



India-Israel Relations in PM Modi Era

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ABSTRACT

India established diplomatic relations with Israel only in January 1992 even though it had recognised the Jewish State in September 1950. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations, political, economic, cultural, and security relations have been flourishing considerably. Important as they are, this chapter looks at the influence of external players in Indo-Israeli relations, especially after normalisation. Some external factors contributed to the delayed normalisation while others have been facilitating a more rapid progress in the bilateral relations. Looking through the external prism, this chapter examines the influence of foreign powers in inhibiting as well as facilitating Indo-Israeli relations through competition and rivalry.

Key Words: - India, Israel, Diplomatic, Political, Economic, Cultural, Security.

Background

There have been various reasons and justifications for the four-decades of Indian non-relations with Israel; these range from domestic considerations (Indian Muslim population influenced India to be supportive of the Palestinian cause), Cold War political calculations, or limited commonalities between the two countries. The roots of this policy can be traced to early 1920s when the shared anti-colonial worldview resulted in the Indian nationalists forging a common cause with the Arabs of Palestine. The Congress Party and its leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, vociferously advocated a pro-Arab position on Palestine, and this trend continued when Britain—the Mandate power—referred the Palestine issue to the newly-formed United Nations. In May 1947, India was elected to the 11-member United Nations Special Commission on Palestine (UNSCOP), and while a seven-member majority proposed partition of Palestine as the solution, India (supported by Iran and Yugoslavia) proposed a Federal plan for Palestine.¹ Unfortunately, the Indian plan was rejected by both the contending parties: the Arabs were opposed to Jews being granted even minimal autonomy within an Arab Palestine while the Jews rejected the Indian plan because it offered them civil and religious rights when the majority plan offered them sovereignty and statehood. Hence, rejected by both the parties, the Indian plan was never discussed by the UN. When the partition plan came before the UN General Assembly on 29 November, India joined the Arab and Islamic countries, and opposed it. In May 1949, India also opposed Israel's admission into the UN. However, after considerable hesitation and internal deliberations,



India granted diplomatic recognition to Israel in September 1950. There were sufficient indications that India was prepared for a full-fledged diplomatic relationship with Israel, including a resident mission in Tel Aviv. A promise to this effect was made by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru when senior Israeli diplomat, Walter Eytan, met him in New Delhi in early 1952. Diplomatic exchange did not happen— or rather, happened more than four decades after Nehru’s promise. Scholars attribute this to senior Congress leader and Education Minister Maulana Abul Kalam Azad who dissuaded Nehru from establishing diplomatic relations with Israel on the ground that such a move would go against domestic Muslim sentiments in India, and could be used by Pakistan for anti-India propaganda in the Arab world, especially over the Kashmir issue. A formal Indian opposition to normalisation came in November 1956 in the wake of the Israel-led tripartite aggression against Egypt over the Suez crisis and, since then, the-time-is-not-ripe became the standard Indian position vis-à-vis normalisation.² Over the years, India sought to further its interests in the Middle East by flagging its support for the Palestinian cause, and the absence of relations with Israel became integral to India’s zero-sum approach to the Arab-Israeli equation. India joined various Arab and Islamic countries in proposing or voting in favour of various resolutions against Israel in the UN, and other international forums such as the Non-aligned Movement. This reached its crescendo in November 1975 when India sponsored and voted in favour of the UN General Assembly Resolution that equated Zionism with racism. Thus, it was clear that only a far reaching transformation of the international system could bring about a change in India’s attitude towards Israel. This came with the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union as well as the emergence of the USA as the pre-eminent global power. Yasser Arafat’s support for Iraqi President Saddam Hussein over the Kuwait crisis considerably weakened the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian factor in inter-Arab relations. Arafat’s willingness to attend the Middle East Peace Conference in Madrid in October 1991 also diluted India’s reluctance to deal with Israel, especially when there were no bilateral disputes between the two. Under such circumstances, Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao signalled India’s willingness to deal with the post-Cold War international climate by breaking with the past and, in January 1992, established full diplomatic relations with Israel. Since then, the bilateral relations have been progressing considerably, and have been a major source of international attention and envy. How have external players responded and reacted to Indo-Israeli relations since then? For the purpose of clarity, the external players can be divided by regions: Palestine, Iran and Saudi Arabia are the Middle Eastern players; the Southern Asian region comprises of Pakistan and China; and the United States and USSR/Russia are the international players. Some contributed to the absence of normalisation while others facilitated Indo-Israeli relations and, in some cases, one could notice a tacit competition. It would not be incorrect to state that the non-relations before 1992 and the progressing relations since 1992 have been influenced by external players.³

