

Beat: Politics

FIRST MINISTERIAL MEETING OF ARAB-INDIA COOPERATION FORUM

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USPA NEWS - In Manama (BAHRAIN), on January 24, 2016, was given Remarks by Indian External Affairs Minister at the First Ministerial Meeting of Arab-India Cooperation Forum :

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H.E. Shaikh Khalid Bin Ahmad Mohammad Al Khalifa, Foreign Minister of Kingdom of Bahrain,
H.E. Dr. Nabil El Araby, Secretary General of the League of Arab States,
Fellow Foreign Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here in Manama for the First Ministerial Meeting of the Arab-India Cooperation Forum. First of all, I wish to express my gratitude to our host H.E. Shaikh Khalid Bin Ahmad Mohammad Al Khalifa, Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Bahrain, for the excellent arrangements made for this meeting and the gracious hospitality extended to me and the members of my delegation. I also wish to thank my fellow Foreign Ministers and the League of Arab States for joining me in taking our relations to a new high.

Our meeting here today represents a real turning point in our ties with the Arab world. Today we seek to give new shape, direction and energy to our centuries old relations. Today we have the opportunity of translating the vision of India-Arab solidarity into concrete avenues of cooperation.

Excellencies,

From time immemorial, our two civilizations have been at the forefront of human progress. From the Nile Valley to Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, the cradles of our common humanity sprung forth at the same time.

And over the year our lands have been witness to momentous transformations that have shaped the world today. And our seas have given passage to millennia of contacts - our traders, monks and scholars have passed each other light when much of the rest of the world was in darkness.

So, when we gather today across this table we pay homage to our ancestors, and to their fortitude and courage. The seasonal winds of the Arabian sea and the winding caravans of the desert and the plain have been witness to the riches that we shared. Here on the coast of the Gulf, in Bahrain, much before our nations were formed, your merchants returned with the spices and ornaments of the East, and our traders sought new markets and friendships.

And so, from the rock edicts of Emperor Ashoka found in present day Sharjah, to Indian artifacts on the Red Sea, to forgotten Arab and Indian traders who sailed to lands they had never seen before, not knowing whether they would ever return, the centuries of our interaction have instilled within us a profound respect for each other.

And we see this in our art and our architecture, our music and our food, in the literature that we write and the poetry that we recite. We find this all around us, in the pillared halls of the Diwan-e-Am in the Red Fort in Delhi, to the lyrical strains of the classical Hindustani Gharanas, to the tehzeeb or etiquette of our modes of interaction.

So I am not surprised when I know that the words for crop seasons in India ““ kharif and rabi ““ are derived from Arabic roots; or that the lotus is the sacred symbol of regeneration in India and Egypt; or that many distinguished families in the Arab world bear the title al-

Hindi, or that Hind itself is a common name amongst women in the Arab world.

In the past millennium, it has been our intertwined histories that have pushed forward the boundaries of science and technology, of knowledge and human progress.

The early Islamic traveller Alberuni wrote of Indian Arab interactions and our mutual philosophical journeys, and it was the Moroccan explorer Ibn Battuta who rose to high stature in the Courts of Delhi, even when the Caliphate of Baghdad, sponsored the translation of Indian works in subjects ranging from medicine to mathematics, agriculture and astronomy. So today is an occasion for us to celebrate our ancient bonds and deepen our modern partnership.

Fellow Foreign Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Ever since our Government assumed office in May 2014, we have paid special attention to our ties with the Arab world. We have also had extensive engagements, with various high level visits. In fact, our very first incoming visitor was the Foreign Minister of Oman in June 2014. And I started 2016 with a visit to Palestine, which was a follow up to the very successful visit of our President to Palestine in October 2015. Prime Minister Modi made a path-breaking visit to the UAE in August 2015. This was the first visit of an Indian Prime Minister to UAE after 34 years.

We received the Emir of Qatar in March last year. Apart from Palestine, I have also made bilateral visits to Oman, Bahrain, UAE and Egypt. I have also benefited immensely from the two deliberations we held with the Foreign Ministers of GCC countries on the sidelines of the UNGA. We had the great honour of receiving Arab leaders from Algeria, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia during the 3rd India Africa Forum Summit held in New Delhi three months ago. And today's meeting reflects India's continued strategic engagement with the Arab world.

Just as today marks a turning point for India-Arab relations, we are also at a major turning point in history when the forces of terrorism and violent extremism are seeking to destabilise societies and inflict incalculable damage to our cities, our people and our very social fabric. For so long, the ties that bind India and the Arab world have provided prosperity, enhanced wisdom and enriched our civilizations. It is therefore imperative more than ever before that we stand together and recognize the danger to our world for what it is.

Many centuries ago, a young Indian ruler, in his quest for glory, laid waste to all the lands that he saw in pursuit of his Empire. On the battlefields of Kalinga, in Eastern India, after yet another victory, he witnessed the suffering of thousands of the dying and the maimed, and through it the futility of war, and was fundamentally transformed. The young Emperor Ashoka was to become one of India's most unique rulers, propagating non-violence, respect for all religions, the welfare of ordinary subjects, and the protection and care of animals.

