

Independent trajectory for India-Israel ties

When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visits India this month, he has one person to be thankful to more than anyone else. And that is late former Indian PM Narasimha Rao who took the bold and momentous decision in 1992 to cross the Rubicon, establishing diplomatic relations with Israel. Narasimha Rao was responding to global shifts and his opening to Israel was part of several policy changes that included economic liberalization and the “Look East” policy.

Under PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee, bilateral relations acquired greater heft, leading to expansion of bilateral trade and burgeoning acquisition by India of Israeli civilian and defence technology products. India-Israel bilateral trade has crossed \$5 billion and India’s acquisition of Israeli defence products is valued at over \$1 billion annually. Around one-third of Israel’s defence production is bought by India. The Indian market is more important for Israel since the US stopped Israel from selling high technology defence products to China.

Destiny and the cycle of history have brought India and Israel closer today than ever before. Israel has come a long way, leaving behind the complicated history of its creation and the turbulent years that followed which saw three Arab-Israeli wars. India too has discarded the baggage of history and the apprehension of vote-bank sensitive Indian politicians seems to have receded, as national interests of India and Israel have steadily converged over the decades.

India-Israel ties are now fully out of the closet. Just over seven months earlier, PM Narendra Modi undertook the historic first visit by an Indian PM to Israel, marking the growing maturity in bilateral ties. There have been several high-level visits. Among them, the visit of Israeli President Reuven Rivlin to India in November 2016, President Pranab Mukherjee’s visit to Israel in October 2015 and visits by external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj and home minister Rajnath Singh. With the blossoming of bilateral ties, there has been an increase in the frequency of high-level visits between the two countries, after PM Modi’s government took office.

The warmth was missing in the aftermath of Israel’s creation. Even the great scientist Albert Einstein failed to persuade Jawaharlal Nehru to recognize Israel in 1948. Nehru demurred and diverted the argument to “realpolitik”. Nehru was guided by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, who was his close adviser on issues relating to Muslims. India was then grappling with the consequences of Partition and deference to Muslim sentiments trumped the fact that the UN Commission on Palestine had voted to partition the old League of Nations Palestine Mandate territory. India, a member of the UN Commission, had voted against the partition of Palestine into two independent nations of Israel and Palestine. The UK, which had responsibility for the territory, had abdicated its responsibility to the UN, the successor organization of the failed League of Nations after World War II.

In more recent years, India-Israel ties have expanded steadily, encompassing sensitive areas like high technology products, defence equipment, security, intelligence, agriculture, water management, pharmaceuticals, information technology etc. Joint production and development of key defence items has emerged as an important domain of cooperation. Israel is today the third-largest source of key defence equipment for India. Israel has doggedly pursued its courting of India over the years, particularly at times when India needed critical defence supplies during conflicts with Pakistan, when other sources of supplies were not available quickly. Netanyahu’s visit will follow the dropping of a proposal, valued at \$500 million, to buy anti-tank Spike missiles. While this decision will disappoint Israel, India has agreed to buy \$100 million worth of Barak missiles. The Barak has been used by the Indian Navy for over two decades.

While India-Israel ties have expanded, India has tried to keep these growing ties off the radar. The

reasons remain the same—ties with Arab and Islamic countries. Today, however, bilateral ties are no longer hostage to ties with other countries. Ties with Israel have broad bipartisan support in Indian politics. Yet, India faces a dilemma when Israel cracks down on Palestinians. Israel's iron-fist approach to Palestinian violence and confiscation of their lands promotes sympathy in India and anti-Israel feelings among Indian Muslims who are quick to demonstrate their sympathy for Palestinians.

The burgeoning ties with Israel has not prevented India from reiterating its public support for the state of Palestine and exhorting both sides to negotiate a peaceful settlement, based on a two-state solution and secure borders. While this has remained the official position of every Indian government, there is no hesitation in engaging with Israel publicly.

The recent UN vote on Jerusalem was another opportunity for India to reiterate India's opposition to US President Donald Trump's surprising unilateral move to recognize Jerusalem as the official capital of Israel. The UN vote overwhelmingly rejected Trump's move.

The regional situation in West Asia has been marked by conflict, turmoil and strategic rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Syria and Yemen have been destroyed by civil wars in which proxies of Iraq, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey were involved. The rise of the Islamic State (IS) led to an orgy of religious-inspired violence and brutality which has now been quelled. But IS has not been completely liquidated and is re-grouping in various countries. Iran has been convulsed by public demonstrators against the "Mullahcracy" that has retained an iron grip on power since 1979. Saudi Arabia, under the new leadership of Muhammad bin Salman, has taken bold steps to reform Saudi society and also challenged Iran's influence in a competition with distinct sectarian Sunni-Shia overtones. Strategic rivalry and great power competition has destabilized West Asia.

This has made India's policy choices easier, as Gulf countries gravitate towards Israel in search of support against Iran. A divided West Asia helps India make independent policy choices that are underpinned by growing economic bonds, India-Israel ties, position on Palestine, ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries, therefore, do not contradict each other but bolster India's independent relations with different countries of West Asia. India-Israel relations are on course for further expansion under Modi and Netanyahu, who have developed the personal chemistry needed to take it forward.

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