

# The Modi Government's Policy on Israel: The Rhetoric and Reality of De-hyphenation

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## Background

In January 1992 India's Congress-led government under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao established full diplomatic relations with Israel. This milestone, which constituted a revolution in the diplomatic history of both the countries, came shortly after India's vote to overturn the 1975 United Nations resolution equating Zionism with racism.

A number of factors helped Rao abandon India's hesitation toward Israel of the previous four decades. With the onset of the process of economic liberalization at the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Rao looked to the West as India's principal partner. Full diplomatic relations with Israel was a clear signal to the West that New Delhi was formally giving up the ideological rigidity that was the hallmark of India's foreign policy during much of the Cold War when the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was at its height.

Fast-changing developments in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process also contributed to a change in Indian attitude. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) incorporated the idea of political engagement into its traditional strategy of armed struggle against Israel. It not only recognized the existence of Israel, but also endorsed the process that launched the United States-Soviet sponsored peace talks in October 1991 at Madrid, attended by all of Israel's immediate neighbors – Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. Though the conference did not result in any major achievement, it

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symbolized the commitment of all parties to the conflict to seek a political solution.

India had tried hard to secure Arab friendship by avoiding rapprochement with Israel, yet when Israel's Arab neighbors engaged in negotiations, New Delhi could seemingly hardly be criticized for pursuing normal relations with Israel. Nonetheless, India was met with resolutions by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in support of Pakistan, the instigator of armed conflict in Kashmir. Within India, voices demanding policy correction became louder. The fact that China had recently established full diplomatic relations with Israel also made it easier for the Indian government to follow suit. Israel was a great source of advanced military technology and hardware, and India could benefit from Israel's experience in counterterrorism in its own struggles in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Thus, India's security and strategic imperatives drove New Delhi to adopt a pragmatic policy toward Israel.

Yet even after the normalization of relations with Israel in 1992, the Indian government was not eager to be seen as courting Israel. When then-Defense Minister Sharad Pawar talked about cooperating with Israel on counterterrorism, he was criticized by some Muslim politicians.<sup>1</sup> Visits to India in December 1996 by Israeli President Ezer Weizman hinted at a new degree of warmth in relations. However, there was a noticeable shift in Indian policy with the formation of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Due to the pro-Israeli stance of the Hindutva leaning Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the government leaders

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were more willing to publicize India's friendship with Israel. Even the onset of the second intifada and the international criticism over the Jewish state's policy toward the Palestinians did not prevent the Vajpayee government from forging closer ties with Israel. There was a huge increase in defense cooperation with Israel, particularly in the exchange of intelligence. By the time Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made his historic trip to India in 2003, both countries had become major trading partners.

Following the 2004 general elections in India, which resulted in the formation of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, there were some apprehensions whether cordial relations with Israel forged during the previous BJP-led NDA government

would continue. Yet though the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government was dependent on the support of left wing parties, there was no moving away from the policies set out by the previous government. Therefore, Indo-Israeli relations progressed considerably during the two tenures of the UPA government between 2004 and 2014. However, there were not many high profile visits – especially from India to Israel. A trip planned in 2006 by then-Defense Minister Pranab Mukherjee was reportedly cancelled due to Israel's military operations in the Gaza Strip and the Second Lebanon War.<sup>2</sup> There was a symbolic visit in January 2012 by then-External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna, the first by an Indian foreign minister in more than a decade, to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.<sup>3</sup>

### **A New Phase**

The recent change in government in India has brought about a fundamental reappraisal of India's foreign and security policy. Over the last two and a half years, India's changing policy postures are clearly evident in several areas, including a significant transformation in Indo-US relations; an impressive warming of relations with Israel; a cautious attempt to alter the nature of Indo-China relations; and a systematic effort to make inroads into Southeast Asia. Ever since Narendra Modi's rise to power in 2014, Israel seems to have acquired greater priority over other West Asian countries on India's diplomatic agenda. Modi can be credited with elevating the strategic dimension of Indo-Israeli partnership by bringing the bilateral relationship out from "under the carpet."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, India-Israel strategic relations are poised at a historic plateau, but at the same time, the relationship will need to be nurtured for some years before it matures.

