

India - Saudi Arabia Relations

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Topic- International Relations [GS Paper-2]

Context- India and Saudi Arabia are recently in talks to sign a Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) in order to obtain formal assistance from each other in investigations related to criminal cases.

Key Highlights

- India has till now signed MLATs with 45 countries and is also in talks to finalise MLATs with Italy and Germany.
- Saudi Arabia is only among some other countries that does not have either an MLAT or any other bilateral agreement with India to facilitate such investigations.

MLAT

- The Ministry of Home Affairs acts as the Central Authority of India for dealing with requests of mutual legal assistance in criminal matters.
- MLAT aims at gathering and exchanging information in an effort to enforce public or criminal laws.
- It is a mechanism whereby nations cooperate with one another to provide and obtain formal assistance in prevention, suppression, investigation and prosecution of crime to ensure that the criminals do not escape or sabotage the due process of law for want of evidence available in different countries.
- MLATs are used to send a formal request for investigation in foreign countries for collection of evidence, examination of witnesses and execution of orders of attachment and confiscation of assets.

Significance of MLAT

- The signing of the Legal Assistance treaty would help in getting a conviction for an accused in a court of law based on evidence gathered through the mutual agreement.
- In the past, Saudi Arabia has deported many terror suspects on India's request.

Assurance of Reciprocity

- Countries that are not covered by any bilateral or multilateral treaty or agreement or international convention, the summons, notices and judicial processes are served based on an assurance of reciprocity.

India-Saudi Arabia Bilateral Relations

Political Relations

- The establishment of diplomatic relations in 1947 was followed by high-level visits from both countries.
- The historic visit of King Abdullah to India in 2006 was a watershed moment which resulted in the signing of the 'Delhi Declaration', imparting a fresh momentum to the bilateral relationship.

Commercial Relations

- Saudi Arabia is India's fourth largest trade partner (after China, USA and Japan) and also a major source of energy as India imports around 18% of its crude oil requirement from the Kingdom.
- Saudi Arabia is a major source of LPG for India.
- During the Financial Year 2022, bilateral trade was valued at US\$29.28 billion.
- India's total imports from Saudi Arabia were valued at US\$22.65 billion and exports to Saudi Arabia were worth US\$6.63 billion.

Cultural Relations

- India has successfully participated as 'Guest of Honour' in the 32nd edition of the prestigious Saudi National Festival of Heritage and Culture in 2018.
- Also Yoga was announced as a 'sports activity' in Saudi Arabia.
- Haj pilgrimage is another significant component of bilateral relations.

Military exercise

- AL – Mohed AL – Hindi is the maiden bilateral naval exercise held between India and Saudi Arabia.

Diaspora

- The approximately 2.2 million Indian community is the largest expatriate community in the Kingdom.

Need for Cooperation

- **Afghan Peace Process:**
 - Saudi Arabia's position on the developments in Afghanistan assumes significance as several other countries in the Gulf region, including Qatar and Iran are playing a role in the Afghanistan development, even before the Taliban's capture of power.
- **Economic Reform:**
 - Economic reform programs under Vision 2030 are underway in Saudi Arabia, for which it needs India's economic as well as technological assistance.
 - Saudi Arabia plays a significant role in India's energy security while India is a vital partner in Saudi Arabia's food security.

- In 2021-22, Saudi Arabia was the second largest source of hydrocarbon imports for the India market.
- **Investments:**
 - Saudi investment of around \$100 billion is in the pipeline in areas which range from energy, refining, petrochemicals and infrastructure to agriculture, minerals and mining.
 - India is among the fastest growing economies in the world as the size of its economy with a nominal GDP of US\$3.5 trillion in 2022 makes it the fifth largest economy in the world.
 - It is one of the largest consumers of hydrocarbons in the world and this makes India an attractive investment destination for the world.
- **Countering Militias:**
 - Saudi Arabia seems to have limited experience in countering threats from groups like Houthi militias.
 - It is an area where India's expertise in fighting such threats could be imparted to the Saudi side, by enhancing joint military training programs.

Challenges

- The politics of the Middle East is merely complex and multidimensional so requires a collective and united effort.
- The Saudi Arabia-Turkey rivalry could create issues for India.
- Considering Saudi Arabia-Iran Rivalry, India has close relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran.
- However, India still needs to work out a way to balance its ties with Iran on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and the United States on the other.

Way Forward

- India-Saudi Arabia defence cooperation has merely picked up the pace.
- The defence ties between the two nations are growing during rapidly changing developments in the Gulf region.
- It will enhance bilateral cooperation and security in Indian Ocean Region.