

ISAS Insights

No. 430 – 3 July 2017

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India-Israel Relations under Narendra Modi: A Robust Partnership in the Making

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to visit Israel from 4 to 6 July 2017 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries. In a short period of three years since coming to power, the Modi government has invested considerable political capital to develop New Delhi-Tel Aviv ties. As a consequence, India-Israel relations have gone through a paradigm shift during that period. The visit, a first by an Indian prime minister, could provide a further boost to the relationship between the two countries.

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Introduction

Since New Delhi normalised relations with Tel Aviv in 1992, the two countries have steadily strengthened their bilateral ties. Although India recognised the state of Israel on 17 September 1950, there was thereafter no substantial exchanges between them – it took 42 years for them to move from limited recognition to full engagement. This relationship between the two democracies, which was mostly discreet and under the radar, with India hesitant to

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acknowledge the relationship in public,² was often described as the proverbial “mistress syndrome”.³ It is now moving towards a robust partnership.

India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi is redefining India-Israel relations. He is scheduled to visit Israel from 4 to 6 July 2017 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries. Modi will not only be the first Indian prime minister to visit Israel, but he will also address the Indian diaspora community there, together with Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. As a result of the huge political capital invested by the Modi government in a short span of three years, New Delhi-Tel Aviv ties could now be at a significant turning point.

Heading for a Robust Partnership

When the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power through a landslide victory in the Indian elections in May 2014 under Modi’s leadership, it was a mandate for change. Delivering the 37th Singapore Lecture on “India’s Singapore Story” on 23 November 2015, Modi remarked, “The wheels of change are moving; confidence is growing; resolve is stronger; and the direction is clearer”.⁴ Indeed, the Modi government has not only focused on changing perceptions, but it has also changed the realities of its foreign relations imperatives, one of which is Israel. It has become more decisive in overcoming the historic hesitation. Redefining and strengthening ties with competing powers underline this noteworthy transformation of India under Modi.

When an Israeli delegation attended the Asian Relations Conference in 1947, and the Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, who visited India in early 1952, had lunch with India’s then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and met several ministers, the Congress was hesitant to

² Tanvi Madan, “Why India and Israel are bringing their relationship out from “under the carpet”, *Brookings Institution*, 11 February 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/02/11/why-india-and-israel-are-bringing-their-relationship-our-from-under-the-carpet/>.

³ P R Kumaraswamy, “Decentralization: The Key to Indo-Israeli Ties”, *The Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies Perspective*, 23 June 2017. Retrieved from: <http://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/india-israel-decentralization/>.

⁴ “Text of PM’s 37th Singapore Lecture ‘India’s Singapore Story’ during visit to Singapore”, 23 November 2015. Retrieved from: http://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/text-of-37th-singapore-lecture-indias-singapore-story-by-prime-minister-during-his-visit-to-singapore/.

acknowledge the relationship with Israel in public.⁵ The BJP, however, has always admired Israel and it was the BJP Convention in October 1991 that called for the establishment of full diplomatic relations with Israel.⁶ The first visit to India by an Israeli foreign minister took place in 1978 when the BJP's Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the country's external affairs minister. And in 2003, as India's then-prime minister, he hosted the first visit by an Israeli prime minister – Ariel Sharon.⁷ The BJP made it clear to the international community that India was not shy about its growing engagement with Israel. Most of the high-level political contacts between the two countries have taken place when the BJP has been in power. Once again, it is the BJP under Modi's leadership that is redefining India-Israel partnership.

The Modi government seems determined to improve India's relations with Israel. His visit to Israel aims to provide a new direction, momentum and substance to the growing relations between the two countries. He has shown zeal and vigour in wanting to engage Israel at the highest political level, which could be seen as an effort to build political connectivity, along with security, economic and cultural cooperation. Several ministerial visits in both directions, involving presidential and parliamentary delegations, have already taken place. Modi's visit in July 2017 will set another benchmark in their relationship.

An important aspect of the Modi government's foreign policy is to promote collaborations between India's state governments and partner countries in a meaningful way. Speaking at the second Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi on 17 January 2017, Modi stated that his "'to do list' is guided by the constant drive to reform and transform India", and India's international priorities form part of a seamless continuum of its choices at home.⁸ Domestic economic growth and developmental issues are key drivers of Modi's foreign policy. Israel has noticeably understood this aspect, and Tel Aviv's state-centric approach towards India ties in well with the Modi government's developmental plans for the country.

⁵ Chinmaya R Gharekhan, "India-Israel: Retrospective and Prospective", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 41, No. 4, p 314.

⁶ Efraim Inbar, "Israel and India: Looking Back and Ahead", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 41, No. 4, p 373.

⁷ Prakash Nanda, "India-Israel ties: Under Modi, Congress tradition of being apologetic about this relationship ends", *Firstpost*, 7 March 2017. Retrieved from: <http://www.firstpost.com/india-israel-relations-under-modi-congress-tradition-of-being-apologetic-about-this-relationship-ends-3318896.html>.

⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Inaugural Address by Prime Minister at Second Raisina Dialogue", 17 January 2017. Retrieved from: <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/27948/inaugural+address+by+prime+minister+at+second+raisina+dialogue+new+delhi+january+17+2017>.