The visit to Israel by Pranab Mukherjee in October 2015 was the first visit by an Indian President to Israel and was another milestone in the bilateral relations. Traditionally, Indian presidential foreign trips do not attract much attention, but Mukherjee's six-day tour of Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel was seen as a prelude to the much-anticipated visit of Prime Minister Modi to Israel. In an extraordinary gesture reflecting the warmth of Indo-Israeli ties between the two countries, President Mukherjee addressed a special session of the Knesset and asserted that his "visit to Israel is taking place at a time when relations between our two governments are taking a very positive trajectory." Underlining the growing convergence between the two countries, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

said: "I speak to my dear friend Modi quite often. When we met once, he told me 'India wants Israel' and that I see a paragon of fraternity between our two countries."<sup>5</sup> India's Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj visited Israel in January 2016. Her visit was part of the ongoing effort by New Delhi not only to broaden India's relationship with Israel, but also to make it more public.<sup>6</sup>

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin's week-long visit to India in November 2016 was another positive development in the bilateral relations, reflecting India's unapologetic position over its growing relations with Israel. Rivlin is the first Israeli head of state to visit India in two decades, following President Weizman's visit. Terming India's engagement with Israel as "multi-dimensional and wide-ranging," Indian Prime Minister Modi, during his meeting with the Israeli President, stressed the need to "build on convergences and commonalities" in agriculture, science, and technology, research and innovation, defense, tourism, education, and culture. President Rivlin also remarked that theirs "is not just a partnership that we talk about. This is a partnership which is making a difference for Israelis and Indians in the water we drink, in the food we eat, in the technology we use, and many important areas of our lives."<sup>7</sup> Speaking at Agro Tech 2016 in Chandigarh, Rivlin sought to connect the Hindi term *jugaad* to the Jewish State of Israel and its style of inventing and working, and said that "*jugaad* is the way we think, the way we invent, the way we work."<sup>8</sup>

### Gradual De-hyphenation

Apart from the anti-colonial component of the NAM posture, India's uncritical support for the Palestinian cause was driven primarily by the need to alleviate the sentiments of considerable segments of India's Muslim minority. In this vein, India traditionally conditioned rapprochement with Israel on progress in the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Now, at a time when the Modi government has decided to showcase what were behind-the-door ties with Israel, there is a growing demand that India disconnect Israel from the Palestinian issue. Nonetheless, first steps toward de-hyphenation were initiated only in 1992 under the leadership of Narasimha Rao, when his government established full diplomatic relations with Israel. Since then, India's relations with Israel have blossomed gradually, albeit not completely free of ideological constraints and domestic political concerns.

Prominent visits by top Indian leaders have combined Israel and the Palestinian Authority in a single tour. Visits by Union Home Minister L. K.

Advani and External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh in 2000, and External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna in 2012 were termed as regional since they included meetings with both Israeli and Palestinian leaders. The visit to Israel by Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh in November 2014, however, was a landmark in that it was confined to Israel. The fact that the Palestinian Authority was not part of Rajnath's tour was interpreted as the Modi government's intent to break with the tradition of packaging high level official visits to Israel with the Palestinian Authority and Jordan. This also implied a degree of loosening the existing ties between India and the PA. However, the need to balance competing domestic political demands was evident when the traditional policy staged a comeback. President Pranab Mukherjee visited Jordan and the PA along with Israel in October 2015, and was in fact the first foreign head of state to stay in Ramallah overnight. In January 2016 External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj likewise visited the PA and Jordan, as well as Israel. While in Ramallah, she emphasized that India remained "steadfastly committed" to "the Palestinian cause" and "to Palestine's nation-building and capacity-building efforts."<sup>9</sup>