And so it has been that from the days of Mahavira and Buddha, India has sought liberty ““ whether political, personal or spiritual ““ through the power of non-violence. It is the spirit that animated the Mahatma in his quest for independence, and it is this spirit that has preserved India's pluralistic ethos and democratic values despite numerous challenges.

As the spectre of terrorism and religious hatred raises its ugly head across the world, particularly in those cherished cities of history, it is time once again to reach back in time and redeem the essence of our civilizational spirit. We must pledge to halt the physical violence that has spread like a plague. But we must recognize that we cannot do so without equally addressing the violence in our minds, a poison that has been spread by terror groups, harnessing the power of modern technology and social media platforms to infect our youth ““ those ideologies and beliefs that regard one's own brother as a stranger, one's own mother as accursed.

We should not underestimate the power of this illusion, clothed in a false interpretation of faith.

Equally, we must delink religion from terror. The only distinction is between those who believe in humanity and those who do not. Terrorists use religion, but inflict harm on people of all faiths. Those who believe that silent sponsorship of such terrorist groups can bring rewards must realise that they have their own agenda; they are adept at using the benefactor more effectively than the sponsor has used them.

None of us can afford to ignore the dangers of radicalization and indoctrination. We do so at our own peril, and that is why I believe India's model of unity in diversity offers an example for the world. We in India have citizens who belong to every existing faith. Our

Constitution is committed to the fundamental principle of faith-equality: the equality of all faiths not just before the law but also in daily behaviour. In every corner of my country, the music of the azaan welcomes the dawn, followed by the chime of a Hanuman temple's bells, followed by the melody of the Guru Granth Sahib being recited by priests in a gurdwara, followed by the peal of church bells every Sunday.

This philosophy is not just a construct of our Constitution, adopted in 1950; it is the essence of our ancient belief that the world is family. Faith harmony is the message of the Holy Quran as well. I will quote only two verses: La ikra fi al deen [Let there be no compulsion in religion] and La qum deen o qum wa li ya deen [Your faith for you, and my faith for me].

We have seen repeatedly that terrorism does not respect national borders. It seeks to subvert societies through its pernicious doctrine of a clash of civilizations.

The only antidote to this violent philosophy is the path of peace, tolerance and harmony, a path that was illustrated centuries ago by Buddha and Mahavira and which was taken into the modern age by the Father of our nation Mahatma Gandhi. As he famously said, "an eye for an eye ends up making the whole world blind."

But not only do we need to condemn all acts of terrorism but we need to join hands regionally and globally to remove the scourge of terrorism completely. In this context, the passage of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism in the United Nations will remove a significant lacuna in the global community's fight against this menace.

We, who represent the stable and civilized world, must meet the challenge, or we risk destroying the most precious inheritance of our forefathers.

Excellencies,

Beyond facing the common challenge of terrorism, India-Arab ties now cover a whole host of sectors. We have substantial common interests in the fields of trade and investment, energy and security, culture and Diaspora. Today the Arab world is collectively India's largest trading partner with bilateral trade crossing US\$ 180 bn.

We source 60% of our oil and gas requirements from West Asia, making this region a pillar of our energy security. The Maghreb region is a major source of phosphates and other fertilizers which contributes significantly towards our food security. The new and emerging areas of our cooperation include agricultural research, dry land farming, irrigation and environmental protection. In all of these we would be happy to share our experience with our Arab partners.

Over the last six decades India has made rapid strides in economic development which has placed us at the forefront of the global revolution in information technology, pharmaceuticals, and cutting edge research in the areas of nanotechnology and biotechnology. We are proud of our institutes of excellence which have made India into a knowledge and talent hub. We have always been ready to share our expertise in human resource development with our fellow partners on the road to development. We are even ready to provide tailor made courses to LAS member countries under the Indian Technical & Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme and promote academic exchanges.

Similarly, we stand ready to partner all of you in areas such as Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), automobiles and Small and Medium Enterprises, biotechnology and space. At a time of global economic slowdown, India has emerged as a bright spot for the world economy. We are today the fastest growing major economy in the world. Our growth, I believe, offers significant opportunities for our LAS partners. The Sovereign Wealth Funds of Gulf countries can be profitably employed in India's burgeoning infrastructure sector. The next India Arab Partnership Conference in Oman this year can be a real game changer in terms of deepening our economic partnership.

Excellencies,

Beyond Government to Government interactions, the bedrock of our relationship is provided by people to people ties. Over 7 million Indians reside in this region and there are 700 flights a week between India and UAE alone! A vast number of people in the Arab world enjoy our films, listen to our music and relish our cuisine. I am confident that the 3rd India-Arab Cultural Festival to be held in India this year will further promote our cultural contacts and cooperation. We also look forward to closer engagement between our civil society and community organizations.

Excellencies,

India & the Arab world face common challenges and have similar opportunities in their quest for peace, prosperity and stability. Today, through the Manama Declaration and the Executive Program for 2016-17, we have taken an important step towards addressing those challenges & utilizing those opportunities.

The famous Egyptian poet Ahmed Shawky, a friend of the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, once remarked that the revolution of souls severs our chains, & that the revolution of minds removes mountains. Through the friendship of our civilizations, through the partnership of our nations, I am confident that we can move mountains in our common quest for a safer & more prosperous world.

Thank you.

Ruby BIRD
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