Modi's development agenda and Israel's practical engagement with India are creating opportunities for tangible economic gains and strengthening foundations for a robust partnership. Why is this so?

First, Israel is a leading power in agricultural innovation, and it is not surprising, therefore, that cooperation in the field of agriculture has become an important aspect of Indo-Israel relations.⁹ It is natural for Israel to recognise the importance of agriculture and harmonise it with India's interests. The main occupation of 52 per cent of the Indian labour force relates to the agricultural sector, and an average Indian spends about one half of his household income on food (the bottom 30 per cent population spends 60 per cent). Therefore, it is prudent for India and Israel to put agriculture high on their agenda for cooperation.

Israel has set up agriculture research centres in several Indian states and has plans to set up more centres of excellence in agriculture across India.¹⁰ These centres offer free training sessions to farmers in efficient agricultural techniques using Israeli technological expertise and know-how, including vertical farming, drip irrigation and soil solarisation. While the current focus of these sessions is on mangoes, pomegranates and citrus fruits, there are plans to expand the focus to flowers, bee keeping and dairying.¹¹ Israel's agro-technologies could play a vital role in meeting India's crucial needs in the niche fields of agriculture and the related technology. India's quest for agro-technology and improving agro-productivity have created opportunities for Israel, especially in irrigation, and soil management equipment and techniques.¹² Likewise, deepening cooperation in areas such as water management, water harvesting, rural health, sanitation, start-ups and skills development would have a profound impact on India's overall development.

Second, security and defence cooperation plays a significant role in growing India-Israel ties. Israel has limited instruments to advance its foreign policy interests. It is not a member of any

⁹ Joseph Puder, "The Flourishing India-Israeli Relations: The Sky is the Limit", *FrontPage Magazine*, 3 April 2017. Retrieved from <http://frontpagemag.com/fpm/266289/flourishing-indian-israeli-relations-joseph-puder>.

¹⁰ Interview of Israel's ambassador to India Daniel Carmon, *The Economic Times*, 19 June 2017. Retrieved from <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/interviews/pm-modis-visit-will-send-message-to-businessmen-to-do-more-business-with-israel-daniel-carmon/articleshow/59209541.cms>.

¹¹ "History & Overview of India-Israel Relations". Retrieved from: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/history-and-overview-of-india-israel-relations>.

¹² Nicolas Blarel, "Redefining India's Grand Strategy?: The Evolving Nature of India's Israel Policy", in Kanti Bajpai, Saira Basit and V Krishnappa (Eds.), *India's Grand Strategy: History, Theory, Cases*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2014, p 475.

key regional organisation and forum. Hence, defence and security cooperation has become the most effective foreign policy instrument for Israel.¹³ Despite India's non-engagement with Israel for a long time, Tel Aviv has provided military aid to India during all the wars it has fought after the First Kashmir War of 1947-48.¹⁴ The Indian defence establishment overcame its initial inhibitions of doing defence business with Israel, and the commercial aspect of this relationship has begun to blossom. While some scholars argue that the military dimension is "unlikely to be the driving force behind bilateral relations",¹⁵ the last two decades have witnessed an "incremental change in the levels, scope and dynamics of defence ties" between the two countries. Indeed, Israel is proving to be "a reliable supplier, with [the added incentive of] its expertise in technological innovation and upgradation skills".¹⁶ Perhaps, institutionalised joint training/exercises and operational cooperation could be the next step to further improving defence relations. Also, cooperation in the field of space technology and research, cyber-security and information technology is likely to further intensify the engagement between the two countries.

Third, the Modi government is also beginning to work in trilateral frameworks with some countries, like Sri Lanka and Maldives, to promote open, balanced and inclusive maritime security mechanisms. These include joint projects, high-level dialogues and consultation on key political and security issues. As such, there is potential for embedding the India-Israel partnership into the India-United States (US) bilateral framework, or other trilateral frameworks in which both India and the US are members. Such arrangements will be facilitated by the convergent security interests of these countries, especially in the development of open and inclusive security arrangements that ensure the peaceful management of regional tensions, including in the areas of border management, counter-terrorism, innovation, joint exercises and training, intelligence sharing, maritime domain awareness, search and rescue, anti-piracy operations and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Comfort and candour between the Modi government and Israel could be helpful in taking the next step in their growing partnership. The integration of the India-Israel cooperation into

¹³ P R Kumaraswamy, "Redefining 'Strategic' Cooperation", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 41, No. 4, p 358.

¹⁴ Alok Deb, "India-Israel Defence Engagement: Land Forces' Cooperation", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 41, No. 4, pp 336-337.

¹⁵ P R Kumaraswamy, "Redefining 'Strategic' Cooperation", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 41, No. 4, p 363.

¹⁶ N A K Browne, "A Perspective on India-Israel Defence and Security Ties", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 41, No. 4, pp 332-334.

regional mini-lateral frameworks, if successful, will not only strengthen bilateral ties, but will also contribute to the emergence of a Principled Security Network – “a future where every country – no matter how big or small – is free to make its own political, economic, and military choices, free from coercion and intimidation. Where disputes are resolved peacefully; and the freedoms of navigation and overflight, guaranteed by international law, are respected”.¹⁷ The strategic convergence between India and Israel demands a greater degree of interoperability, cooperation and accessibility.

