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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in India: New Delhi seeks Balance in the Middle East

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to India in January 2018 and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel in July 2017 together mark the new prospect for political engagement between the two nations at the highest level. Although domestic political disputations have cast a shadow in the past over India's engagement with the Middle East, under Modi, New Delhi is attempting to bring greater pragmatism and balance to its regional policy.

C Raja Mohan¹

Cultivating personal relationships with foreign leaders has been the hallmark of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's diplomacy. Few leaders, with the probable exception of the Japanese leader Shinzo Abe, have drawn the kind of special attention from Modi that the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has during his visit to India from 14 to 19 January 2018. The Modi government demonstrated all the tricks in India's hospitality book in welcoming Netanyahu.

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Modi broke protocol to receive Netanyahu at the airport. He immediately drove with him to the historic Teen Murti Circle in the heart of New Delhi. The circle hosts a memorial for the Indian soldiers who helped liberate Haifa from the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. The two leaders presided over a ceremony to rename the circle as Teen Murti Haifa Chowk. After his formal meetings in New Delhi, Netanyahu travelled to the Taj Mahal in Agra for the customary photograph with his wife in front of the greatest monument for love.

The Indian prime minister serenaded Netanyahu in the streets of Ahmedabad, the capital city of his home State of Gujarat. Netanyahu concluded his visit to Mumbai where he met with Indian businessmen and posed with Bollywood stars. If Modi went out of his way to showcase his personal friendship with Netanyahu, the Israeli leader was lavish in his praise of the Indian prime minister as a ‘revolutionary leader’ who was ‘catapulting India’ to a new future.²

On substance, the talks between the two leaders focused on the familiar areas of defence, security, counter terrorism, water management and technological innovation. There were some new areas such as cooperation in energy and maritime transport.³ However, there were few dramatic announcements to be made. The significance of the visit barely a few months after Modi travelled to Israel underlines the full normalisation of India’s relations with Israel, nearly a quarter century after India established full diplomatic relations with Israel.

For some in India, though, Modi’s enthusiasm for Netanyahu is rooted in his party’s ideological affinity towards Israel and antipathy towards Muslims. That Prime Minister Modi was the first Indian prime minister to visit Israel in July 2017 and the fact that it was another Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who hosted the first-ever visit by an Israeli prime minister in 2003, does indeed suggest the importance of Indian domestic politics in the Indian approach to Israel.

² “Israeli PM Netanyahu hails Narendra Modi as a revolutionary leader”, Indrani Bagchi, *Times of India*, 16 January 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/israel-pm-netanyahu-hails-narendra-modi-as-a-revolutionary-leader/articleshow/62515526.cms>. Accessed on 20 January 2018.

³ “India-Israel Joint Statement during visit of Prime Minister of Israel to India” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 5 January 2018. <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29357/India-Israel+Joint+Statement+during+visit+of+Prime+Minister+of+Israel+to+India+January+15+2018>. Accessed on 20 January 2018.

Domestic politics, of course, is never too far below the surface in India's policy towards Israel and the Middle East. When he visited Israel in 2000, then-External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh had expressed public regret that New Delhi's Israel policy was a prisoner of India's "vote-bank" politics. Singh, who was the first Indian foreign minister to visit Israel, was, of course, making the familiar argument that India's hesitations on Israel were about the Congress party's political "appeasement" of the nation's Muslim minority. Now many critics of the ruling BJP return the compliment by suggesting Prime Minister Modi's warmth towards the Israeli prime minister is only about "injecting Hindutva" into India's foreign policy.⁴

Domestic politics can never be eliminated entirely from the conduct of any nation's foreign policy. However, there is no escaping that internal considerations have had a debilitating effect on India's engagement with the Middle East. The sources of this distorting influence are deep and go back to the pre-independence period. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire, for example, had a traumatic impact on the Subcontinent's Muslims at the beginning of the 20th century. As the leading force of the national movement, the Indian National Congress struggled to cope with the consequences. The partition of India made matters worse. Pakistan's claim to represent all the Muslims in the Subcontinent generated pressures of its own in India's regional policy.

India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was quick to extend diplomatic recognition to Israel when it was founded in 1948. However, more than four decades elapsed before Delhi decided to establish full diplomatic ties with Israel in 1992. Nehru's attempt at constructing a strong partnership with Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and a broader non-aligned movement led to the reluctance to expand the political engagement with Israel. The 1967 Arab Israeli war, the radicalisation of the non-aligned movement in the 1970s and India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's domestic populism combined to produce a conscious effort to limit relations with Israel. It was only in the second half of the 1980s, when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi began to ease some of the hostilities. The end of the Cold War, an incipient peace process in the

⁴ See, for example, "Shallow shalom", M K Bhadrakumar *The Week*, 28 January 2018. <http://www.the-week.in/columns/mk-bhadrakumar/israel-pm-netanyahus-visit.html>. Accessed on 20 January 2018.

