

## India-Israel relations: the Arab perspective

Marking 25 years of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and India, the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to India in January 2018 served as a milestone in the burgeoning friendship between these nations. During the visit, Netanyahu and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated iCreate—the International Centre for Entrepreneurship and Technology—in Gujarat that will encourage scientific and technological exchanges between Israeli and Indian technology companies. In a speech at the event, Netanyahu expressed the hope that the partnerships between Israeli and Indian young professionals would flourish into ideas that would “change the world.”

Netanyahu’s arguably successful visit received comprehensive coverage in the Arab media, eliciting a wide array of ambivalent responses. The majority of coverage displayed frustration at Israel’s infiltration into a formerly pro-Arab bastion of the Non-Aligned Movement and fear that close Israeli-Indian relations would come at the expense of Arab interests. On the other hand, some responses highlighted an appreciation that a small state like Israel had successfully positioned itself as a strategic partner to a world power like India. Thus, for instance, Lebanese reporter Haifa Zeiater remarked on Israel’s ability to compete with the US, France and Russia in selling weapons to India.

An article by Makram Mohammed Ahmed, representing both approaches, was published in the Egyptian daily *Al-Ahram*. According to him, while Arab-Indian relations have been on a gradual decline, in recent years, Israeli-Indian relations have advanced significantly, as demonstrated by aerospace, scientific and technological agreements. He was impressed by Israel’s ability to identify, more than two decades ago, “India’s growing importance as a rising global power”, unlike the Arab failure to recognize this trend.

Arab fascination with the achievements of the Israeli “start-up nation” is not a novel concept and at times culminates in functional idealization. For several decades, more than a few Arab thinkers have discussed the growing technological gap between Israel and its neighbours as accentuating the need for reform in the Arab world. To them, Israeli achievements, such as launching satellites and astronauts into space, winning Nobel prizes in physics and chemistry, and developing technologies, should serve as a reminder to Arab states not to be left behind, and to allocate resources toward scientific education and nurturing rational and critical thought.

The view of Israel as a hub for patents and inventions was also voiced by Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006), considered by many as Egypt’s greatest writer. In his writing, Mahfouz expressed his admiration of Israeli academia. He was especially impressed by the rejuvenation of the Hebrew language and its ability, unlike Arabic, to absorb foreign-universal terms that promoted a modern scientific and technological discourse.

A similar example can be found in Egyptian publicist and TV host Khalid Muntasir, whose work stressed the need for a scientific revolution in the Arab world as a prerequisite to joining modern civilization. Muntasir argued that Israel’s scientific achievements are not a result of genetic advantage, but of studious and concentrated effort to establish and promote top-notch research institutions and academic centres.

The Technion—Israel Institute of Technology, one of Israel’s leading universities, is for Muntasir the model for the revolutionary path that Arabs should take because, according to him, its slogan “Science is the solution” is a reversal of the Muslim Brothers’ slogan, “Islam is the solution”. Muntasir was impressed that the department of computer sciences at the Technion was founded as early as the 1960s, and counts among its alumni executives in companies such as Yahoo and

Google. In an article written after the 2011 Nobel Prize in chemistry was awarded to Dan Shechtman from the Technion, he defined it as the *qibla* (the direction of prayer in Islam) for scientists, which attracts chemists, physicists, engineers and computer scientists from all over the world.

These opinions are part of a broader view that depicts a growing Arab understanding that Israel is not necessarily an enemy, but, rather, a potential partner in achieving progress in the Middle East. Ahmed chose to conclude his article on Netanyahu's visit with a call to Egypt to elevate and develop its relations with the Indian subcontinent "not in order to compete with Israel, but because it was India". Nevertheless, the ultimate goals of Israel, Egypt and the rest of the countries in the region might be also the formation of bilateral, trilateral and multilateral collaborations over mutually beneficial interests.

If India joins Arab-Israeli scientific and technological initiatives of this kind, it could assume a pivotal role in formulating a new future for the Middle East, one which would shatter outdated perceptions of a "zero sum game" and promote peace, prosperity and well-being in the region and beyond. In this day and age, technological innovations are critical to every nation, but diplomatic creativity and visionary leadership are the prerequisites for harnessing its full potential.

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