Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (l) with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, New Delhi, January 15, 2018. Photo: Prime Minister ´s Office

Shifting Sands of Time: India's Approach toward Israel

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Over the past hundred years India's policy toward Israel has faced numerous challenges and prompted different approaches. While there were no problems or disputes with Israel, India pursued a policy of recognition without relations. The end of the Cold War, the shift in Middle East dynamics after the Kuwaiti crisis (1990-1991), and India's economic growth prompted India to chart a new course that better reflects its interests and its desire to project its strength. Although normalization has been in place for over a quarter of a century, relations between India and Israel continue to arouse much interest, both in India and abroad, primarily due to the gradualist approach and the efforts to integrate Israel into a wider Middle East policy. Under the Narendra Modi government, Israel is "special," and India has successfully skirted the negative implications of relations with the Jewish state, but at the same time Israel is "normal," given that India no longer fears overt relations.

Keywords: India, Global South, Jerusalem, Narendra Modi, normalization, Israel-India relations, Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Introduction

In his campaign for the September 2019 Knesset election, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu used images of three international figures: United States President Donald Trump, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Though a rather unlikely montage, the inclusion of the first two leaders is understandable. The US is Israel's principal strategic ally, and bilateral ties have grown particularly strong under Trump, while the Russian immigrants comprise a sizable portion of the Israeli electorate. But why Modi? When the number of Israelis of Indian origin is insignificant, how many votes was Netanyahu planning to gain by playing the Modi card? Rather, instead of trying to lure voters, Israel's longest-serving Prime Minister was conveying a powerful message: under his leadership, Israel was not alone but has been courted by important global personalities (PM Modi features in Netanyahu's election campaign in Israel, 2019). Intentionally or otherwise, Netanyahu has heightened India's importance in Israel's foreign policy calculus. How did this happen? Or was it always the case?

The Indo-Israeli friendship flagged by Netanyahu is a post-Cold War development. It was only on January 29, 1992, while the multilateral Middle East conference was underway in Moscow, that India announced the establishment of diplomatic relations. Until then, India followed a policy of recognition-without-relations introduced in early 1952 by its first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who promised full diplomatic relations with Israel. In announcing the establishment of relations with Israel, Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao signaled India's willingness to recognize and respond to the end of the Cold War, which demanded political pragmatism and abandonment of ideological blinders that dominated the inter-state relations for over four decades. More than any other possible measures, normalization of relations with Israel was the most powerful step that conveyed India's preparedness for the new world order.

The Indian journey toward formal relations with Israel and its subsequent expansion is century-old and began shortly after the Balfour Declaration, which promised the British support for a Jewish national home in Palestine. It falls into four broad timeframes, with each marking a distinct pattern and set of interests.

The Process

The roots of India's Israel policy can be traced to the early 1920s when the Indian nationalists faced a pan-Islamic struggle regarding the office of caliph, then held by the Ottoman sultan. For centuries, the Indian Muslims were indifferent toward the Sunni Islamic institution. The existence of various Islamic dynasties based in India contributed to their long indifference and neglect of the caliphate. When the Ottoman Empire, the last prominent Islamic rule, came under attack during the First World War, despondency set in and the Indian Muslims began rallying against the British in support of the Ottoman sultan-cum-caliph (Minualt, 1982). The struggle, commonly known as the Khilafat Movement, eventually failed when the Turkish Republic abolished the caliphate in 1924.

It was during this pan-Islamic struggle that Indian nationalists paid attention to the question of Palestine and framed their position on the emerging demands for a Jewish national home. More than his contemporaries or future leaders, Mahatma Gandhi recognized the religious symbolism of the Palestinian problem. Shortly after the Balfour Declaration, he saw Palestine as an integral part of *Jazirat ul-Arab* (the Arabian Peninsula) and observed that according to the injunctions of Prophet Mohammed, Palestine could not be handed over to non-Muslim control or sovereignty. In April 1920, he observed that the injunction of the Prophet

> does not mean that the Jews and the Christians cannot freely go to Palestine, or even reside there and own property. What non-Muslims cannot do is to acquire *sovereign jurisdiction.* The Jews cannot receive sovereign

> rights in a place which has been *held for centuries* by Muslim powers by right of religious conquest. (CWMG, 19, p. 530, emphasis added)

In May 1921, he remarked that the leaders of Khilafat movement "claim Muslim control of *Jazirat ul-Arab* of which Palestine is but a part" (CWMG, 20, p. 129). What was the compulsion to adopt that position, especially when the Holy Land was promised to the Jews centuries before Mohammed?