Prime Minister Modi visit to Israel

In July 2017, Narendra Modi became the first ever Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel. It was noted that Prime Minister Modi did not visit Palestine during the trip, breaking from

convention. With the sole exception of Union Minister Rajnath Singh, previous trips by Indian ministers and President Mukherjee included visits to both Israel and Palestine. The Indian media described the move as the "dehyphenation" of India's relations with the two states.⁴

India, Israel expand cooperation from defense to science, agriculture and technology

- India and Israel signed agreements on science, agriculture and technology as part of Narendra Modi's visit to the Middle Eastern country
- Defense had been a key driver of Indian-Israeli cooperation
- The countries agreed to create a bilateral technology innovation fund worth \$40 million.

Defense ties have long underpinned Indian-Israeli relations, but a string of deals signed this week reflected wider cooperation that could benefit Indian companies seeking advanced technologies and could pave the way for Israeli firms to access millions of consumers. On Wednesday, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs said India signed several agreements with Israel on science, agriculture and technology, as part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's historic visit to the country, 25 years after both nations established diplomatic relations. The agreements included the decision to create a bilateral technology innovation fund worth \$40 million for research in industrial development, and to establish a strategic partnership in water and agriculture to focus on water conservation, waste-water treatment and its reuse for agriculture and desalination, among other deals. "Israel's becoming a more important defense partner for India, a source of great technology, not just in the defense space, but in biotechnology (and) agriculture," "Street Signs" on Thursday. "A lot of the things were reflected in that joint statement."⁵

"India's good at large-scale things, like call centers and software development, but Israel's doing package software. India's doing back-office biotech research, but Israel actually has products that are out there in the global markets more than India does," "So it could be Israeli companies looking for a larger production base, in which case India's ready to go." Indian companies looking to get access to higher-end technologies than what was available domestically could then make acquisitions in Israel. "It's a good complementary relationship between the two countries,". India and Israel also signed cooperation pacts between their respective space agencies in areas including atomic clocks and electric propulsion for small satellites. Defence, however, remained a key factor in the India-Israeli relationship. Israeli companies, led by government-owned aerospace giant Israel Aircraft Industries, have signed arms deals with India totaling over \$2.6 billion earlier this year. "Israel was one of the main suppliers for India during the Kargil war with Pakistan. It showed its reputation as a strong, stable supplier, even in times of duress. So since then, there have been a lot of major, important deals,". According to the joint statement, future developments in defense cooperation between the countries should focus on joint development of defense products that include transfer of technology from Israel, with an emphasis on Modi's signature 'Make in India' initiative. India was one of the largest defense spenders in Asia. Data from the

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute showed that in 2016, 2.5 percent of India's gross domestic product (GDP) went to military expenditure. By comparison, China spent about 1.9 percent of its GDP on its military in the same period. Israel has, over the years, become more comfortable equipping India with weapon systems that may be employed against its neighbor Pakistan — more so than the United States, which he said was looking to "equip India more for maritime domain activity." Sources of friction between India and Pakistan usually centre around terrorism and the contested region of Kashmir. "Support from Western Europe, the U.S. is not as strong as it used to be. So showing the strong relationship with an important emerging Asian power is also quite symbolic,"

Military and Strategic Ties

New Delhi found in the Defense industry of Israel a useful source of weapons, one that could supply it with advanced military technology. Thus was established the basis of a burgeoning arms trade, which reached almost \$600 million in 2016, making Israel the second-largest source of defense equipment for India, after Russia. India and Israel have increased co-operation in military and intelligence ventures since the establishment of diplomatic relations. The rise of Islamic extremist terrorism in both nations has generated a strong strategic alliance between the two. In 2008, India launched a military satellite TecSAR for Israel through its Indian Space Research Organisation.