Fourth, the Modi government has qualitatively and quantitatively enriched engagement with the Indian diaspora. It is trying to simplify rules, quickly responding to their concerns and feedback, and engaging them in the overall development agenda of the Indian government. Modi’s proactive approach towards the Indian diaspora community has re-energised the non-resident Indian and persons of Indian origin communities. The Modi government has become a unifying force for the Indian diaspora community across the world, and India’s outreach efforts are helping to strengthen their ties with their country of origin, as well as enhancing their stature in their country of residence. Moreover, digital diplomacy has become a very effective means of communication. For instance, the Indian diaspora community has approached the Ministry of External Affairs for assistance and, due to quick and direct communications, timely assistance has been facilitated by the government. Particularly, India’s External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj has shown the way in helping people through her citizen-centric decisions. Israel is home to approximately 85,000 Jews of Indian-origin, and approximately 10,000 Indian citizens work in Israel. Modi will address the Indian diaspora at a community event at Tel Aviv’s Convention Center on 5 July 2017, in the presence of the Israeli prime minister.¹⁸ His presence will be not only unprecedented but will also signal a bold political statement – it is the full public display of a relationship which was kept under wraps for so long. Connecting to the Indian community in Israel and leveraging on the diaspora strengths will further cement ties between the two countries.

¹⁷ US Department of Defense , “Remarks on “Asia-Pacific’s Principled Security Network” As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter at 2016 IISS Shangri-La Dialogue”, Singapore, 4 June 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/791213/remarks-on-asia-pacifics-principled-security-network-at-2016-iiss-shangri-la-di/>.

¹⁸ Byeytan Halon, “4,000 Indian Jews Expected to Attend PM Modi Address in Israel”, *Jerusalem Post*, 13 June 2017. Retrieved from: <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/4000-Indian-Jews-in-Israel-expected-to-attend-Modi-address-496738>.

Finally, people-to-people contact, particularly deepening cultural linkages and tourism, is another important aspect of the relations between the two countries. Just before Modi's visit, the Israeli cabinet approved a series of measures aimed at strengthening ties between the two countries, including increasing the number of Indian tourists to the country from 45,000 today to 80,000 in four years, and providing incentives for the filming of Bollywood films in Israel. In fact, Israeli prime minister mentioned on 24 June 2017 that, "Next week, the Indian Prime Minister, *my friend, Narendra Modi* will arrive in Israel, This is a historic visit to Israel" (emphasis added). He underlined that Modi's visit, the first by an Indian prime minister, is a "very significant step" in strengthening bilateral relations that are on a "constant upswing".¹⁹

The Modi visit marks a point of departure from India's traditional policy of taking a stance against Israel and supporting the Arab cause. While, in the 1970s and 1980s, it was routine for New Delhi to join the Arab chorus of condemnation of Israel at every turn, Modi's planned visit to Israel has not led to even a murmur of protest from the Arab world.²⁰ Modi has figured out that "India's imagined binaries – West versus Muslims and Israel versus Arabs have long ceased to be the defining political themes in the Middle East."²¹ In fact, the Modi government has taken a non-military approach to regional security that is based on the active participation of the regional states themselves as key players, working with other nations that have a stake in regional security for the first time in a century.²² The Modi government has remained proactive in the past three years to engage all Arab countries. That Modi was conferred Saudi Arabia's highest civilian honour – the King Abdulaziz Sash – by King Salman bin Abdulaziz at the Royal Court in April 2016 is a testimony to his charismatic leadership.

¹⁹ Herb Keinon, "Netanyahu hails 'historic' visit by Indian Prime Minister", *Jerusalem Post*, 25 June 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.jpost.com/business-and-innovation/netanyahu-hails-historic-visit-by-indian-prime-minister-497844>.

²⁰ Bobby Ghosh, "Narendra Modi's Israel visit: The view from Arab palaces", *LiveMint*, 29 March 2017. Retrieved from: <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/2KtBrpI0mrhDyL5wjmvTUP/Narendra-Modis-Israel-visit-The-view-from-Arab-palaces.html>.

²¹ C Raja Mohan, "Raja-Mandala: Returning India to the Gulf", *The Indian Express*, 5 April 2016. Retrieved from: <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/narendra-modi-saudi-arabia-india-middle-east-gulf-countries/>.

²² Talmiz Ahmad, "India's engagement with Arab world under Modi", *Arab News*, 23 April 2017. Retrieved from: <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1088901>.

Conclusion

Overall, Modi's visit to Israel is set to inject the much-needed momentum to India-Israel relations, which have remained cold for a long time. The Modi effect is expected to not only transform New-Delhi-Tel Aviv relations, but also provide the impetus to India's domestic economic growth. Both sides expect much from the visit, with the belief that the Modi-Netanyahu chemistry is destined to take India-Israel relations to a higher, stronger and more robust level.

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