The Khilafat movement was an eye-opener for the nationalists who were fighting for India's freedom from the British. The Indian National Congress could not be "Indian" or "National" with only minimal participation of the Muslim population. Mahatma Gandhi sought to remedy this situation. By embracing the pan-Islamic agenda of the Indian Muslims, he tried to involve them in the Congress party and its anti-British struggle. Though some within the Congress opposed embracing a pan-Islamic agenda, the opportunity was there, and soon Gandhi emerged as the leader of the Khilafat struggle until the movement dissipated after the abolition of the caliphate by Kamel Ataturk in 1924 (Nanda, 1989).

During the Khilafat period Palestine figured in the Indian political consciousness and was perceived through the Islamic prism. This approach became more pronounced in the 1930s when the Palestine question became an internal political battle between the Congress Party and the Muslim League. As the latter was championing Muslim separatism in British India, the demands for a Jewish national home in Palestine became a Congress-League contest for the support of Indian Muslims, something the Zionist leaders sought to avoid. Keeping India, especially its Muslim population, away from Palestine was the prime motive of Chaim Weizmann's brief encounter with Khilafat leader Shaukat Ali in January 1931 (Azaryahu & Reiter, 2015) and the meeting between Gandhi and the Zionist leaders in October that same year (Kumaraswamy, 2018b); both meetings took place in London.

On the eve of the Second World War, the Indian nationalists hardened their positions. Reflecting the historical absence of antisemitism, the Congress party was sympathetic toward the plight of the Jews in Europe, but this did not influence the Congress to endorse the Jewish aspirations for a homeland. The tiny Jewish population in India was part of the reason for the Indian unfamiliarity with Jewish history, the evolution of Zionism, and the Jewish longing for a home. Furthermore, British India had the largest Muslim population in the world, and this contributed to the Islamic narrative gaining prominence when discussing the Jewish claims to Palestine. Hence, the Congress party visualized an Arab state in Palestine with limited autonomy for the Jews.

The Congress party's opposition to Jewish self-determination could not be separated from its ongoing contest with the Muslim League in India; if the Jews were a separate nation because they follow a different religion, the Congress would have to accept the similar claims of the Muslim League. The Congress could not support the Jewish nationalist aspirations in Palestine while opposing a similar demand of the Muslim League in India, and vice-versa (Kumaraswamy, 2018b).

This became the formal Indian position when it was elected to the eleven-member United Nations Special Commission on Palestine (UNSCOP) in May 1947. While a seven-member majority proposed partition as the solution, India—supported by Iran and what was then Yugoslavia—proposed Federal Palestine. The Indian plan offered autonomous Arab and Jewish states within one federal Palestinian state, which it saw as a compromise between partition and unitary Palestine demanded by the Arabs (Agwani, 1971).

The Federal Plan was the brainchild of India's Prime Minister Nehru and was formalized on September 1, 1947, literally two weeks after India's own partition along religious lines

(Kumaraswamy, 2010). Despite its ideological opposition to religion being the basis of nationality and the two-nation theory, the Congress party accepted the communal partition as the price of India's freedom. For the Congress, led by Nehru, partition was acceptable in the Indian context but not for Palestine. Likewise, the Muslim League followed a contradictory logic; partition and the formation of a separate state for the minorities was necessary for India but had to be opposed in Palestine.

The Indian proposal for a Federal Palestine came despite Nehru knowing the deep divisions between the two communities in Palestine through the periodic reporting of Abdul Rahman, the Indian representative to UNSCOP. Contrasts between the partition of India and Palestine are telling:

a. Partition of India was accepted by both the parties, and in Palestine it was vehemently rejected by the Arabs;
b. The Muslim community was a majority in Palestine, and a minority in India;
c. The majority party (Congress) accepted the partition in India, but the majority (Arabs) rejected it for Palestine; and
d. Partition left a sizable Muslim population both in India and Israel, and ensuring their civil and political rights as equal citizens has been one of the enduring challenges facing both the democracies.

The geographical proximity compelled the Congress party to be pragmatic and come to terms with the partition of India; but distance and larger foreign policy calculations resulted in the Indian nationalists' reluctance toward accepting the partition of Palestine.

Thus, India joined the Arab and Islamic countries in voting against the partition plan, and during the Second Special Session of the UN General Assembly (April 16-May 15, 1948), it joined hands with the US in seeking to freeze the partition vote toward reducing the inter-communal violence in Palestine. The unilateral declaration of independence by the Zionist leaders on the eve of the British departure and its immediate recognition by President Harry S. Truman changed the regional dynamics. On May 17, 1948, the second full working day of the State of Israel, Moshe Sharett—Foreign Minister of the provisional government—wrote to Prime Minister Nehru, who also held the Foreign Ministry, asking for recognition. Conscious of its implications, India did not formally acknowledge, let alone reply to this request. It adopted the same response when the Mufti-led All Palestine Government sought India's recognition in October (Kumaraswamy, 1991). In line with its opposition to the partition plan, on May 11, 1949, New Delhi voted against Israel's admission into the UN, the only such occasion in India's history when it voted against admission of a country into the UN.

