

India and Israel: Growing Warmth in Bilateral Relations

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Abstract

India and Israel both countries share an extensive relation on the global platform in innumerable areas like economic, military and strategic partnership. They also focus on newly emerging areas like tourism, water management, agriculture and other developmental spheres. Both nations share old socio-cultural relations which are documented in historical literature. There was a brief period of cold war politics which kept the nation away. However, in the post-disintegration years, India maintained its relations with Israel like any other Asian nations. As an important nation of Asia and the world, India designates Israel as significantly important partner country and hope a better understanding in the changed contemporary regional and global geopolitics.

Key words: India; Israel; India- Israel relationship; India- Israel-ties; Bilateral ties

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INTRODUCTION

India realized the importance of Israel in its geopolitical and security discourse four decades after it recognized the state of Israel in 1950. Since then the relationship has been marked by positivity and trust. Both countries share certain similarities that have helped to draw them close to each other like common law structure,

democratic practices, colonial past, civilizational linkage, etc. (Abhyankar, 2012). Several factors have helped to the maturing of this strategically important relations. First, Israel is one such few reliable friends of India that have stood behind her at times of crises, providing her with weapons and weapon launching systems that India would not have availed from any other country. Secondly, India has been successful in delinking its relations with Israel from that of Palestine, which many strategists believe is due to the lack of gains from a pro-Arab stand on the issue of Kashmir and exaggeration of Muslim sensitivity supplemented by the rise of right-wing politics in India. Moreover, in recent times India has been able to draw a similarity between its struggle against Pakistan sponsored terrorism and Israel's coping with Hamas sponsored terrorism. Third, both are subject to the hostile and nuclear-armed neighbourhood and radicalism emanating from international terror groups like Al Qaeda, ISIS, etc. Today along with the US, India, and Israel remain major targets of these terror groups. Fourth, India's talent and skill complement Israeli innovation and technology. These have made possible collaborations across the fields of science and technology, space, medicines, nanotechnology, etc...¹ (Gerberg, 2010) A historic milestone was established with a six-day visit of Prime minister of Israel to India. Though the relations between India and Israel have boomed up after the cold war period, they started since cold war. Rather India shared its close links to the other Asian states since ancient time. On 17th September 1950 India formally has recognized the existence of Israel. As soon as India gave its consent, thereafter the Jewish agency has established

¹ Gerberg, Itzak. (2010) 'India Israel relation, Strategic Interest, Politics & Diplomatic Pragmatism', published by Israel National Defense College Tel Aviv.

https://www.jewish_virtuallibrary.org/history_and_overview_of_india_israel_relations. dated on 20th May, 2019. Accessed on 21st May, 2019

an immigration office which further converted into a trade office later became a Consulate.

Both the countries are having commonalities in multiple senses. They have passed through the nationalization process in which religious factor and communities were prominent one. The conflict between religious communities existing between both the nations (viz. Hindus and Muslims in India and Jewish and Palestinians in Israel) have largely affected not only the domestic politics at internal level but also has put an impact on their external relations. Both the countries have shared the common security concerns related to the Islamic terror support. With the same the neighborhood of both of them was problematic at a certain point. Though both of them have received their independence from the British colonialism in 1947 and 1948, still it took nearly four decades to engage with each other. Today, India and Israel are now progressing in terms of starting ups in various emerging sectors.²

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDIA AND ISRAEL

The relationship of India and Israel is significant from many angles. As India was put under the sanctions imposed by international regimes, Israel was the one who forth come to sell the weaponries in times of India's need. It was proved in Kargil War of 1999. Even today Israel and India conduct their crucial defence trade with each other. Another significance of their relationship is in spite of having differences of opinions over the Palestinian issue both countries are cooperating and holding their relations. India's support for Palestinians was seen in its pro- Arab policy as being sensitive towards Muslims community. But in later period it became distinct as India Israel started getting up with each other. For the improvement of areas like water management provisions and agricultural crisis India is strengthening its ties with Israel so that it can implement the solutions successfully. The major significance of their bilateral relationship is they not only had cooperated over the domestic areas but also the on the external affairs and their changing global power equations and according to their strategic interests. Though India publicly kept distance from Israel, they had already made a beginning to develop their relations with Israel before establishing an embassy in New Delhi. Thousands of Indian Jews started travelling to Israel. The deep ties of cooperation can be traced through the following areas.³

² https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/israel_to_supply_missiles_defense_systems_to_indian_navy_for_770_million, accessed on 22nd May, 2019.

India-Israel relations building bridges of dynamic trade,' (2017, October) published by PHD Research Bureau.

³ http://dst.gov.in/first_india_israel_initiaves_announced_joint_40_million_technology_fund. accessed on 22nd May, 2019

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. Thus, 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 complexed 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.