Prime Minister Modi has been quite open about wanting to develop a strong relationship with Israel. As a reflection of the new dynamism in the bilateral relations, India bought more arms from Israel in the Modi government's first nine months in power than the Manmohan Singh government did in the preceding three years.<sup>10</sup> As underlined by C. Raja Mohan, in contrast to the UPA government leaders' unwillingness to be seen with Israeli leaders in public, Prime Minister Modi's "immediate instinct" has been "to flaunt India's special relationship with Israel and his own personal bonhomie" with his Israeli counterpart.<sup>11</sup> Modi was officially invited to Israel by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during their much publicized meeting at the UN General Assembly in September 2014. During this encounter, the first between Prime Ministers of Israel and India in over a decade, Netanyahu remarked that "We are very excited by the prospects of greater and greater ties with India. We think the sky's the limit." Modi replied that India is "the only country where anti-Semitism has never been allowed to come up and Jews have never suffered."<sup>12</sup>

Moshe Ya'alon's visit to India in February 2015 was the first by an Israeli Defense Minister since full diplomatic ties were established in 1992.<sup>13</sup> The following month, when Modi met Israeli President Reuven Rivlin at the funeral of Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore, he confirmed his desire to visit Israel.<sup>14</sup> When President Rivlin met Modi November 2016 during his visit

to India, Rivlin said, "It will be our privilege to welcome you at Jerusalem, the capital of Israel."<sup>15</sup>

The overall climate in West Asia is relatively favorable toward Israel, which is not seen as the root cause of regional instability. The current havoc created by the Islamic State has shifted attention away from the Israel-Palestinian dispute and left India with an excellent maneuvering space, as most of the regional players are too busy with infighting and the jihadist juggernaut to be preoccupied with the first visit to Israel by an Indian Prime Minister. While he has not disclosed a specific timetable, Modi's visit to Israel is a foregone conclusion, even though a solo prime ministerial visit to Israel may not be possible due to a host of constraints.

Indeed, despite some favorable domestic and regional conditions, there are some factors that the Modi government cannot ignore before completely de-hyphenating India's Israel-Palestinian policy. Given India's historical support for an independent Palestinian state, some have argued that Modi's solo visit to Israel could seriously weaken India's traditional stance. India has managed to preserve a pragmatic balancing act between regional players in West Asia. Beyond strategic relations with Israel, India cannot afford to ignore its crucial energy ties with Iran and the Gulf states. Furthermore, given the already strong nature of the bilateral ties, it is questionable what new tangible results Modi's solo visit would be able to achieve. There is always the risk that this move could be used against the Modi government during high stake state assembly elections of Uttar Pradesh, home to the majority of India's Muslim population. Elections in Uttar Pradesh in early 2017 can prove to be a serious spoiler in which the opposition parties, both regional and national, would feel tempted to indulge in ideological rhetoric against the Modi government. The government would not like to listen to the accusation that as part of the anti-Muslim agenda of the BJP, the Palestinian cause has been totally abandoned.

Another challenge emerging from India's tilt towards Israel is New Delhi's bid toward permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). India requires firm endorsement of its candidacy from the Arab countries that form a large group in the General Assembly. If angered, an angry Palestinian contingent might try to sabotage India's efforts. In July 2015 during a United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) vote criticizing Israel's "alleged war crimes" in Gaza, India was among the five countries that abstained from voting.<sup>16</sup> This was the first time India decided to abstain at the vote on a UN resolution condemning Israel. It was also reported that

Prime Minister Netanyahu had spoken to his Indian counterpart, asking India to abstain.<sup>17</sup> Criticizing India's decision, Palestinian Ambassador to India Adnan Abu Alhaja said that New Delhi's changed "posture on Palestine will send a confusing signal to other UN members as to what India's role would be if and when it becomes a permanent member."<sup>18</sup> So far, maintaining a strong pro-Palestinian posture has not been an impediment for India to develop a mutually advantageous partnership with Israel. But diluting or changing the terms of support for the Palestinians has some obvious implications for India.

In all probability, the Modi government would act cautiously in order to preserve important strategic, economic, and energy interests while simultaneously enhancing India's engagement with Israel. The government may publicly claim to remain wedded to the status quo in India's Israeli-Palestinian policy, tenuous and fragile though it has become. India's voting pattern at important international forums, from its prior anti-Israel stance to one where it has now begun to abstain on Israel-related issues, is indicative of the government's resolve to bring about a seminal shift in India's Israel policy. In April 2016, India, along with more than 30 countries on the United National Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) general board, condemned Israel for its excavation and exclusion policies around the al-Aqsa mosque and al-Haram a-Sharif/Temple Mount.<sup>19</sup> But when a similar resolution was put to a vote in October 2016, India decided to abstain. Since the text of the UNESCO resolution was almost identical, India's refusal to back the Palestinian draft may have surprised Israeli officials,<sup>20</sup> and the only explanation for the change is Modi government's subtle shift in policy. What happens in the UN forums over the next few years will likely prove to be very relevant to India's Israel-Palestinian policy. While nothing is certain in international politics, India under Modi's stewardship has already shown its ability to deviate from the familiar path.