While India, an emerging player in the decolonized world, was important for the nascent Israeli state, New Delhi had limited political interests in the Jewish state, and this delayed progress toward formalizing recognition through diplomatic relations.

Meanwhile, the question of recognition of Israel figured in the Constituent Assembly, which drafted India's constitution. Nehru's acceptance of the People's Republic of China was flagged as a precedent and benchmark. Some Arab countries gravitating toward Pakistan and diplomatic pressures from the US influenced India's thinking on the issue. After much deliberations, on May 17, 1950—interestingly, the day future Prime Minister Narendra Modi was born—India recognized the State of Israel (Kumaraswamy, 1995).

In the initial years, a shortage of funds and personnel compelled India to be selective in opening new diplomatic missions in different parts of the world, including the Middle East. While India, an emerging player in the decolonized world, was important for the nascent Israeli state, New Delhi had limited political interests in the Jewish state, and this

delayed progress toward formalizing recognition through diplomatic relations. This prompted Israel to send Dr. Walter Eytan—Director-General of the Foreign Ministry—to India in March 1952. He met several Indian officials, and even lunched with Prime Minister Nehru. The Indian leader assured Eytan that relations would be established and promised to secure the cabinet approval shortly after the ongoing elections to the first Lok Sabha elections (Eytan, Israel State Archives, 21/2383). Nehru even asked Ministry officials to prepare the budget for a resident Indian mission in Tel Aviv.

None of these promises were fulfilled, or more precisely, they took more than four decades to materialize. According to the accounts of Nehru's biographers Michael Brecher (Brecher, 1968b) and Sarvepalli Gopal (Gopal, 1980), Nehru did take the matter to the cabinet but was cautioned by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Nehru's senior colleague and former president of the Congress party raised two concerns, namely, Pakistan and the domestic Muslim population. Azad feared that Pakistan would earn diplomatic capital in the Arab world by exploiting India's relations with Israel and gain their support for its position on the Kashmir question in the UN General Assembly. Having taken the Kashmir dispute to the UN, Nehru needed the Arab support, or at least neutrality, and normalization with Israel, Azad argued, would be counterproductive. Similarly, India's partition had traumatized the Muslims of India, and given the Islamic dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Azad feared that the Indian minority population would be further alienated from the Congress party and government over relations with Israel. As subsequent events proved, Nehru accepted Azad's concerns and logic and deferred normalization.

The absence of relations easily influenced Nehru to accept the Arab diktats over Israel's participation in the Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia, in April 1955. The Indian Prime Minister insisted on the participation of the People's Republic of China, which was not recognized by several Asian countries who were invited to Bandung, but he was unable to prevail over the Arab countries regarding their opposition to Israel's participation. Nehru's confidant Krishna Menon felt that even Indonesia—the host and the country with the largest Muslim population—could have been convinced, but not Pakistan (Brecher, 1968a). The exclusion from Bandung, conceded by Nehru, eventually led to Israel's exclusion from the Non-Aligned Movement (September 1961) and its isolation from the Global South. Indeed, the anti-Israeli chorus in the United Nations and various other forums since the mid-1950s was the direct outcome of the Bandung conference, and Nehru was a reluctant handmaid in this saga. Had India maintained formal ties with Israel at that time, Nehru would not have easily succumbed to Arab pressure tactics or the Pakistani blackmail.

However, formal Indian opposition to normalization came amidst the Suez crisis. Interestingly Moshe Sharett, who had resigned as foreign minister due to policy differences with Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, met Nehru in New Delhi when newspapers carried the Israeli military offensive as the headline news (Caplan, 2002). By then, Nehru's friendship with Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser was firmly in place, and Cairo had become a stopover for Nehru's visits to Europe and the United States. More than the aggression against a friendly country, Nehru was infuriated by Israel's collaboration with the imperial powers. As he was championing decolonization, Nasser was slowly gravitating toward Nehru's worldview against the Cold War-centric military blocs in the Middle East. Though he came under criticism for his lenient views on the Hungarian crisis, which was unfolding at that time (Reid, 1981), Nehru was forceful in his disapproval of the tripartite aggression, which affected his views on relations with Israel. Having not implemented his March 1952 pledge to Eytan, he was now forceful in deferring the move. On November 20, 1956, he informed the Lok Sabha that "in view of the existing passion" over the Suez crisis,

"diplomatic exchanges [with Israel] were not possible" (Kumaraswamy, 2010, p. 124). Since then, time-is-not-ripe became the standard Indian position regarding relations with Israel.

