

The nuances of India's de-hyphenated policy

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tri-nation trip covering Palestine, Oman and the UAE is going to be a continuation of an orchestrated re-visit of India's longstanding policies on West Asia.

In July last year, Modi became the first Indian prime minister to visit Israel, breaking a decades-long self-inflicted embargo of Indian foreign policy. However, prior to the historic visit, Modi also hosted Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in a balancing act to reaffirm India's commitments towards the cause of the Palestinians, a historic stance that has stood the test of time and survived multiple governments.

Over the decades, India has managed to create a system where its interests and ambitions in West Asia are protected via a web of diplomacy that, first and foremost, largely steers clear of taking sides in the political and sectarian quagmire that regularly engulfs the region. Second, Indian engagement revolves around protecting a demographic base of more than seven million of the country's citizens working in the region, responsible for sending over \$60 billion in remittances every year into the Indian economy. As India moves towards becoming a larger player in global politics and economics, these pre-existing policies are increasingly in need of review, and de-hyphenating Israel and Palestine was a process long past its due date.

Modi's visit to Ramallah is important not only to reaffirm his own government's commitment towards a legacy policy, but also to re-establish to the Palestinians and, perhaps more importantly to the Arab states in the region, that any consensus that may suggest Israel is a "no-go" issue for New Delhi is against the autonomy of Indian strategic thinking. Israel realizes the fact that India will maintain a certain posture regarding Palestine, and the same is accepted by the Palestinians with regard to India's developing relations with Israel.

However, it is also vital to note that the issue of Palestine is as much a domestic political tool in India as it is for many of the Arab states. The importance of the Palestinian cause in Indian vote-bank politics is an over-sold argument, devoid of realities and tectonic shifts in thinking of the Indian Muslim population which today is much more interested in security, stability and economic upliftment than the Palestine issue that is almost forced upon them. This is not exclusive to Indian politics; some West Asian nations as well often use Palestine for their own regional agendas, fighting for the cause in global multilateral forums while simultaneously treating Palestinian refugees as third-class citizens in their own countries.

From an Indian point of view, its policies towards Israel and Palestine are shifting from mere symbolism towards one driven by substantial outcomes for its interests on a global level. For example, India went against the US in a vote at the UN to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, with New Delhi backing its decision by highlighting that its views on the issue are independent and do not coincide with anyone else. On the other side of the spectrum, it also pulled up Ramallah when the Palestinian ambassador to Pakistan was photographed sharing the stage with terrorist Hafiz Saeed, forcing Ramallah to recall their diplomat.

But along with maintaining its funambulism act, by steering clear of any change in trajectory, the Modi government also managed to avoid unwanted and extra pressures before the winter Parliament session where it was already going to be under the hammer over a host of controversial domestic policy decisions made during the preceding months and an increase in violence against minorities in Bharatiya Janata Party-led states that had gained significant space in national and international debate.

The fact that India is an upcoming superpower both by domestic and international narratives is a

discourse that is directly on a collision course with its policy of non-alignment. While West Asia is an example of India successfully balancing its interests over time, an emboldened Indian presence will also disallow New Delhi to fence-sit on issues of global relevance beyond a certain point.

Signs of such friction are visible with regard to Palestine, as India's narrative on terrorism on global platforms today aligns much more closely with Israel. The political history of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Hamas and its military wing the al-Qassam Brigades today would stand at uncomfortable odds with India's global stance against the idea of distinguishing between good terrorism and bad terrorism, specifically when the leader of Hamas, Ismail Haniya, has now made it to the US blacklist of global terrorists. This is despite India seeing "high legitimacy" of an elected Palestinian government, even if led by actors such as Hamas.

Historical baggage over keeping Israel and Palestine hyphenated has today been correctly brought to an end. Even former prime minister Manmohan Singh had looked into the possibility of him travelling to Israel during his second term in office, only for the idea to get dissolved over time. This de-hyphenation does not delegitimize New Delhi-Ramallah relations—India's former president Pranab Mukherjee, in fact, visited both Israel and Palestine in 2015—and is aimed at maximizing the advantages of the unique power-play in the larger West Asian region and to link Israel directly with India's national interests.

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