

Humanitarian Diplomacy as a Tool for India's Middle East Strategy

Hindistan'ın Orta Doğu Stratejisinde Bir Araç Olarak İnsani Diplomasi

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ABSTRACT

There is an undeniable connection between a state's foreign interests and its engagement in humanitarian action. Humanitarian diplomacy refers to the practices of governments and international organisations in the field of humanitarian aid. Humanitarian aid promotes diplomatic relations with recipient countries, enhancing the donor country's reputation. Recently, India has been increasingly playing a significant role in providing aid and support to the Middle Eastern countries. This research uses the process tracing method to explain India's humanitarian diplomacy efforts in the Middle East. Process tracing is employed to uncover India's practices and motives in humanitarian diplomacy in the Middle East. India's relief efforts in the Middle East include providing scholarships, healthcare services, and shelter for those affected by civil wars, conflicts, and disasters. Although one cannot rule out the moral side of these humanitarian efforts, India's increasing attention in responding to humanitarian crises in the region also has a strategic dimension. As the Middle East region is a critical energy and remittance source for India, India aims to protect its interests in the Middle East, especially after its regional rival, the People's Republic of China (PRC), increased its presence. However, there are impediments to India's humanitarian diplomacy endeavors in the region, such as persistent geopolitical tensions between the Middle Eastern countries and rising Indian nationalism, which alienates the Muslim population in the Middle East.

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ÖZ

Bir devletin dış ilişkileri ve insani yardım çalışmaları arasında inkar edilemez bir bağ vardır. İnsani diplomasi hükümetlerin ve uluslararası organizasyonların insani yardım işinde uygulamalarını ifade etmektedir. İnsani diplomasi sağlayıcı, ülkenin diplomatik saygınlığını artırıp alıcı ülkelerle olan diplomatik ilişkilerini geliştirmektedir. Son zamanlarda Hindistan Orta Doğu ülkelerine artan bir şekilde yardım ve destek sağlamaktadır. Bu çalışma Hindistan'ın Orta Doğu'daki insani diplomasi çabalarını süreç izleme metodunu kullanarak açıklamaktadır. Süreç izleme Hindistan'ın Orta Doğu'daki insani diplomasi faaliyetlerini ve motivasyonunu açığa çıkarmak için uygulanmıştır. Hindistan'ın Orta Doğu'daki yardım operasyonları iç savaşlar, çatışmalar ve felaketlerden etkilenenler için burs sağlama, sağlık hizmetleri ve barınmayı içermektedir. Bu insani yardımların ahlaki boyutu reddedilemezse de Hindistan'ın bölgedeki insani krizlere yaklaşımının stratejik boyutu da vardır. Orta Doğu Hindistan için önemli bir enerji ve havale kaynağı olduğundan dolayı, Hindistan Orta Doğu'daki çıkarlarını özellikle Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti'nin bölgedeki ağırlığını arttırmasından sonra korumak istemektedir. Fakat Hindistan'ın insani diplomasi çabalarına, Orta Doğu'daki ülkeler arasında uzun süredir devam eden jeopolitik gerilimler ve Orta Doğu'da Müslüman nüfusu açısından kabul edilemez olan artan Hindu milliyetçiliği gibi faktörler engel olmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hindistan, Orta Doğu, insani diplomasi, çatışma, çıkarlar

Introduction

The world is constantly experiencing humanitarian crises as a result of environmental disasters, earthquakes, and military conflicts. The Middle East is hosting the majority of these troubling scenes which lead to human tragedies. The Israel-Palestine conflict, the Syrian civil war, the war in Yemen, and most recently, the big earthquake in Türkiye generated migration, healthcare and shelter crises and disrupted services in these countries.

Although Western states and organisations previously took the lead in providing humanitarian assistance, regional actors have been replacing Western states and organisations. India is one of these regional actors that expanded its humanitarian aid to the affected areas. Indian foreign developmental assistance constituted an important part of Indian foreign policy within the South-South Cooperation Framework. However, the past two decades have witnessed substantial increases in Indian humanitarian assistance to respond to humanitarian crises (Shanbog & Kehlivan, 2022). In this study, the main questions raised are "What are India's humanitarian practices in the



Middle East? and “Why does India increase its humanitarian diplomacy in the Middle East?” Thus, this article demonstrates and analyses India’s humanitarian practices in the Middle East.