From 1956 onwards, Israel's policy choices and behavior added to India's reluctance for normalization. Interestingly, a similar situation elsewhere did not impede India from maintaining formal relations with the outside world. The most notable examples are China and Pakistan. Political differences and even military confrontations did not prevent India from maintaining diplomatic relations and resident missions in Beijing and Islamabad. Relationships and political engagements with them were seen a necessary and effective way of mitigating tensions and further conflicts.

Israel, however, was treated differently. Why did New Delhi avoid even minimal ties with Israel, especially when there were no political, economic, cultural, or strategic problems with the Jewish state? Why was India more hostile toward the Jewish state than it was toward China or Pakistan? The answer lies in two closely-linked external factors, namely, India's political competition with Pakistan and its limited diplomatic capital, especially in the Arab-Islamic world. Before discussing these factors, which contributed to the absence of formal ties with Israel until 1992, it is essential to remember the prolonged neglect of India and its leaders by the Zionist movement.

Neglect of India

India never figured in the political or diplomatic calculations of Zionism, and leading figures of the Zionist movement, such as Chaim Weizmann, Ben-Gurion, or Sharett, never reached out to the Indian nationalists. The reasons are not difficult to understand. India has been one of the few places in the world free from the scourge of antisemitism. This and the small Jewish community meant that from a Zionist viewpoint, India was not a critical arena that needed attention, and hence it did not figure in Zionist diplomacy.

Moreover, the success of the homeland projected rested on British support, and this precluded the Zionists from identifying with or supporting the Indian nationalists who were fighting the British. Thus, other than one brief meeting in October 1931, the Zionist leadership never met Gandhi, who dominated the nationalist struggle for over two decades. In line with his earlier pro-Arab positions in November 1938, Gandhi observed: "Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English and France to the French." Though his remarks were questionable (Ginat, 2009; Kumaraswamy, 2018c), the limited Zionist interest in Gandhi disappeared after this controversial remark. Likewise, Ben-Gurion never reached out to India until after both partitions.

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The Zionist neglect of India was in contrast to the Arabs and Palestinians who reached out, identified with its anti-imperial struggle, and in the process, secured the steadfast support of the Congress party. The convergence of interests and mutual support were prevalent both before and after India's independence. Nehru and his successors emerged as the prominent supporters of the Palestine cause, and unlike some Arab countries, India's support for the Palestinians was visible, consistent, and even uncompromising.

When there were no bilateral disputes, what was the logic behind the prolonged non-relations between India and Israel? Why did India persist with its recognition-without-relations policy for over four decades? The reasons lie in two closely-linked external factors, Pakistan and Palestine, which also symbolized India's limited external influence during the Cold War.

The Pakistan Factor

The rivalry between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League during the anti-British struggle before 1947 transformed into Indo-Pakistan rivalry after the British departure from the Indian subcontinent. Earlier the target audience was the domestic Muslim population, which both parties wanted in order to expand their support base. It began in the 1920s during the pan-Islamic Khilafat phase and intensified in the following decade when the situation in Palestine was heating up. The League's vociferous demand for the revocation of the Balfour Declaration, criticisms of the British policy in Mandatory Palestine, and protests in support of the Arabs compelled the Congress party to increase its focus and formulate its position on Palestine (Kumaraswamy, 2018b).

The Jewish demand for a homeland reflected the emerging agenda of the Muslim League and its aspirations for a Muslim homeland in post-British India. In both cases, a distinct religious group felt it was also a nation and hence was entitled to self-determination and sovereignty. If the Congress party were to accept the Zionist argument of Jews being a distinct nation, it would not be able to reject the same clams of the Muslim League. In the Indian context, the religious-national convergence undermined the Congress agenda of an inclusive and unified country after the British departure. Therefore, the Congress Party's sympathy in 1938 for the Jews in Europe, under growing Nazi power, was accompanied by its support for the Arab nature of Palestine.

The Congress-League rivalry played out internationally when the UN took over the Palestine question, and this also became the first formal arena for the Indo-Pakistani disputes over Palestine. As a member of UNSCOP, India proposed Federal Palestine, but Jews as well as Arabs opposed this and hence the plan was never discussed in the United Nations and was largely forgotten even by the academics. (For a notable exception, see Ginat, 2004.) Opposing the partition proposal, the Arab states pushed for a unified Palestine, and this forced the UN General Assembly to appoint another panel to deliberate the idea. Comprising primarily Arab and Islamic countries, the sub-committee was headed by Pakistan, which joined the UN only on September 30, weeks after the UNSCOP report was submitted. With limited deliberations, the group endorsed unitary Palestine (UNGA, 1947), but its recommendation was rejected by the General Assembly, thereby leaving only the partition plan for wider deliberations and vote. And on November 29, both India and Pakistan voted against the majority plan that formed the legal basis for the establishment of the State of Israel.

