

Palestine asks Modi to mediate

Mahmoud Abbas

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Palestine this week is "historic" and will be important in the West Asian peace process, says a key diplomatic official in Ramallah, indicating a greater role for India in the political process with the decline of the U.S. role in mediation.

"Mr. Modi is visiting us at an important juncture when Palestine needs India to interact much more with the region," Majdi El-Khaldi, the diplomatic adviser to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas told *The Hindu*, in an exclusive interview over telephone from the seat of the Palestinian authority.

"The U.S. can no longer be the only mediator," he said, referring to the U.S.'s decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital. "We are asking the European Union and EU countries to mediate, and we are inviting India, which will be a strong leader in a multipolar world, to assist the process."

Mr. El-Khaldi's words are significant as they come during a period of intensive engagement between New Delhi and West Asia. After Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to India last month, the government is pivoting its interests to Israel's rivals: with the PM travelling to Jordan, Palestine, Oman and the UAE this week, and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj visiting Saudi Arabia.

High-level visits

New Delhi is also preparing for three high-level visits, from the region's most powerful leaders, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Jordanian King Abdullah II in February, and Saudi King Salman later this year. Calling the renewed engagement in West Asia as "smart diplomacy" by India, Mr. El-Khaldi said that India was one of the "few countries in the world" that had no problems with most of the countries in the region. Asked about Mr. Netanyahu's statement during his visit to Delhi that one should "ally with the strong", not the weak, Mr. El-Khaldi said that while Palestine was the "weaker side" as it was "under occupation", and India had many technological requirements from Israel, it was wrong to believe that India would "choose Israel over Palestine."

"When it comes to specific disputes, Palestinians are mindful of their position, and we don't interfere in domestic issues. When our Ambassador [to Pakistan] didn't follow this policy, even if it was inadvertent, we said it was a mistake and withdrew him immediately," Mr. El-Khaldi said.

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