This paper views humanitarian diplomacy as a tool for countries to increase their strategic goals. Although humanitarian concerns cannot be separated from humanitarian diplomacy, humanitarian assistance’s political and diplomatic dimension cannot be neglected. To discover this connection, process tracing is a valuable methodology. It is a fundamental methodology in qualitative analysis. It is defined as: “the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analysed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator” (Collier, 2011, p. 823). Process tracing allows the reader to explore what causal mechanisms brought about a particular outcome. Thus, it provides a deeper understanding of one specific case study (Lamont, 2015, p. 156). This research focuses on the relationship between India’s interests and humanitarian diplomacy in the Middle East. It analyses India’s increasing humanitarian aid to the main crises, such as wars and natural disasters in the region. India engaged in humanitarian efforts ranging from providing healthcare to education services for those affected in the Middle East. India’s immediate response, named Operation Dost, to the earthquake disaster in Türkiye is a recent demonstration of India’s increasing humanitarian assistance in the region.

India’s humanitarian diplomacy in the Middle East is a way to increase its soft power and visibility in the region. Through humanitarian aid, India can gain the amity and backing of the countries in the region. This will help India strengthen its political and economic influence in the region. In the long run, humanitarian assistance would cement India’s attempts to prove itself as a worthy partner for the Middle Eastern countries.

Humanitarian Diplomacy

The concept of humanitarian diplomacy started to be used at the beginning of the 20th century. As the nations come closer and the relations between the states become interdependent by rapid contact, the welfare of all nations becomes dependent on the welfare of each nation. Thus, the concept of the family of nations gained significance (Straus et al., 1912, p. 45). The establishment of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863 was an important step in the spread of the use of the concept of humanitarian diplomacy. The ICRC defines humanitarian diplomacy as “persuading decision makers and opinion leaders to act, at all times, in the interests of vulnerable people, and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles” (n.d.). However, there is not a single definition of humanitarian diplomacy. Another conceptualisation of humanitarian diplomacy is that humanitarian diplomacy is pro-

protecting civilians in case of a political emergency by using international law (Whittall, 2009, p. 38). Regnier brings another definition to the concept:

humanitarian diplomacy refers to the policies and practices of national and international agencies active in humanitarian aid work. The term is used not only by humanitarian organisations but also by national co-operational agencies and ministers (foreign affairs, defence, development, civil protection) comprising humanitarian aid departments to respond to domestic or international emergencies (Regnier, 2011, p. 1212).

Humanitarian diplomacy focuses on providing humanitarian assistance and relief for those affected by humanitarian crises. It involves a wide range of activities at the international, national, and local levels. These activities are awareness campaigns, mobilising and coordinating resources, providing expertise and information, negotiating logistical, financial and legal mechanisms, and ensuring the safety of humanitarian officers (Şeyşane & Şeyşane, 2022, p. 158). Humanitarian diplomacy includes fundamentals such as neutrality and impartiality in that the activities are carried out according to the severity of need and without political agendas (Minear, 2007, p. 15).

However, humanitarian diplomacy includes a contradiction. Diplomacy refers to the representation of a polity to another polity. Humanitarianism is related to helping people in distress. Diplomacy is characterised by compromise and pragmatism, whereas humanitarianism is based on working for ideals (Lauri, 2018). Therefore, humanitarian objectives might not be in line with a state's national interests (Gong, 2021, p. 242). Uncovering this tension in studying humanitarian diplomacy is significant and timely.

Governments, civil society organisations, humanitarian organisations, and international organisations are practitioners of humanitarian diplomacy (Veuthey, 2012, p. 197). The increasing involvement of the states in humanitarian diplomacy since the end of the Cold War complicates humanitarian diplomacy. In an interconnected world, complex humanitarian problems invited states' interventions to avoid costly military and political actions. Furthermore, humanitarian interventions are being perceived as a part of counter-terrorism efforts. Humanitarian action is also considered a way of legitimising armed intervention. Thus, states devoted more resources to humanitarian action to deliver assistance. As a consequence, humanitarian diplomacy has become more politicised (Şeyşane & Şeyşane, 2022, p. 159). The increasing complexity of politicisation of humanitarian crises and the rising role of politics in shaping humanitarian responses also contributed to politicisation of humanitarian diplomacy (Parry & Bhat, 2023, p. 6107).

The different priorities and goals of humanitarian actors create different understandings of humanitarian diplomacy (Lauri, 2018). The states are divided over issues related to humanitarian actions, such as motives, actors, means, and consequences.