Since then, an intense Indo-Pakistani rivalry played out in the Middle East and was visible for the entire duration of the Cold War. As the conflict over the Himalayan State of Jammu and Kashmir intensified following the Pakistan-backed infiltration after partition, Prime Minister Nehru took the matter to the UN on December 31, 1947. In hindsight one could fault the very expectation of the UN's ability to resolve the problem as an error of judgment, but the Kashmir dispute came to shape India's Middle East policy. As Israeli diplomat Eliyahu Sasson observed in December 1950, Pakistan has been the "center of gravity" of the Indian diplomats.[1] In practical terms, this meant that Israel became the casualty of India's rivalry with Pakistan, evidenced when Azad raised Pakistan as a concern against the normalization of relations with Israel shortly after the Nehru-Eytan meeting in 1952. Another senior aide to Prime Minister Nehru admitted that Pakistan was responsible for India succumbing to Arab pressures for the exclusion of Israel from the Bandung conference.

A more visible manifestation of the Indo-Pakistani rivalry over Israel was played out in the first Islamic summit held in Rabat in September 1969. The conference was in response to the fire in the al-Aqsa mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem a few weeks earlier, which enraged the Muslim sentiments across the Global South.

The Saudi and Moroccan monarchs sought to use the opportunity to undermine Nasser and generate an Islamic response and agreed for a conference to be hosted by King Hassan V. The preparatory team set out two criteria for the attendees; countries with a Muslim-majority population or with Muslims as heads of state. India did not fulfill either of the yardsticks; while Muslims constitute a large population, they are a minority in India; and Zakir Hussain, who was the third president, passed away in May 1969.

However, India was keen to attend the proposed Islamic conference, largely because of the strategic shifts brought by the Six Day War in 1967. The Arab military defeat buried the secular pan-Arabism and heralded the upsurge of the Islamist revivalism led by the conservative Saudi monarchy. This shift was unfavorable to India, which was closer to and benefited from the Nasser-led regional order in place since the 1950s. The Nehru-Nasser bonhomie reflected India's Middle East policy, and between 1953 and July 1955 alone, both leaders met as many as eight times (Heikal, 1973). After the 1967 War, India was compelled to adjust to the new Saudi-dominated regional order.

In contrast, the new shift benefited Pakistan. Since its birth, Pakistan has emphasized the Islamic element in furtherance of its relations with the Middle East (Chaudhri, 1957; Delvioe, 1995), and actively but unsuccessfully promoted the idea of an international body or "commonwealth of Muslim nations" (Khan, 1961). Pakistan was also part of the US-sponsored military blocs in the region, a move vehemently opposed by Nasser. The rivalry was more than tactical; some of the Pakistani diplomats, for example, hailed the Israeli military advances during the Suez War (Kumaraswamy, 2000). The post-1967 Middle East favored Pakistan and undermined India's interests. Since the al-Aqsa fire, there were massive demonstrations in different parts of India against Israel, and one such event in Calcutta (now Kolkata) drew over a million protesters. Responding to the new situation, India abandoned its secular approach and was eager to attend the Rabat conference.

From the materials available in the public domain, one can reconstruct the following. India approached King Faisal of Saudi Arabia through back-channel diplomacy and questioned the logic of not inviting a country with a sizable Muslim population. This effort was successful: India secured a nod to attend Rabat, and an official delegation by senior minister Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad was sent to Morocco. Before the delegation could reach Rabat, the conference had started, and India was represented by its Ambassador in Morocco, Gurbachan Singh. The presence of a turban-wearing Sikh diplomat in the Islamic conference upset Pakistani President Yahya Khan, who chose to stay away after the inaugural session. The mediatory efforts by King Faisal were unsuccessful, and India did not attend the subsequent deliberations. The conference meant to discuss Israel and the al-Aqsa incident was hijacked by the Indo-Pakistan rivalry (Kumaraswamy, 2010; Singh, 2006).

The Rabat fiasco symbolized the influence of Pakistan upon India's policy toward Israel and the broader Middle East. The formation of the Organization of Islamic Conference (later Organization of Islamic Cooperation, OIC) boosted Pakistan's endeavors in waving the Kashmir issue in the Islamic forum and beyond and became a major foreign policy challenge to India. Despite its best efforts, India was unable to remove the Kashmir issue from the OIC agenda. However, over time its economic ascendance since the early 1990s and its growing ties with key Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE dented the negative fallout of the OIC positions on Kashmir.