Likewise in October 2016, speaking at a public function in Himachal Pradesh, Modi compared the Indian army's targeted action against terrorist launching pads across the Line of Control (LoC) in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, dubbed as "surgical strikes," to Israel's policy of targeted assassinations and military action. He was quoted as saying: "Our army's valor is being discussed across the country these days. We used to hear earlier that Israel has done this. The nation has seen that the Indian Army is no less than anybody."<sup>21</sup> Generally, prime ministerial speeches are replete with metaphors and symbols that are used at national and international

events to construct national identity and help mold strategic culture. Pointing to an Israeli military action as a model and positioning it within the broader narrative of Indian military strategy suggests an ideological affinity that plays a significant, if subtle, role and justifies certain policy options over others. This reinforces how geopolitical as well as geo-psychological considerations weigh heavily in the Modi government's foreign and security policies, which are on the cusp of a major change. The favorable public reference to Israel makes Modi different from his predecessors in their attitudes toward the Jewish state. There appears to be a link between these developments and a discernible shift in India's Israel policy.

### Counterterrorism Cooperation

During the Cold War period, India's close ties with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its reluctance to denounce the acts of terrorism committed by the PLO made India suspicious in Western and Israeli eyes. New Delhi was viewed "as following a double standard owing to its readiness to condemn terrorism when the victims were its own people and its reluctance to do so when the victims were citizens of Israel."<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, India and Israel have managed to come together on a range of issues. Israeli leaders demonstrated considerable understanding of the constraints behind India's vocal political-diplomatic support for the Palestinians against the backdrop of New Delhi's concerns over Pakistani efforts to mobilize the Arab states against India on the issue of Kashmir. Since 1992, the dynamic has improved, reflected in a significant upward trend in the bilateral relationship in the form of defense cooperation, intelligence sharing, and counterterrorism.

Israel is India's second largest source of defense equipment.<sup>23</sup> Israeli Ambassador to India Daniel Carmon rightly termed defense cooperation between the two nations as "central pillars" of the relationship.<sup>24</sup> India has entered on significant defense collaborations with Israel, which also include developing the Barak-8 surface-to-air missile defense systems with India's DRDO<sup>25</sup> and Spike anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM).<sup>26</sup> In October 2016, India cleared procurement of Israeli combat radio sets for the Indian army, one of the latest defense procurements from Israel.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the fact that the roots and nature of the terrorism they face are different, countering jihadist terrorism is a challenge for both India and Israel. The terrorism directed against both countries is sponsored by neighbors. India has found it advantageous to learn from the Israeli experience in dealing

with terrorism, because Israel has developed remarkable technological and operational capabilities in its fight against cross-border terrorism.<sup>28</sup> Recurring cross-border attacks on Jammu and Kashmir as well as growing threat perception from the neighborhood have pushed Indian policymakers to deepen security cooperation with Israel. India's internal conflict theater presently covers diverse categories, including sub-conventional war, low intensity conflict, proxy war, insurgency, and non-combat operations, which require enhanced counterterrorism cooperation with the Israeli defense forces.

The 2008 Mumbai terror attacks again exposed the glaring inability of the Indian state to control its borders, process actionable intelligence, and preempt and counter terrorist attacks. The urgent need to address the grossly inadequate, fractured nature of the Indian security apparatus aroused a growing interest in Israeli counterterrorism methods.<sup>29</sup> Israel has provided India with satellite photo imagery, unarmed vehicles (UAV), hand-held thermal imagers, night vision devices, long range reconnaissance and observation systems (LORROS), and detection equipment for counterterrorism purposes.<sup>30</sup> India has already adapted some of the Israeli techniques and methods in countering terrorist threats emanating from Pakistan. New Delhi has held regular talks with Tel Aviv on counterterrorism within the framework of a Joint Working Group, which was set up in 2000. Even during President Rivlin's meeting with Prime Minister Modi in New Delhi in November 2016, countering terrorism was one of the priority areas of cooperation.