- In September 2015, the Indian government approved the air force's request to purchase 10 Heron TP drones from Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI). In 2015, a delegation from Israel's Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs visited India, led by former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations Dore Gold. Shared strategic interests were discussed, including combatting radical Islam, the handling of territorial disputes, and the security situation in the Middle East and South Asia.
- In October 2015, *The Pioneer* reported that India and Israel were planning to hold their first joint military exercise. The date and location were not announced.
- In September 2016, the Indian government approved the purchase of two more Phalcon AWACS.
- In 2017, the countries signed a military agreement worth USD 2 billion.⁶

Bilateral trade

Bilateral trade between India and Israel grew from \$200 million in 1992 to \$4.52 billion in 2014. As of 2014, India is Israel's tenth-largest trade partner and import source, and seventh-largest export source. India's major exports to Israel include precious stones and metals, organic chemicals, electronic equipment, plastics, vehicles, machinery, engines, pumps, clothing and textiles, and medical and technical equipment. Israel's imports from India amounted to \$2.3 billion or 3.2% of its overall imports in 2014.⁷ Israel's major exports to India include precious stones and metals, electronic equipment, fertilisers, machines, engines, pumps, medical and technical equipment, organic and inorganic chemicals, salt, sulphur, stone, cement, and plastics. Israeli exports to India amounted to \$2.2 billion or 3.2% of its overall exports in 2014. In 2007, Israel proposed starting negotiations on a free trade agreement with India, and



in 2010, then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh accepted that proposal. The agreement is set to focus on many key economic sectors, including information technology, biotechnology, water management, pharmaceuticals, and agriculture. In 2013, then Israeli Minister of Economy Naftali Bennett projected a doubling of trade from \$5 to \$10 billion between the two countries, if a free trade agreement was successfully negotiated. As of 2015, negotiations on a free trade agreement continue, with both countries considering negotiating a more narrow free trade agreement on goods, followed by separate agreements on trade in investment and services.⁸

India–Israel relations and USA factor

Historically, the USA has been Israel's political and diplomatic benefactor. It began with active American support in the UN for the partition plan, and President Harry S. Truman's recognition within minutes after the Declaration of Independence. In the initial years, the American support was less pronounced and given in a gingerly manner. In the wake of the Suez crisis of 1956, pressures by President Dwight Eisenhower compelled Israel to unconditionally withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip. It was only after the June war of 1967 and the spectacular military success that the USA began seeing Israel as an asset in the Middle East. The benign American attitude towards Israel's nuclear programme was accompanied by the USA coming to its rescue during the early stages of the October war of 1973 through massive military supplies. Since then, the USA has been providing political and diplomatic support, military supplies and technologies, and strategic commitments towards ensuring Israel's qualitative edge over its adversaries. The USA has been active in various peace initiatives such as the Camp David Accords, Madrid Conference, Oslo Process and the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty. In line with this approach, the USA prodded India for a long time to normalise relations with Israel; this began as early as in the 1950s. The USA was one of the factors leading to India's recognition of Israel in 1950. It was no accident that the normalisation of relations were announced on the eve of Prime Minister Rao's departure for New York to attend the summit meeting of the UN Security Council, also attended by President George H. W. Bush. The US role has been periodically flagged to both explain and criticize Indo-Israeli relations since 1992. For example, speaking before a dinner organised by the American Jewish Congress on 9 September 2003, India's National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra earmarked that 'the three countries have to jointly face the same ugly face of modern-day terrorism'.⁹ This pronouncement at times has been erroneously interpreted as a clarion call for an India-Israel-US alliance. A more logical explanation can be that India wishes to avoid the kind of problems China faced in its post-1992 military relations with Israel. By keeping the US informed and onboard, India wants to ensure that the USA does not exercise its veto over Indo-Israeli military-security relations. Such an insurance policy is essential in the light of the politico-strategic leverage that the USA wields over Israel: besides being its principal arms supplier, the USA has provided technology or funded Israeli research and development. The American ability to intervene and block the Indo-Israeli military partnership is substantial, and by keeping the USA on board, India wishes to prevent an American veto. This strategy has

been effective and since 1992—there are no major American impediments aimed at slowing or blocking emerging military ties between India and Israel.¹⁰

Conclusion

Since the establishment of relations with Israel, India has been under different kinds of pressures from various countries. Some are prepared to endorse and facilitate the furthering of Indo-Israeli bilateral relations; others have reluctantly accepted India's political will, and the desire to follow and pursue an independent course in the furtherance of its interests. A positive attitude of the USA is necessary for the furtherance of Indo-Israeli military ties. Though the geopolitical situations in the Middle East have weakened its importance, the historic legacy and the periodic upsurge of violence means that the Palestine factor would continue to be relevant in India's ability to pursue closer ties with Israel.

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