Primarily due to the Pakistan factor, until the normalization of relations, India has refrained from publicly acknowledging Israel's military help, and political support during its wars with China (1962) and Pakistan (1965 and 1971), and periodically rejected Israeli overtures. For decades Israel's only representation in India was confined to the consulate in Mumbai with

limited diplomatic immunities and restricted functions (Kumaraswamy, 2007). Even this representation became problematic following controversial remarks by Consul Yosef Hassin. In a media interview, he lamented that the Indian leaders "are afraid of the Arabs, they are afraid that Iraq will cancel their contracts, Saudi Arabia will stop accepting laborers… India is always asking for floor at the UN and other international forums to denounce Israel and prove to the Arabs that you are doing more than Pakistan. That way, you think you will impress the Arabs" (Sunday Observer, 1982).

These remarks were not inaccurate, and when it came to Israel, India was presenting itself to be more pro-Arab than Pakistan. The Jan Sangh-led opposition had long made similar charges against the Congress-led government party. Hassin's undiplomatic and intemperate remarks came amidst Israel's invasion of Lebanon and resulted in his being declared *persona non grata*. There were suggestions that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi even contemplated closing down the consulate but was dissuaded due to American pressure. The Pakistan factor remained dominant until the end of the Cold War when India was compelled to dovetail its policy in the new US-dominated world order and to forge relations with Israel.

More than the end of the Cold War and structural changes in the international order, it was the diminishing influence of the Palestinian factor that spurred India to reexamine its Israel policy.

The normalization of relations did not end the Indo-Pakistani tussle over Israel but took a different turn. India's growing ties with Israel have spurred debates within Pakistan over its continued opposition to the Jewish state. A sense of uneasiness is visible, especially over the Indo-Israeli military relations (Noor, 2004). Several Pakistani leaders, diplomats, media personalities, and even religious figures have suggested a reexamination of the status quo, especially in the wake of the Oslo process (Kumaraswamy, 2000, 2006). In short, while previously the Pakistan factor inhibited India from normalizing relations with Israel, since 1992, India's friendship with Israel has encouraged a Pakistani rethink on Israel.

The Palestinian Factor

More than the end of the Cold War and structural changes in the international order, it was the diminishing influence of the Palestinian factor in the regional polity that spurred India to reexamine its Israel policy.

For long, the instruments through which India could further its interests abroad have been limited to its pre-independent legacy of non-violent national liberation and desire for a peaceful resolution of international disputes. They enabled India to play a pivotal role in several issues and crises such as anti-imperialism, decolonization, Afro-Asian solidarity, the Commonwealth, disarmament, the nuclear arms race, Korea, Vietnam, and others. If national liberation movements saw India as an inspiration, major powers viewed it as a possible role model for the decolonized countries. Despite its limited economic influence, the admiration of rival blocs of the Cold War was genuine, but this did not endure. The mid-1950s saw the arrival of a Soviet bias in India's worldview manifested during the Prague Spring, and gradually New Delhi gravitated toward Moscow on a host of issues and tensions. As its moral sheen began to fade, a fatal blow came over its military confrontation with China in 1962. The inability to defend its territories made India's leadership claims empty and unsustainable. Like the Yom Kippur War for Golda Meir, the Sino-Indian War ushered in Nehru's political eclipse.

India's diminishing diplomatic influence, limited economic clout, and preoccupation with Pakistan resulted in New Delhi looking for the Palestine cause to further its interests in the Arab-Islamic Middle East. Mahatma Gandhi's 1938 statement that "Palestine belongs to the Arabs" figured prominently in Indian discussions on

Israel, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the broader Middle East (Abhyankar, 2007; Ahmad, 2014; Chakravorti, 2008; Dasgupta, 1992; India, MEA, ND; Ramakrishnan, 2014; Ward, 1992). Since 1947, the support for the Palestinians has been a standard requirement when Indian leaders meet their Arab counterparts. For example, in December 1963, when the West Bank was still a part of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, King Hussein visited India and met Prime Minister Nehru. The joint communique issued on the occasion declared that both leaders "expressed understanding and appreciation of the Palestinian problem" (Heptullah, 1991). The Palestine cause filled the vacuum created by India lacking political influence or economic clout in the Arab world. Though this did not lead to Arab support during India's wars, a contrary position would have firmly placed the Arab countries on the side of Pakistan.

The reliance on the Palestinian factor became untenable after the Kuwait crisis (1990-91). The perceived Palestinian support for President Saddam Hussein and his offer to withdraw from Kuwait if Israel were to do the same vis-à-vis the Palestinian territories proved fatal for the PLO (Abed, 1991). It was in Kuwait that Yasir Arafat founded al-Fatah in 1959 when he was pursuing engineering. Hence, in the hour of their need, the Kuwaitis felt abandoned by the Palestinian leadership. Once the *status quo ante* was restored in Kuwait after US-led Operation Desert Storm, the tide turned against the Palestinians, and their stay in Gulf Arab countries became problematic. Kuwait alone expelled more than 350,000 Palestinians (The White House, 2020). For a while, some Arab countries even imposed an unofficial ban on Arafat, and because of the Kuwaiti refusal, he could not visit the emirate before his death in November 2004. Upon his election as president, Mahmoud Abbas visited the Emirate only after his public apology over the PLO's stand during the Kuwaiti crisis (BBC News, 2004).