Although humanitarian practices are altruistic, states are driven by mixed factors to become involved in humanitarian practices (Gong, 2021, p. 242). Although humanitarian diplomacy is not a rival to conventional diplomacy, there is a risk that states might subordinate it to their political interests (Şeyşane & Şeyşane, 2022, p. 160).

Humanitarian diplomacy is a way to highlight public diplomacy. Humanitarian diplomacy provides a useful tool to build an altruistic international image considering the charitable nature of humanitarian action (Gong, 2021, p. 238). Humanitarianism and diplomacy have become status symbols in world politics. Especially for rising powers, it has been a policy of asserting legitimacy. It has also been used to promote a state's political and economic interests by creating opportunities to form new ties and consolidate existing ones. Humanitarian diplomacy is an important mechanism for promoting a state's identity and values (Altunısık, 2019, p. 3). Humanitarian diplomacy is, therefore, a substitute for political intervention. The heroism engaged in humanitarian practises garners media attention and public appreciation. Thus, states increasingly use it to advance their interests. Humanitarian aid has no independent and special status. These components are added to other state instruments to promote a state's political goals (Autesserre, 2002). In times of crisis, the global public is watching to observe which states step up and which ones are absent. Thus, it is a component of soft power (Leight, n.d.).

Humanitarian concerns certainly play a role in the implementation of humanitarian diplomacy. Humanitarian diplomacy serves two purposes simultaneously. States can depict themselves as caring and responsible members of the international community by providing humanitarian assistance to crisis-affected regions. This helps states amass soft power. Promoting its soft power, improving its stance, and building reputation diplomacy could be evaluated as a foreign policy strategy. Moreover, humanitarian diplomacy allows donor states to negotiate humanitarian aid to the groups, offering leverage in the recipient countries. Humanitarian diplomacy, therefore, combines humanitarian goals and states' interests.

Sources of Indian Humanitarian Diplomacy

India, as a rising power, increasingly implements humanitarian diplomacy to assert its legitimacy as a rising power and introduce Indian identity. The ancient texts of Buddhism and Hindu religion focus on a humanitarian approach. In Buddhism, Karunā, which can roughly be translated as compassion, is one of the Four Immeasurables. In Hinduism, in the Vedas, dāna means an act of hospitality towards those who are needy. In the Hindu epic Mahābhārata, compassion is mentioned as one of the main virtues. Charity is essential in maintaining cosmic order in Hinduism (Gulliot et al., 2022). This background influenced India's approach toward humanitarian diplomacy. India's views on humanitarian diplomacy have been shaped by its struggle for

independence and solidarity with other developing nations. Mahatma Gandhi stated, “I do want to think in terms of the whole world. My patriotism includes the good of mankind in general. Therefore, my service to India includes the service of humanity” (Ministry of External Affairs Government of India, n.d.). India’s humanitarian aid principle is founded on “dharma”, which means righteous path. The Dharma-based norms are based on humanity and humanitarian values, which have many rules about how to conduct conflict. According to Dharma, civilians have to be protected. These principles predate the foundation of modern India. Yet, they still guide it (Ministry of External Affairs Government of India, 2021). India gives significance to the initiatives in disaster management and disaster resistance by strengthening disaster relief infrastructure. The Indian policymakers set a target of becoming a first responder in the case of a disaster in the Indian sub-continent (Business Standard, 2019).

Humanitarian aid is listed as one of form of developmental support, which is an integral part of India’s foreign policy pillars (Ministry of External Affairs Government of India, 2022). While considering humanitarian diplomacy is important to increase its influence, India rejects some Western practices of humanitarian diplomacy, viewing these practices as interventionist. The role of the state is paramount in India’s humanitarian diplomacy. The Foreign Contribution Regulatory Act, adopted in 1976 and consolidated in 2010, allowed the state to monitor the activities of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations, making collaboration more difficult in humanitarian aid. NGOs or foundations need The Ministry of Home Affairs’ permission to receive foreign donations (Gulliot et al., 2022). In 2005, the Indian government created the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) to handle disasters. This agency is authorised to coordinate disaster management and resource mobilisation (The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), 2005). National Disaster Management Plan prepared in 2016 served the purpose of making India resilient to disaster. It also allows the government to direct humanitarian aid according to the ideology of Hindutva which refers to attempts to form a Hindu nation within the borders of India. This process gained traction especially after Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power. State sovereignty and Hindu nationalism became the pillars of India’s humanitarian diplomacy (Gulliot et al., 2022). India also gives significance to the initiatives in disaster management and disaster resistance by strengthening disaster relief infrastructure. The Indian policymakers set a target of becoming a first responder in the case of disasters in the Indian sub-continent (Business Standard, 2019).

