

FAST FACT

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Protesters condemn Israel during a rally in Chennai on Saturday. Israeli attacks on Iran started on June 13 when Tel Aviv hit more than a dozen sites in the country. AFP



SECURITY AND STABILITY

Where does India stand on the Israel-Iran conflict?

Middle East situation shows New Delhi deviating from its traditionally pro-peace policy, experts say

Sanjay Kumar New Delhi

India is on a path of non-involvement in the growing conflict in the Middle East, experts said on Saturday, as they warned Delhi's silence could have serious implications for the region.

Israeli attacks on Iran started on June 13 when Tel Aviv hit more than a dozen sites — including key nuclear facilities and residences of military leaders and scientists — claiming they were aimed at preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

After Iran retaliated with ballistic missile strikes against Israel, the two countries have been on a tit-for-tat cycle of bombing.

Israel's attacks on Iran have reportedly killed at least 639 people and wounded 1,329 others,

while Iranian missile strikes have killed 24 people and injured hundreds more in Israel.

India has yet to join other Asian nations — such as China, Japan, Pakistan and Indonesia — in condemning Israel's initial strikes against Iran.

It was also the only country in the 10-member Shanghai Cooperation Organization which did not endorse a statement issued by the bloc condemning Israel's military strikes on Iran. The organization is a political and security body that includes China, Russia, India, Pakistan and Central Asian nations.

In a statement, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs urged "both sides to avoid any escalatory steps" and engage in dialogue and diplomacy "to work toward de-escalation."

"India enjoys close and friendly relations with both the

countries and stands ready to extend all possible support," the ministry said.

Talmez Ahmad, an Indian diplomat who served as ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Oman and the UAE, described the statement as "a very low-key remark and is meant for the record."

"India is not interested in engaging itself with serious matters pertaining to regional diplomacy. India is not interested in pursuing ways in which we could promote security and stability," he said.

Historically, India's ties with countries in West Asia — a region that includes the Middle East — have been bilateral and transactional, lacking engagement "with the region in a collective sense."

"With regard to the Israeli-Iran issue we have taken a position of non-involvement ... (but) silence

in this matter where Israel has initiated a conflict that could have potentially horrendous implications for the region, is another and is something which India should be very concerned about," Ahmad said.

"There is no justification whatsoever for India to be so indifferent to the flames that are now gathering speed and strength right in our neighborhood."

India is Israel's largest arms buyer and Israel is India's fourth-largest arms supplier. According to a report from Reuters, India has imported military hardware worth \$2.9 billion over the last decade.

Delhi also has strategic interests in Iran and has invested around \$370 million in a port development project in the Iranian port of Chabahar, aimed at hastening trade and connectivity links to Afghanistan and Central Asia.