Thus, in the wake of the Kuwaiti crisis, the Palestine cause through which India promoted its interest in the Middle East since independence suddenly lost its importance. The Arab anger in the Gulf over Arafat meant that no country, including India, could expect favorable treatment with their pro-Palestinian credentials. The Kuwait crisis was followed by the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference (October 30-November 1, 1991), which further exposed the diminishing influence of the Palestinian issue in regional affairs. By agreeing to attend the conference, the Palestinian leadership signaled its willingness to seek a political settlement and accommodation with Israel. Moreover, despite being recognized by the Global South as the "sole and legitimate representative" of the Palestinian people, the PLO agreed to go to Madrid as a joint delegation with Jordan and acceded to other Israeli demands for the Madrid format. Thus, when the Palestinians were ready to seek a negotiated political settlement with Israel, there was no compelling reason for India to be more Palestinian than Arafat or more Catholic than the Pope. Normalization of relations with Israel became a logical and even inevitable step.

Post-1992

The recognition-without-relations phase of India's Israel policy ended on January 29, 1992, when Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao reversed Nehru's policy and announced the establishment of diplomatic relations. Until then, it was a zero-sum approach whereby even minimal ties with Israel was seen as an anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian measure. Even though the Cold War was not responsible, the absence of relations was in sync with the emerging Afro-Asian bloc, namely Non-Alignment. Over time, the rhetoric against Israel emerged as one of the foreign policy issues that could unite an otherwise divergent and even incongruous group. The hostility of the Soviet bloc after the 1967 War added a "progressive" cloak to the anti-Israeli narrative.

Normalization was the second phase of India's Israel policy and was marked by the

establishment of resident missions in both countries. While reaching out to Israel, India pursued a delicate balance of not diluting its traditional support for the Palestinians. Through what can be described as a parallel track, India maintained its former positions on critical issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict such as Palestinian statehood, borders, settlements, and others. The 1990s saw India pursuing a delicate policy whereby it sought to balance its new-found friendship with Israel with its pro-Palestinian past. Though some were not happy with the balancing (Aiyar, 1993; Dasgupta, 1992; Pradhan, 1998), India actively pursued relations with Israel, including in the military-security arena (Inbar, 2004). The nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party, which came to power in 1998, expanded the relations through robust political contacts and hosted Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in September 2003 when not many Western countries were eager to engage with him.

In 1992 India normalized diplomatic relations with Israel, and Israel has become integral to India's overall Middle East policy. By moving gingerly and through his economic agenda, Modi has minimized the criticisms that India was pursuing an ideological approach toward Israel.

The third phase of the Indo-Israeli relations coincided with the return of the Congress party to power in 2004 under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The Left parties, whose outside support was critical for the government, demanded "course correction" on Israel and reduced military ties (Cherian, 2004). The Indian government, however, followed a complex policy, reminiscent of the *yishuv's* posture on the MacDonald White Paper of 1939; it delinked the bilateral relations with Israel from the multilateral peace process and increased the former, despite disagreements over the latter. For example, India's initial reaction to the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers that spiraled into the Second Lebanon War was more balanced (India, MEA, 2006). This phase peaked in January 2008, when India launched an Israeli spy satellite into orbit (Subrahmanyam, 2008). It was during this period that the state governments in India playing a more vigorous role in promoting relations with Israel was evident (Kumaraswamy, 2017b, 2017c).

Modi-Bibi Phase

The arrival of Narendra Modi on the Indian national scene marks the fourth phase of the bilateral relations. On May 16, 2014, as the Lok Sabha results were streaming, Benjamin Netanyahu became the first world leader to telephone Narendra Modi on his impending landslide victory. Since then both leaders have followed each other on Twitter and exchanged greetings on each other's national days, festivals, electoral success, and other events. Unlike his predecessors, Modi has been more public and vocal about his admiration for Israel and its accomplishments and has frequently praised Israel. For his part, Benjamin Netanyahu used Modi's portrait for his election campaign in September 2019.

There has been a spate of political engagements and meetings between the two countries. Modi and Netanyahu met in September 2014 on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session. The following March Modi met Israeli President Reuven Rivlin in Singapore during the funeral of veteran statesperson Lee Kuan Yew. In October 2015, Pranab Mukherjee became the first Indian president to visit Israel (Kumaraswamy, 2015), and this was followed by the visit of President Rivlin to India in November 2016.[2] In July 2017, Modi became the first Indian premier to visit Israel (Kumaraswamy, 2018a). Contrary to initial speculations, Modi avoided going to Ramallah and underscored his dehyphenation.