State sovereignty is a top priority for India’s humanitarian diplomacy. India officially declared that it offers assistance to countries that request it. India calls this approach demand-driven aid. India criticises Western aid practices for being supply-driven and not caring about the needs of the population affected by the disaster. Its experiences shaped this perception. For example, after the Gujarat earthquake in India that occurred in 2001, several organisations sent beef meals to the Hindu population. Yet, India’s



humanitarian aid was perceived as an infringement of sovereignty on several occasions. In 1971, India justified its military engagement in the East Pakistani civil war by claiming it was necessary to aid refugees. India also supplied humanitarian relief to the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. Both Pakistan and Sri Lanka considered these practices to violate their sovereignty (Parry & Bhat, 2023, p. 6109). This demonstrates that India could ignore its own principles when its interests are compromised. The imperatives of the regional dynamics also played a role in shaping India's humanitarian diplomacy. A recent example is India's response to the earthquake that occurred in Afghanistan in June 2022. For a rapprochement with the Taliban, India delivered humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan (Gulliot et al., 2022). Thus, pragmatic considerations also constitute importance besides ideational consideration in India's humanitarian diplomacy. These examples indicate that India employs humanitarian diplomacy in line with its national interests. Therefore, it will be helpful to analyse India's interests in the Middle East to evaluate its goals in implementing humanitarian diplomacy in the region.

India's Interests in the Middle East and Türkiye

Although India established energy relations with the Gulf countries during the Cold War, these relations were commercial in nature. Despite the existence of the Indian population working in the region, India did not develop political and strategic ties with the Middle Eastern countries. There were three reasons why India kept its distance: Firstly, U.S. dominance in the Gulf countries was seen as one of the legacies of the colonial forces. Secondly, Israel was seen as the culprit of the Arab-Israel conflict. Thirdly, India preferred secular and socialist regimes instead the conservative monarchies. However, these considerations are no longer valid. Today, the USA is one of India's allies in the region. India developed security and economic relations with Israel. Finally, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are important partners for India (Alterman & Mohan, 2022). India's interest in the region revolves around securing energy supply, strengthening trade relations, and protecting Indian nationals working in the Gulf (Sevilla, 2020, p. 16).

India's energy needs make especially the Gulf region a strategic priority for India. India is the third biggest energy consumer of oil. India focuses on importing energy from the Middle East. The desire of Saudi Arabia to diversify its allies besides its traditional Western allies coincided with India's new realisation of geopolitical and geo-economic interests. The major oil companies, Saudi Arabia's ARAMCO and the UAE's ADNOC, increased their engagement with Indian companies ONGC. Regarding repeal of Article 370, which revoked the special status of Kashmir, Saudi Arabia and the UAE avoided criticism against India despite their strong relations with Pakistan (Khushnam, 2020). Thus, India's close economic ties with the Gulf countries resulted in diplomatic gains.

On the other hand, India has geopolitical interests in Iran, the biggest regional rival of the Gulf countries. Since the 1990s, India has endeavored to construct a port in Iran's Chabahar city. Despite the effects of sanctions on Iran, Iran completed the Chabahar Port. On October 29, 2017, India commenced the first shipment of wheat to Afghanistan through the Chabahar Port. The Chabahar Port is crucial for India and Iran because they reduce their dependency on the Suez Canal for transportation to Europe through the Chabahar Port. It establishes transport connectivity between Europe, Central Asia, India, and Iran. Lacking a border with Central Asia, Chabahar can be considered a link point for India to reach Central Asia, which has rich natural resources. Moreover, the competition of the Zaranj-Delaram highway between India and Afghanistan enables Afghanistan to reach to sea via the Chabahar Port (Pant & Mehta, 2018, pp. 660–670). Therefore, the Chabahar Port also offers leverage to India against Afghanistan. This route is an important boost to the efficiency of trade by reducing shipping costs and times between India and Central Asia by 50 per cent (ANI, 2022). The Chabahar Port also counters the Gwadar Port, constructed in Pakistan by the People's Republic of China (PRC) within the Belt and Road Initiative framework by providing alternative trading connectivity, bypassing Pakistan (Khalid, 2022).

