

# ISAS Brief

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## **Emerging Contours in India-Israel Relations: Progress, Pitfalls and Prospects**

*India has grown closer to Israel during Narendra Modi's period of office as India's prime minister. However, he has also sought to maintain close ties with Israel's foes – the Arab States and Iran – at the same time. This paper examines, as this policy unfolds, successfully so far, the pitfalls might it confront and whether there is an opportunity in it for a peace-making initiative that could gain international kudos for Modi.*

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India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi likes to hug his foreign peers. This he does almost as a matter of relentless routine. His greeting to his high profile recent guest, his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu, in January 2018, included such an act. It was not just signalling the warmth of the welcome accorded the visitor. This time round, the hug turned out to be much more than just routine. It became an embrace, both literally and figuratively, that left little daylight between them across a spectrum of issues.

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Earlier, Modi had approached his Israeli connections with a modicum of caution. He had sought to confine it to the areas of defence. Now, like the proverbial camel making its way into the Arab's tent, he is seeking out much wider space. This visit made significant inroads into economic spheres, rendering a relationship into a much more composite or comprehensive one.

From Modi's side, the growing ties were carefully choreographed. Beginning with small steps – he had despatched his Home Minister Rajnath Singh and Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj to Israel earlier – before undertaking a trip there himself in July 2017. Now, by welcoming Mr Netanyahu in his own terrain, he has completed the diplomatic circle of reciprocations and is obviously keen to see this relationship develop to his and India's maximum advantage.

In all fairness to him, Modi did not make a clean break with India's time-worn policy on Israel and Palestine. In the past, India had stood staunchly behind Palestine in this equation. In 1938, Mahatma Gandhi, leader of the Indian independence movement against the British, had unequivocally declared that Palestine belonged to the Arabs. Following independence, India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, had India vote at the United Nations (UN) against the partition of Palestine and the creation of the Jewish state of Israel, influenced perhaps by the horrors accompanying the division by the same British colonial power of India itself in 1947. Through the 1950s and 1960s, a non-aligned India, under the Congress governance, ranged itself against the West and its allies, including Israel. India remained on the Arab side. Apart from a demonstrated strain of idealism that coloured that policy, as it did many others in post-independence India, one positive upshot of it for India was that it prevented the Arab world, including the inimitable Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, from rallying automatically, as was oftentimes expected, to Pakistan's support, even on issues like Kashmir.

Be that as it may, when Modi was swept into office as India's prime minister at the head of the Bharatiya Janata Party in May 2014, he thought he did so because his electorate preferred a change to continuity. His Israel policy fell within the purview of his intended changes. He saw in Israel a source of powerful weaponry and state of art technology, in short, a useful tool for India's rapid advancement. On the other side were the Muslim majority Arab states of

West Asia, mired in intramural crises and conflicts among themselves and with Iran. However, aware that two-thirds of India's oil imports were from that region, which also hosted seven million Indian expatriate workers, he had to be careful not to up the ante too much so as not to induce negative reaction from that part of the world. As such, he proceeded to develop connections with Israel incrementally, with an eye on possible negative reactions from the region. Seeing none, he began pushing them beyond what once would have been considered limits.

First and foremost, among the reasons to seek this proximity to Israel were weapons. Already between 2012 and 2016, 41 per cent of Israeli arms exports went to India. In April 2017, a deal worth US\$2 billion (S\$2.64 billion) was signed, which would render India as Israel's largest defence market. Israel's aerospace industry has three joint ventures in India. This included one for the Barak 8 air system, a key component of India's defence deployment. Along with the aerospace industries, under the US\$2 billion (S\$2.64 billion) deal, Rafael Advanced Defense Systems Ltd, an Israeli company, was contracted to sell to India advanced surface to air missiles.