India's ruling BJP has always been an ardent supporter of stronger ties between India and Israel. Its leaders, be they in the government or in the opposition, have continued to express admiration for Israel's counterterrorism and national security policies. With recent surgical strikes across Pakistan-occupied territory, the Modi government has underscored India's intention of focusing on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir. In the spirit of Modi's comparison of India's anti-terror surgical strikes to Israel's exploits, India is likely to give priority to the development of elite special forces similar to Israel's Sayeret Matkal. These dynamics are likely to translate into greater counterterrorism cooperation with Israel. According to P. R. Kumaraswamy, "India's search for technological modernization and Israel's needs for economizing defense research are complementary and should lay the foundation for sustained long-term partnership."<sup>31</sup> David Malone also believes that while the security partnership is not the sole factor that binds

India and Israel, "it is the most salient one, and likely to remain so as long as terrorist violence threatens both nations."<sup>32</sup>

Although the Modi government is steadily expanding the scope and dimensions of its counterterrorism and intelligence-sharing cooperation with Israel, it has some obvious limitations, as India and Israel are not directly fighting the same adversary. India cannot afford to identify entirely with Israel's definition of terrorism. Similarly, the Indian government cannot use the same kind of coercive counterterrorism tactics that Israel has practiced.<sup>33</sup> While counterterrorism is usually the province of government, expanded efforts involving think tanks and academic institutions might make a unique contribution to fostering candid exchanges on the lessons of past counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaigns waged by both sides, and bridging between Indian and Israeli perspectives on terrorism.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

Clearly, the India-Israel relationship has evolved in the last 25 years. India officially recognized Israel in 1950, but established full diplomatic relations in 1992, which finally freed New Delhi's West Asia policy from the clutches of ideological rigidity, moral sentimentalism, and self-doubt. Almost 25 years after normalization, relations with Israel continue to draw significant attention within India. Israel's policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians still arouse much domestic debate inside India, but they do not hinder opponents from recognizing the benefits of Israeli friendship. Issues like agricultural cooperation, technology transfer, foreign investment, and security cooperation have helped generate positive sentiment about Israel. India and Israel have faced cross-border terrorism and jihadist extremism in their neighborhood, and this factor has brought them closer to each other. While progress may have been slower than expected, ties have blossomed.

At the same time, increasing ties with Israel comes with a substantive hindrance: India's traditional relationship with the Palestinians and the Arab world. The Modi government has reiterated the value of relations with Israel while maintaining that India would remain unswerving in its support of the Palestine cause. However, India's voting pattern at the UN on issues relating to Israel and the Palestinians has registered a perceptible change since 2015. New Delhi's decision to abstain from voting on resolutions condemning Israel in some UN agencies has been interpreted as a departure from India's historical support of the Palestinians. India's tilt toward Israel reflects the fact that New Delhi has not received any meaningful backing

from Arab countries on its stance on Kashmir. Moreover, there have been no sincere attempts by the Arab countries to pressure Pakistan to stop cross-border terrorism in Kashmir.

The Indian leadership has recognized that while it is necessary to maintain closer ties with both Israel and the Arabs, it is self-defeating to hide the burgeoning friendship with Israel. In fact, at a time when a violently anarchic political climate in West Asia caused by jihadist radicalization is adversely affecting regional security, there is an urgent need for India to strengthen its ties with Israel. Although it is difficult to envision the impact of future regional events on the evolution of Indo-Israeli relations, it seems inconceivable that it could put an end to a very fruitful and fertile partnership between the two countries. With Narendra Modi at the helm of affairs, it is clear that a phase in Indian foreign policy is coming to an end. The combination of diplomatic energy, strategic ingenuity, and political boldness channeled by Modi government into building a new relationship with Israel is indicative of a transformative shift in India's foreign policy.

## Notes

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