India has always been distrustful of the PRC's development of ports with dual-use capacities, which would enable the PRC's commerce and naval deployment. As soon as Iran's former President Hasan Rouhani invited the PRC to invest in the Chabahar economic zone, the Prime Minister of India, Modi, extended a \$300 million credit. India and the PRC also competed for commercial stakes in Oman and the UAE (Blarel, 2020, p. 455).

Besides energy and trade interests, India has also taken steps to protect its migrant workers' status in the Gulf states. The Kafala system, which ties Indian migrant workers to their employers, remains widespread in the Gulf region. This system, identified as modern slavery, causes stress and deaths of Indian migrant workers. The government of India has set up Indian Workers' Resource Center in the UAE and Community Welfare Funds, which lend small fees for Indian migrants who are in distress (Calabrese, 2020). Since India is the world's top recipient of remittances, protecting its migrant workers in the Middle is also an Indian foreign policy goal.

Yet, it should be remembered that India is a new entrant in the region. Regarding security and military arrangements, it is not as experienced as the USA. It will remain a secondary power, at least in the immediate future (Sevilla, 2020, p. 14). The Middle East is ridden with conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War, the Arab-Israel conflict, and the Yemen War. It is wise for India to resort to humanitarian diplomacy to promote its humanitarian stance rather than take sides in these conflicts. With its soft power, India could place itself as a mediator and mitigating actor. In addition to interstate conflicts and civil wars, India also extends its humanitarian aid to natural disasters.



India's Humanitarian Aid to the Middle East

India positioned itself as a neutral actor who provides humanitarian assistance to the Middle Eastern people who experience distress during times of crisis. From civil wars to natural disasters, India has offered support to the Middle Eastern population. India has shown that it is willing to take action when needed. This strengthened India's ties with the region. This study lists Indian efforts in major conflicts and disasters in the Middle East. It attempts to answer how India has positioned itself through humanitarian assistance in accordance with its interests in the Middle East.

The Arab-Israel Conflict

The Arab-Israel conflict is the most enduring conflict in the Middle East. India has always supported the Palestinian cause as a foreign policy choice. It recognised Palestinian state in 1988 and opened a Representative Office in Gaza, which was later moved to Ramallah (Representative office of India Ramallah, 2022).

The Israeli occupation of Palestine for more than five decades has negative consequences for the Palestinian people. It is estimated that 2.1 million Palestinian require humanitarian assistance (Sida, 2022). India has provided developmental assistance to Palestine, amounting to \$141 million. India contributed \$39 million to the Palestinian Authority budget. In 2021, India donated 25,000 doses of Covaxin to Palestine. Annually, India provides 50 Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) scholarships for Palestinian students. It has engaged in building Jawaharlal Nehru Library and the Mahatma Gandhi Library in Gaza. It has built two schools and Vocational Training Centers. During his visit to Palestine in 2018, Prime Minister Modi announced grants amounting to \$57,85 million, which include eight developmental projects. These are the Palestinian Institute of Higher Diplomacy, the construction of Super-speciality hospitals, Turathi Women Improvement Centers, the National Printing Press, an additional floor in Gol-funded Jawaharlal Nehru Boys for School, and the construction of schools. In 2021 India also initiated several projects, such as the Rehabilitation of Yasser Arafat Square, the Integration of Technology into Education with the Young Scientists Club, Aqaba Children Park, and Beitunia Municipality Nursery. Moreover, India, Brazil, and the South Africa (IBSA) Fund financed four projects in Palestine, amounting to approximately \$5 million. These projects are the Indoor Multipurpose School Complex, Atta Habib Medical Center, Cardio-Thoracic Unit of Palestinian Red Crescent Society's Al-Quds Hospital, and Rehabilitation Center for People with Mental Disabilities (Representative office of India Ramallah, 2022). India announced it would provide \$5 million to the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which offers education, healthcare, and social services, for the Financial Year 2022-2023. The UNRWA has thanked India for its unwavering support of the organisation and its solidarity with the Palestinian people (The Hindu, 2022).

While extending humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people, India normalised its relations with Israel during the premiership of Modi. These two countries strengthened their cooperation in security and economic areas. After the USA and Russia, India is the largest market for Israeli arms producers. Besides security deals, bilateral trade between the two countries increased by 600 per cent between 2001 and 2015 (Kumaraswamy, 2019). Yet, India has the second largest Muslim population after Indonesia. Its humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people allows India to maintain its balanced and neutral position. India's humanitarian diplomacy is driven by its focus on humanitarian aid, which improves the daily lives of the Palestinian people. This approach helps to build India's reputation among the Palestinian people without upsetting its relations with Israel.