Middle East and the reorientation of Indian foreign policy, provided the basis for a fresh approach to Israel and the region.⁵

Although India has stepped up cooperation with Israel since then, it remained hesitant about political engagement at the highest level. The only exception came when Prime Minister Vajpayee hosted the Israeli premier, Ariel Sharon, in 2003. That moment should have led to routine visits of the prime ministers. The return of the Congress party to power in the summer of 2004, heading a new coalition that included Left parties seemed to put domestic politics back into the picture.

Although the government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh steadily advanced the bilateral relationship with Israel, it was unwilling to entertain prime ministerial visits. Prime Minister Singh did not travel to Israel nor did he host another Israeli prime minister in India. When Modi became the prime minister, he did not hide his affection towards Israel. He was determined to end the ambivalence in India's engagement with Israel.⁶

The reciprocal visits of Modi and Netanyahu in 2017 and 2018 respectively will hopefully reduce the salience of domestic politics on India's Israel policy. However, the fact that there was no meeting between Netanyahu and the Congress party president, Rahul Gandhi, suggests that the bilateral relationship may not yet be free of India's internal politics.⁷ While domestic considerations may continue to hobble India's relations with Israel, New Delhi's engagement with the Middle East has certainly acquitted greater pragmatism and balance under Modi.

Even as he flaunted his special ties with Israel, Modi has intensified India's partnerships elsewhere in the Middle East, including with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Iran. He has not allowed the special ties with Israel to undermine India's traditional

⁵ For a history of bilateral relations, see P R Kumaraswamy, *India's Israel Policy* (New York, Columbia, 2010) and Nicolas Blarel, *The Evolution of India's Israel Policy: Continuity, Change and Compromise since 1922* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁶ "The hesitations of history", Ram Madhav, *Indian Express*, 18 January 2018. <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-hesitations-of-history-benjamin-netanyahu-india-visit-5027479/>. Accessed on 20 January 2018.

⁷ "Why did Rahul and Netanyahu not meet?", P R Kumaraswamy, *Indian Express*, 16 January 2018. <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/rahul-gandhi-benjamin-netanyahu-india-israel-narendra-modi-5026782/>. Accessed on 20 January 2018.

positions on Israel's dispute with Palestine. Days before Netanyahu visited India, New Delhi voted against Israel in the United Nations General Assembly resolution criticising the United States for deciding to shift its embassy from Tel Aviv to disputed Jerusalem.⁸ As Netanyahu put it, Israel was indeed disappointed with the Indian vote, but will not let that cast a shadow over the relationship with India that is growing closer.⁹

Barring a stray voice in Pakistan, there has been little criticism of Modi's warmth towards Israel. This is easily explained by the vast changes in the Middle East over the last few decades. The conflict between Israel and Palestine is by no means the only or main divide in the Middle East. Multiple other fractures today rock the region. These include tensions between Israel and Iran, Riyadh and Tehran, the Sunni and Shia, Saudis and Qataris, and between the Kurds and everyone else.

Although Pakistani ideologues revel in the rhetoric against the 'Hindu-Zionist axis' and talk of Israeli occupation of Palestine and the Indian 'occupation' of Kashmir in the same breath, Islamabad has known to run a secret channel with Israel and engaged with American Jewish groups in the past. The former president and army chief of Pakistan had tried to establish ties with Israel but had to back off amidst domestic opposition.¹⁰ On its part, Israel is eager not to present its ties with India as anti-Pakistan and will be quite happy to have diplomatic ties with Islamabad.

India's interests in Israel have grown rapidly in the last quarter of a century; just as those with the 400 million Arabs. The Arab Middle East is the main source of India's energy, the home to nearly seven million expatriate workers and a big market for Indian goods. As it seeks to tend India's growing stakes in the Middle East, New Delhi is likely to be less ideological and more pragmatic in the years to come. This is reflected in the planned visits of India's External

⁸ "Modi Govt sticks to the earlier line...", Devirupa Mitra, *The Wire*, 22 December 2017. <https://thewire.in/author/devirupa-mitra/>. Accessed on 21 January 2018.

⁹ "A dissonance between Modi's warmth and India's vote", Herb Keinon, *Jerusalem Post*, 17 January 2018. <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/India-Israel/A-dissonance-between-Modis-warmth-and-Indias-UN-vote-536947>. Accessed on 21 January 2018.

¹⁰ "Pakistan ties with Israel? Why Not asks Musharraf", Qasim Nauman, *Reuters*, 7 January 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-israel-musharraf/pakistan-ties-with-israel-why-not-asks-musharraf-idUSTRE80607Z20120107>. Accessed on 20 January 2018.

Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj, to Saudi Arabia and Modi to Oman, Palestine and the UAE in February 2018. Modi will be the first Indian prime minister to visit Palestine.¹¹

Like all other major powers, India would want to balance between competing imperatives in a volatile region. The Israelis and Arabs, alike, have a strong tradition of *Realpolitik*. They might be happier with an open, predictable and interest-based Indian policy towards the region than the one trapped in political posturing for domestic audiences.

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¹¹ “Modi to visit Palestinians, ‘for balance’”, Itamar Eichner, *Ynet news*, 19 January 2018. <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5073306,00.html>. Accessed on 21 January 2018.