabian Sea region, wherein the concerns created by the Houthis and Israel were firmly brought out.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>[1]</sup> Jaishankar to visit Iran in the backdrop of U.S.-U.K. attack on Yemen, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/eam-jaishankar-likely-to-travel-to-iran-on-january-15-amid-war-in-middle-east/article67737069.ece>

[2] Ibid.

[3] Joint Press Statement by EAM, Dr. S. Jaishankar with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran, [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37513/Joint+Press+Statement+by+EAM+Dr+S+Jaishankar+with+Minister+of+Fore](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37513/Joint+Press+Statement+by+EAM+Dr+S+Jaishankar+with+Minister+of+Foreign+Affairs+of+Iran)  
[ign+Affairs+of+Iran](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37513/Joint+Press+Statement+by+EAM+Dr+S+Jaishankar+with+Minister+of+Foreign+Affairs+of+Iran)

[4] Tehran Times, 16 January,  
<https://media.mehrnews.com/d/2024/01/15/0/4818830.pdf?ts=1705341929482>

[5] Ibid.

[6] Hindustan Times 16 January 2023.

[7] Iran Update, January 16, 2024, [https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/2024-01-16%20Iran%20Update%20PDF.docx\\_.pdf](https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/2024-01-16%20Iran%20Update%20PDF.docx_.pdf)

[8] Ibid.

[9] Palki Sharma, First Post, Jan 17 2023,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7466TGnoaLw&t=1206s>

[10] EAM S Jaishankar, Iran President Raisi discuss pacing up Iran-India agreements, compensating for delays, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/eam-s-jaishankar-iran-president-raisi-discuss-pacing-up-iran-india-agreements-compensating-for-delays/articleshow/106885461.cms?from=mdr>

[11] Hindustan Times 16 January 2023.

[12] US military seizes Iranian missile parts bound for Houthi rebels in raid where 2 SEALs went missing, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/us-military-seizes-iranian-missile-parts-bound-for-houthi-rebels-in-raid-where-2-seals-went-missing/articleshow/106905427.cms?from=mdr>

[13] Ibid.

[14] Resetting India-Iran Relations | 21 Jun 2022,  
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/eam-jaishankar-likely-to-travel-to-iran-on-january-15-amid-war-in-middle-east/article67737069.ece>

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**Article uploaded on 18-01-2024**

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