The second positive aspect was growing economic cooperation. Netanyahu's entourage comprised 130 business representatives. Israel had long chafed at being seen only as a source for military procurements. As such, this time round, there was an agreement on a five-year joint cooperation across a variety of fields. This included agriculture, as well as research in innovation and development in areas such as big data, health care, cyber security and film production. The Indian State of Uttar Pradesh inked agreements to clean up the pollution of part of the Ganges, considered holy in much of India, which could also be viewed as the Jewish State's support to a cherished aim of India's Hindu ethos.

However, in all these efforts, Modi has been careful to be seen to de-hyphenate India's relationship with Palestine and the Arabs. At least at a stated level, India continued to back the notion of a Palestinian state. Palestine President Mahmoud Abbas is referred to by New Delhi as the 'President of Palestine' rather than of 'the Palestinian Authority'. When the UN General Assembly met in a session in December 2017, critical of the decision of United States (US) President Donald Trump to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, India voted against the US' position. Modi travelled to all major Islamic capitals that identify with the

Palestinian cause such as Riyadh and Tehran, even though the latter themselves are locked in mutual acrimony. All this requires continuous juggling in a Bismarckian fashion and, to date, Modi has not seriously ruffled any feathers.

However, as is to be anticipated, such a policy path that entails running with the hare and hunting with the hound is bound to have pitfalls. One is the possibility of a sudden volte face by the young and demonstrably not so dexterous and rather unpredictable younger leadership in the key Arab states. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates come to mind. They may suddenly decide to respond to any burgeoning negative sentiment on the Arab street, which would be detrimental to the interests of the vast expatriate Indian workers and businesses.

Second, the massive procurements in arms from Israel could militate against the basic fundamentals of the 'Make in India' policy, a very important cornerstone of Modi's government. India's state-owned military company, the Defence Research and Development Organization would prefer to manufacture the imports at home. This is perhaps why, in January this year, India reportedly sought to scrap the purchase of US\$500 million (\$656 million) worth of 'Spike' anti-tank missiles, but changed its mind eventually, coinciding with the Netanyahu visit.

Third, there could be possible domestic resistance to the idea of such a close alliance with Israel. This is more than the unaccommodating posture of the new Congress president, Rahul Gandhi, who refused to meet the visitor (even though he had earlier interacted with another visiting Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, some years ago) or the criticism of Prakash Karat of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (even though Left leaders like Jyoti Basu and Somnath Chatterjee had previously visited Israel). To Modi, their reactions would be not fish, flesh, fowl or good red herring. However, there has been some noticeable simmering in the minority Muslim community reflected in the refusal of the 'three Khans of Bollywood' – Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan and Aamir Khan – to take a 'selfie' photograph with Netanyahu which was organised by their professional senior, Amitabh Bachchan. They have considerable traction not only with the Muslims in India, but also in the Arab street in the Gulf as evidenced in the publicity given it by the media there.

The pitfalls apart, the two-tone policy in West Asia could also provide a scope to Modi to come out smelling like a rose. At this time, the decision of Trump to declare Jerusalem as Israel's capital and relocate the US embassy there has pretty much put paid to any American peace initiative between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Modi enjoys good rapport with both sides of the 'Great Divide' – Israel and Palestine, as well as with the other key interlocutors, the Arab states as well as Iran, even though they are at loggerheads among themselves. He is positively viewed in both the US and Europe. Even China does not satisfy such criteria. Could Mr Modi act as a conduit between Israel and Palestine with stable regional peace as a goal? The intellectual capacity of Indian diplomacy should be capable of taking on this challenge. Or would he prefer to act in consonance with the principle that those who rush in where angels fear to tread risk being seen as fools? Modi's instinctive predilections are to seek plaudits in the area of foreign policy which he largely has (though not, alas, in his own region, but that is largely to protect India's perceived self-interest, despite the fact that some serious critics would differ). Not for Mr Modi the conclusion that Lord Palmerston of Great Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had reached, exhausted by incessant diplomatic engagements, that "God made a mistake when He made foreigners"!

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