The Yemeni Civil War

When the Hadi government in Yemen lifted fuel subsidies in 2014, the Houthis, the Zaydi Shiite group which actively protested the government, managed to mobilise people against the government. The militias loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh also supported this insurgency. The southern separatists called for secession. Saudi Arabia's military intervention in 2015 worsened the situation in Yemen (Ahmed, 2019, pp. 85–86). The United Nations declared that Yemen is experiencing one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. Since the start of the civil war, approximately 250,000 people died. The death of 131,000 people is indirectly caused by malnutrition (Al-Deen, 2022).

India has taken steps to address food insecurity in Yemen. Despite its regulation concerning wheat export, India continued to export wheat to Yemen to ameliorate the humanitarian crisis in Yemen (Business Standard, 2022). In 2019 when armed groups staged a coup in Aden, the Consul General of Yemen, Yahya Yahya Ghoobar, requested India to intervene in the crisis in Yemen (Rao, 2019). This demonstrates India's increasing weight in Yemen. The disruption of wheat supply due to the Russia-Ukraine war highlighted India's role as a wheat supplier to Yemen. Yemeni Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmelik Saeed sent a letter to Prime Minister Modi asking for food aid (PL News, 2022). In 2017, India provided \$1 million worth of medical assistance. India also announced it would allocate the ICCR spots for the Yemeni students (Kumaraswamy et al., 2018, p. 223).

India in the Syrian Civil War

The Syrian Civil War that started in 2011 has caused one of the most severe humanitarian crises in the world. It has displaced approximately 14 million people. More than 306,000 citizens were killed as a result of the conflict. The conflict also led to an



economic crisis whose effects were exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Syrian gross domestic product has shrunk by half, and extreme poverty has affected more than half of the Syrian population. In 2022, about 14.6 million need humanitarian aid. The Syrian people require health, shelter, education, and food assistance. In 2022, approximately 14 million people in Syria were insecure, with 12 million facing extreme food insecurity (ACAPS, 2022).

India's Syrian policy reflects its foreign policy traditions. Although India has a democratic tradition, India has never tried to promote liberal and democratic values in the Arab world. Throughout its history, India has maintained good relations with dictators in the Middle East (Sharaf, 2015, p. 163). India also had ties with the Assad family since it assumed power in 1971. Since the start of the Syrian crisis, India has opposed regime change through military means. India has not made any explicit statement encouraging Assad to remain in power, yet it did not withdraw its ambassador from Damascus (Taneja, 2015). However, India has to tread the Syrian crisis carefully because it needs to balance its traditional non-interference policy and its commitment to democratic values. As the Arab League members follow a pro-opposition stance in Syria, its friendly relations with the Arab countries could be compromised. Highlighting humanitarian diplomacy is a useful way in Syria to hide its pro-Assad policy that was hidden in its declared neutrality.

India offered \$1 million in the efforts to dismantle Syrian chemical weapons. India participated in the Second International Humanitarian Pledging Conference hosted by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). It pledged \$2 million in assistance to help Syrian refugees (Sharaf, 2015, p. 167). Syria has provided scholarships to 1,500 Syrian students since 2021. The Indian government set up a Next-Gen Center for Information Technology in Damascus. India financed the construction of a steel plant, a power plant, and two artificial limb fitment camps (The Print, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Syria gifted 2,000 metric tons of rice to Syria (Abraham, 2021). By helping those who need food assistance and Syrian refugees, India does not restrict its aid to the Assad regime. India extended its help to all affected by the civil war.

India-Türkiye Relations and the Earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria

Culturally, the ties between the two countries can be traced back to the ancient era. Sanskrit work Rajtrangi describes Emperor Kaniska and his successors are ethnic Turks. In the Middle Ages, Sufi tradition in India was influenced by Mevlana Celaledin Rumi, who lived in Konya, located in Central Anatolia. The diplomatic relations between the Ottoman and Mughal Empires started in the late 15th century. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the Indo-Turkish interaction experienced the most significant period

as the Indians emulated the constitutionalism movement in the Ottoman Empire. Indian leaders and poets such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Rabindra Nath Tagore praised the Turkish Independence War. However, the early ties between Türkiye and India have broken with the establishment of Pakistan. Turkish opinion polls report Pakistanis as brothers. No such claims have been articulated for any country except Azerbaijan. Moreover, Türkiye and India followed different paths during the Cold War. During the Cold War, Türkiye's belonging to NATO alliance contradicted India's leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement (Mohapatra, 2008, pp. 161-166).