RECENT RELATIONS AND UNDERSTANDING

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.⁴

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 have 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 have 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.⁵

POTENTIAL AREA OF CO-OPERATION

The very important aspect of India Israel relations is security and defense. "In the early 2000s, the Indian army declared its intentions to implement a modernization program to which resources of 10s of billions of dollars would be allocated. Since then, defense deals with Israel have grown exponentially." Technological advancement plays a crucial role in modernization of defense equipment's which Israel sells to other countries. Now, with both India and Israel making renewed bilateral overtures, the potential for cooperation between the two countries is almost limitless—from nanotechnology to mega infrastructure projects. However, a few spheres, as discussed below, can be singled out as likely to be of particular interest: The Modi government's resolute approach to the threat of radical Islamism is likely to converge with that of the Israeli security establishment. Like-minded perceptions regarding common threats will, in all probability, lead to enhanced collaboration in intelligence and counter intelligence activities, especially in the collection and sharing of information; it might even extend to operational levels.

⁴ https://mfa.gov.in/MFA/PressRoom/2018/Pages/Israel_india_26_years_of_friendship_innovation_prosperity_14_Jan_2018.aspx, accessed on 22nd May, 2019

⁵ https://www.google.com/amp/s/m.businesstoday.in/lite/story/india_israel_5_year_cooperation_plan_for_agriculture_water/1/268115.html. Accessed on 22nd May, 2019.
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ECONOMY, AGRICULTURE AND CULTURE

For commercial activities the resources and opportunities can be explored in both the countries like a huge market can be certainly helpful for the Israeli entrepreneurs and vice-a-versa India can be benefited through the vast research and development department which is actively existing and performing in the industries and institutions. The trade of diamonds dominates. However, with the same sectors like water management, clean technology, medical instruments, biotechnology, nanotechnology and training sessions are some of the areas of economic exchanges. As India's international stature has grown over recent decades, so has the importance of its navy. The Indian Ocean, long of paramount importance to New Delhi, has become increasingly strategically significant for Israel too. It is important not only for maintaining the security of trade routes to Israel's expanding markets in Asia, but with the heightened threat from Iran, it is also becoming an important location for Israeli naval operations—not least amongst these is the country's submarine-borne second-strike capability. Both India and Israel have clear common interests here in preserving the security of navigation and developing logistics support for both surface and sub-surface vessels. In its multiple institutions Israel has developed the research and development departments. Both have signed an agreement over the science and technology cooperation. For the betterment academics have also joined and focus on how to give better outcome. There are exchanges of students in India and vice versa. To promote the research both have explore the funding programs for the students so that there can be more flow of quality people. In science and technology and cyber security are emerging areas on which both are focusing. According to scholars both countries are taking keen interest in setting up an identity of role model for cooperation.

This is indeed an important area where Israel and India have cooperated at their best level. Both the nations are working for 5-year comprehensive plan for the development of agriculture. Under the program there are 28 centers are established across nine Indian states. "A three-year joint programme (2018 – 2020) has already commenced, under which the Centers of Excellence (COEs) are being set up across the country to train farmers about Israeli farm and water management technology." This informal aspect proves always beneficial for strengthening the other relations. It includes tourist agencies, films and television, music across the borders. Young Israelis considered India as an ancient nation and very much attracted towards the tourism. Approximately 35000 Israelis visit India for some or other purpose. Prominent among them come as a tourist and sometimes for business purpose. An embassy at New Delhi has

organized several cultural programs in which delegates of both countries participates and celebrates the events.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

India being one of the major victims of the COVID-19 has sought assistance from Israel in tackling the spread of the virus and improving its testing capability. India being the second-most populous country in the world faces the humongous challenge of conducting a rapid test for its citizens to keep a check on the spread of the virus. Israel even sent a team of Research and Development (DDR&D) to help India develop advanced testing facilities and kits and to conduct a test of Israeli technologies for the diagnosis of COVID-19. India has also stood behind its friend by continuing to supply raw materials and respiratory masks despite growing domestic requirements.

The Israelis have also shown interest in contributing to India's "Atmahnirbhar Bharat" policy by willing to engage in collaboration with Indian firms. Israeli technology and India's manpower do complement each other. The opportunity for such collaborations extends from counter-terrorism to defense productions. Agreements worth Rupees 880 crore have been finalized for the purchase of light machine guns from Israel. The issue of the Free Trade Agreement is also a matter that is being increasingly stressed upon. Moreover, as India and China fight each other in eastern Ladakh, India's Raksha Mantri had a conversation with his Israeli counterpart stressing the need for urgent procurement of defense equipment and greater cooperation in joint production under the "Make in India" project. India is under the process to acquire the Phalcon air defense system, smart air- to-ground weapons, multi-mission drones, etc. from Israel to secure its sovereignty from Chinese aggression. Israel has also assured India of all possible help in the face of the ongoing conflict with China. (Sherman, Martin, and Londhi, 1999)

CONCLUSION

By taking in to consideration the recent developments, both India and Israel have put great remarks on various spheres. Both have certain commonalities with diversities. But in this regard Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit proved certainly fruitful for both to engage and explore multiple areas of cooperation. These two must try to take their commercial relations at the apex level. In matters of trade there is a need of Free Trade Agreements. India must open up its health sector for the Israeli companies. Very importantly both need to cooperate for combating terrorist activities and attacks, growing radical activities in neighborhood including in cyber space. A significant relationship that has evolved over nearly 4 decades is still becoming more mature by exploring crucial areas

of cooperation. India by protecting its strategic interests India is trying to balance its relations with Israel and Palestine and also with the Arab World.

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