Moreover, weeks before his Israel visit, Modi hosted Palestinian President Abbas. In a major policy shift, he announced India's support for an independent Palestinian state coexisting with Israel but without any reference to East

Jerusalem being its capital (Kumaraswamy, 2017a), even though for nearly a decade East Jerusalem figured prominently in India's statements on Palestine.[3] Soon after his Israel visit, Modi hosted Netanyahu in January 2018 (Roy, 2019) and media reports suggested that the Israeli leader wanted to visit India before the two Knesset elections held in 2019 (Chaudhary, 2019). Meanwhile, Home Minister Rajnath Singh (November 2014) and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj (January 2016) visited Israel, and in February 2015 Moshe Ya'alon became the first Israeli Defense Minister to visit India.

These political contacts were accompanied by calibrated moves in multilateral forums. Until he was compelled to deliver online presentations due to the Covid-19-related global lockdown, Prime Minister Modi skipped NAM gatherings and preferred to delegate others in his stead. Rather he focused his attention on great power politics and G-20 summits. This meant that India has been less active in joining the international chorus against Israel. Without diluting its overall support for the Palestine cause, India has been signaling its departure from the Global South. On July 1, 2015, it abstained during a vote in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) that called for the Gaza War of 2014 to be investigated by the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Prashad, 2015). Likewise, after voting with the Arab-sponsored resolution in UNESCO in April 2016 that denied Jewish connections to Jerusalem, India abstained in the two subsequent votes in October that year and May 2017. In June 2019 India supported an Israeli move in the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) that denied observer status to the Palestinian NGO Shahed (Blarel, 2019).

India's position on President Trump's decision to declare Jerusalem as Israel's capital is interesting. On December 21, 2017 India joined the majority and voted against the American move. But at the bilateral level, its reaction was bland. Responding to media queries, the official spokesperson merely observed: "India's position on Palestine is independent and consistent. It is shaped by our views and interests, and not determined by any third country" (India, MEA, 2017). Some saw it as Modi's government adopting an ideology that could dovetail with the Trump administration (Joshi, 2017).

The most interesting feature of the ongoing fourth phase of the India-Israel relations is the normalization of a different kind. In 1992 India normalized diplomatic relations with Israel, and now, Israel has become integral to India's overall Middle East policy. By moving gingerly and through his economic agenda, Modi has minimized the criticisms that India was pursuing an ideological approach toward Israel. While not everyone is happy with his approach (Aiyar, 2017; Gandhi, 2017), there were few criticisms from the Middle East over Indo-Israeli relations, with the Islamic Republic of Iran being the notable exception (TNN, 2017).

By carefully focusing on the provincial governments, Israel has enhanced the economic and non-political component of the relations and, in the process, sought to minimize differences over the peace process. While the military-security relations occupy a prime position (Inbar, 2017; Inbar & Ningthoujam, 2012), the bilateral relations are dominated by economic and developmental issues such as agriculture, horticulture, floriculture, recycling, water management, health and others (Kumaraswamy, 2018a). Minimizing the focus on the security agenda should also rid the negative tag normally attached to the securitization of relations with Israel and provide positive content and make cooperation more widely acceptable within India.

Conclusion

In its century-long trajectory, India's Israel policy faced different challenges and responses. Historical relations with the Jews and the absence of antisemitism were accompanied by the lack of understanding of Jewish history and longing for a home. It was compounded by

Palestine becoming a domestic Indian agenda and competition with the Muslim League. Since independence, a weak economic base limited India's diplomatic options. Political competition with Pakistan in the Arab-Islamic Middle East resulted in its relying heavily on the Palestine question to further its interests. Despite the absence of any bilateral dispute or problems, non-relations marked India's policy toward Israel. The end of the ideological divide, the post-Kuwait shifts in regional dynamics, and its own economic ascendance have enabled India to be pragmatic in charting a course that reflects its interests and power projections. Even a quarter of a century after normalization, Indo-Israeli relations continue to invoke attention both within and outside India, due primarily to the gradualism in its approach and its ability to integrate Israel within its broader Middle East policy. At one level, Israel is "special," because India managed to avoid the usual negative repercussions that are normally associated with relations with the Jewish state; but Israel is also "normal," because India is no longer shy in dealing with it more openly.

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Notes

1 Eliyahu Sasson to S. Divon 28 December 1950, Israel State Archives 53/6b.

2 This was the second presidential visit from Israel, as Ezer Weizmann visited India in December 1996-January 1997.

3 Surprisingly, East Jerusalem reentered in the Indian lexicon during Modi's visit to Riyadh in October 2019 (India, MEA, 2019).