After the Cold War, pragmatism and economic relations prevailed. Two countries have increased their diplomatic, economic, and energy interactions (Ministry of External Affairs Government of India, 2017). Yet, the Kashmir and Cyprus issues continue to cause rifts between the two countries. Türkiye has taken a pro-Pakistani stance on the Kashmir conflict, whereas India has adopted a pro-Greek policy on the Cyprus issue (Alam, 2007, pp. 132-135). The Pakistan factor deteriorated the Indo-Turkish relations. Türkiye expanded its defence ties with Pakistan. While Türkiye's ties to Pakistan have improved, Türkiye's relations with India have soured. To respond to this growing Turkish-Pakistani ties, India increased its defence cooperation with Armenia (Çolakoğlu, 2020). Pakistan's relationship with Türkiye is linked with Azerbaijan, a mutual ally. This brought about the emergence of the Türkiye-Azerbaijan-Pakistan axis (Kaura, 2020). A positive turn for India in its relations with Türkiye through exercising soft power is desirable, as warm relations with Türkiye would soften the stance of this axis against India. Therefore, India has increasingly been attempting to seek a rapprochement with Türkiye for two years (Mattoo, 2023).

On February 6, 2023, magnitude 7.8 and 7.7 earthquakes struck southeastern Türkiye and northwest Syria. These earthquakes killed more than 50,000 people and destroyed more than 160,000 buildings. According to International Organization for Migration (IOM), more than 2.7 million people have been displaced in Türkiye (Reliefweb, 2023). After such a devastating earthquake, Türkiye declared a "level 4" alarm condition which includes a call for international help (Prakash, 2023).

India was among the first countries that responded to Türkiye's call for international assistance. The operation's name was selected as "Operation Dost," a common word in Hindu and Turkish that means friend. Operation Dost comprised the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and the 60 Parachute Field Hospital of India's 50 Independent Parachute Brigade. The 60 Parachute Field Hospital included 99 personnel with medical specialists, anaesthetists, orthopaedics, surgical specialists, medical specialists, public health specialists, medical officers, and paramedics (Saha, 2023). After a 12-day operation, the medical team treated over 3,500 patients. Prime Minister Modi commented that India's efforts in Türkiye and Syria proved its constant endeavors to serve humanity. He claimed that India's commitment emanated from the Hindu Va-



sudhaiva Kutumbakam tradition, adding that the world has goodwill to India (The Times of India, 2023).

Positive perceptions of states and their institutions in disaster zones often bypass governments and appeal to the public directly (Taneja, 2023). India has tried to lay a strong foundation by directly engaging with the common Turkish people. Its humanitarian efforts created positive feelings among the Turkish people towards India. An Indian officer recalled that a woman in the earthquake zone said: "For me, god comes first and second" (The Times of India, 2023).

India also sent six tons of emergency assistance to Syria, including protective gear and medicine (Chandok, 2023). By mid-February, the number of Indian assistance materials to Syria reached 23 tons (The Hindu, 2023). The value of India's humanitarian efforts increased because this help was delivered amidst sanctions and conflict.

Challenges and Limits of India's Humanitarian Diplomacy

Although humanitarian diplomacy helps countries develop their diplomatic and political relations, the geopolitical and historical background of the relations persists. In March 2023, Türkiye spoke against Indian claims on Kashmir at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). That caused an uproar among Indian policymakers and the public (The Economic Times, 2023). The Foreign Minister of India, Jaishankar claimed that India helped Türkiye because helping those in need is inherent in Indian culture, and India did not expect gratitude in return (The Hindustan Times, 2023). This statement reflects India's disappointment concerning Türkiye's stance. Yet, Kabir Taneja, a researcher from the Observer Research Foundation, evaluated that: "Diplomacy does not bring results overnight. However, we may see some level of thaw between Ankara and New Delhi, which is good enough for now" (Mattoo, 2023). Thus, the effects of humanitarian diplomacy could be limited.

The Middle East is a conflict-ridden region. This complicates India's humanitarian activities in the region. For instance, India sent the aid directly to Assad instead of sending teams to contested areas (Taneja, 2023). Instead of helping all parties and civilians harmed by the earthquakes, India only granted help to the areas under Assad's control. Considering the Assad regime is under international sanctions, Indian help was helpful for international recognition of his regime. Favoring the Assad regime in humanitarian disasters could lead other groups in Syria to perceive India as a power which takes sides in the Syrian civil war.

India's increasing Hindu nationalism, which suppresses Indian Muslims is another impediment to India's engagement in the Middle East through humanitarian diplomacy. Anti-Muslim sentiments in India heightened in India during Modi's rule. The

discrimination against Muslims increased in areas including education, employment, and housing. In 2019, India passed a controversial Citizenship Amendment Act, which granted fast-tracked citizenship to Hindu, Sikh, Christian, Jain, Pars, and Buddhist migrants from neighboring countries. This law has been considered discriminatory because it excluded Muslims (Maizland, 2022). Hindu nationalism evolved to extreme levels. In June 2022, a spokesperson of the BJP made derogatory comments regarding the Prophet Muhammed. Another official of the BJP wrote an insulting tweet about the Prophet Muhammed. These incidents caused domestic protests and international condemnation. The Muslim countries from South Asia and the Middle East, including Afghanistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Oman, considered these remarks offensive. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) also denounced these statements. Jordan and Maldives criticised these officials' declarations. The Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) also issued a strong statement. In addition to the reactions of regional bodies and countries, an online boycott campaign started under the tags #BoycottIndiaProducts and #Stopinsulting_ProphetMuhammad (Rajagopalan, 2022). Although the damage is likely to be short-term, Hindu nationalism stimulated by the Indian government could harm India's engagement in the Middle East. This inflammatory Hindu nationalism would lessen the effects of Indian humanitarian diplomacy in the region.

Conclusion

This study aims to guide future studies concerning India's engagement in the Middle East through humanitarian diplomacy. It argues that India's humanitarian diplomacy is an essential component of its policies in the region. This study used a process-tracing methodology to determine why India increased its humanitarian efforts in the Middle East. It pointed out in parallel with its rising interests in the Middle East, India stepped up its humanitarian efforts in the region's crises.

India has significant interests in the Middle East. It meets its energy needs from the Gulf countries. India also constructed a port in Iran's Chabahar region to lessen the influence of the PRC by providing an alternative route to the Belt and Road Initiative, which is the flagship foreign policy of the PRC. Moreover, remittances of Indian migrants who work in the region are important financial sources for the Indian economy. As these factors compel India to increase its presence in the Middle East, humanitarian diplomacy offers India a valuable tool.

Refraining from projecting hard power, India concentrated on humanitarian diplomacy in its engagement in the Middle East. Humanitarian diplomacy refers to activities focusing on humanitarian aid. Although altruistic motives cannot be dismissed, states are also driven by other factors in implementing humanitarian diplomacy.



Among states' concerns are highlighting their participation in relief efforts, promoting their identity and values, and increasing their soft power.

India has provided financial support to the Palestinian population affected by the Palestine-Israel conflict. It has built schools and education centers in various Palestinian cities. It offered scholarships for the Palestinian youth. In the Yemeni war, India's efforts centered on relieving food crisis. In the Syrian civil war, India has granted financial assistance to those affected. India has also contributed to the construction of hospitals in Syria. The latest humanitarian Indian effort in the Middle East occurred after the earthquakes that devastated southern Türkiye and northwestern Syria. India was among the first responders to the call for help. India set up hospitals and sent personnel to Türkiye. It also sent humanitarian assistance to Syria.

This study also indicated the challenges that India is facing in implementing humanitarian diplomacy. India is a new entrant to the conflict-ridden region. Since India tries to maintain humanitarian relations with governments, this attitude complicates its relations with non-state groups in conflict zones. Besides its troubles in reaching out to non-state groups, India also has political disagreements with Türkiye, which supports Pakistan on the Kashmir issue. Even after India's humanitarian aid to the earthquake, Türkiye did not change its stance on Kashmir. This demonstrates the limits of humanitarian diplomacy. Even Indian officials admitted that humanitarian diplomacy does not drastically change the countries' orientation. Finally, Hindu nationalism also has the potential to disrupt its endeavors to grow its soft power in the Middle East, which contains a predominant Muslim population. The inflammatory speeches made by the members of the ruling BJP against the Muslim religion will prevent India from attracting the hearts and minds of the Muslim population. Therefore, Hindu nationalism is a major impediment to India's humanitarian diplomacy efforts in the Middle East. Despite these challenges, the main tool for India in engaging the Middle Eastern continues to be its humanitarian efforts, as India wants to boost its profile and appeal across the region.



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