

# MODI IN ISRAEL

India Learns to Get Along with the Jewish State

*By P.R. Kumaraswamy*

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's highly publicized visit to Israel in early July 2017 was part of the silver jubilee celebrations of his country's normalization with Israel, and signaled New Delhi's desire to end Israeli "exceptionalism" and to "normalize" its engagements with the wider Middle East. The visit marked the first prime ministerial exchange between the two countries. It also showed that New Delhi was no longer apologetic about its dealings with Israel and was not prepared to view its relations with Israel only through the Palestinian prism.

For nearly a century, India's position vis-à-vis the Palestine question has been dominated by a host of domestic, regional, and international factors, including the feelings of India's native Muslim community and its troubled relations with neighboring Pakistan, which have limited New Delhi's engagement with Israel. Prime Minister Modi's three-day visit to Israel and the joint statement issued with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dispelled some of the historical misgivings about bilateral relations and set the tone for the future trajectory of Indo-Israeli relations. If it views the oil-rich Arab countries as key partners in energy security, India sees Israel in the same light in fields such as food security and technological independence. India is no longer shy about dealing with Israel and cooperating in areas that would be mutually beneficial in economic growth and development.

▷ **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi taking a walk on Olga beach in Israel, July 6, 2017. Kobi Gideon/GPO/Flicker**

## **Fighting Colonialism and Zionism**

The roots of Indian policy toward the Jewish state can be traced back nearly a century to the nationalist struggle against the British Raj. Shortly after the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which made support for a Jewish homeland in historic Palestine official British policy, the Muslim community in British India was engulfed



by the Khilafat movement, a popular campaign to express Indian Muslims' support for the Ottoman Empire's "caliphate" against Britain and its allies in the First World War. The Khilafat struggle unfolded when mainstream nationalists led by the Indian National Congress felt the absence of adequate Muslim participation in the anti-British struggle. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, they joined the Khilafat struggle and carried out various forms of protest actions throughout the country against the British.

In the early 1920s, many Indian nationalists viewed the Palestinian question as a challenge to Islam's cultural and territorial integrity against Western imperialism, and supported the traditional Islamic argument that Palestine had been under Arab and Islamic rule since the seventh century and should continue to remain so. In their view, Britain had no right to cede parts of the Islamic *umma*, or nation, to non-Muslim sovereignty. The Khilafat movement, however, ended disastrously after Mustafa Kamal Atatürk, the leader of the new Turkish republic, abolished the thirteen-century-old Islamic institution of the caliphate in 1924.

In the post-Khilafat phase, Indian nationalists viewed the Palestinian question within the emerging anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist context. The Arab struggle in Palestine was a mirror image of India's own struggle against British rule; Zionist leaders depended upon the British Mandate powers to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine. From the early 1930s, the Palestinian question became a domestic Indian issue as the Congress Party was competing with the Muslim League for the support of Indian Muslims. For Indian nationalists in the Congress Party, the Zionist demand for a Jewish national home in a predominantly Arab Palestine resembled their struggle against the Muslim League's demand for a separate Muslim homeland in the Subcontinent. Congress leaders opposed both.

In 1947, as a member of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), India opposed the majority plan for partitioning Palestine and advocated a federal plan, comprising of autonomous Arab and Jewish states within a unified federal Palestine. Unfortunately, both Arabs and Jews rejected the Indian proposal; the former felt that the federal plan granted too many rights to immigrant Jews, while the latter felt it granted them civil and religious rights when they were demanding political rights and sovereignty. India subsequently joined the Arab and Islamic countries in voting against the partition resolution adopted by the General Assembly on November 29, 1947, and in May 1949 it opposed Israel's admission to the United Nations.

At the same time, the fact of Israel's existence, its membership in the UN, and its recognition by all the major powers including the United States and the Soviet Union compelled India to reexamine its position. Delhi's continued opposition to

Israel's existence became problematic when India came to terms with the formation of Pakistan in the Subcontinent. Beyond its historical position opposing Zionism on principle, India had no bilateral problems with the Jewish state.

These resulted in India recognizing Israel. On September 17, 1950—incidentally the day future prime minister Narendra Modi was born—India conveyed to the Israeli government its recognition, which came into force the following day. Initially, India's slowness to fully normalize bilateral relations, including establishing a permanent mission in Israel, hinged on budgetary constraints and a shortage of diplomatic personnel. Perturbed by the delay in early 1952, Israel sent Walter Eytan—Director General at the Foreign Ministry—to visit India and meet with Indian officials and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. During their luncheon meeting, Nehru conveyed his willingness to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, including a resident mission in Tel Aviv, and asked his ministry to work out the budgetary details. Nehru assured Eytan that a formal decision by the cabinet would be taken shortly after the elections for India's lower house of parliament, the Lok Sabha, were completed.

Yet the normalization of relations did not happen for another four decades. According to Indian and international accounts, Nehru's senior colleague, a former president of the Congress party, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, flagged two issues, namely Kashmir and the domestic Muslim population's hostility toward Israel. He argued that diplomatic relations with Israel would be used by Pakistan for anti-India propaganda in Arab and Islamic countries and would harm India's case in the UN regarding Kashmir. He further suggested that Indian Muslims, already torn by post-partition communal violence, would feel alienated by normalization of relations with Israel. Convinced of Azad's argument, Nehru deferred the process.

A formal Indian stand came during the Suez Crisis of 1956. By then Nehru had established a personal bond of friendship with President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt. Nehru was infuriated by the Israeli collaboration with British and French colonialism in the attack on Nasser's Egypt. Shortly after the Tripartite Aggression of Britain, France, and Israel, Nehru formally ruled out normalization.

In the following decades, India was engulfed by the growing opposition of Third World powers to Israel. Especially after the June war of 1967, India became increasingly vocal in criticizing Israel in various international forums. In November 1975, despite the historic absence of anti-Semitism, India joined the Arab-Islamic countries and voted in support of the UN General Assembly Resolution 3379 stating "Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination."

By the mid-1970s it became clear that only a radical transformation of the international political order would bring about a change in India's Israel policy. Despite the absence of any bilateral issue, and despite even seeking military help from Israel

during national emergencies like the Sino-Indian War of 1962, India was not ready to view Israel just as another normal country. Even a modicum of relations was seen as an aberration and abandonment of its traditional support for the Palestinians. Indeed, this is far different from India's policy vis-à-vis China and Pakistan, countries with whom it has territorial disputes and has engaged in military conflicts. This zero-sum approach was the hallmark of the first phase of India's Israel policy that lasted from the early 1920s until 1992.

### **A Brave New World**

In January 1992, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao reversed the four-decade policy of recognition-without-relations policy and established full diplomatic relations with Israel. On January 29, India announced its decision.

A constellation of regional and international factors facilitated this move. Internationally the Cold War had ended and the Soviet Union had disintegrated. At least since the early 1970s anti-Israeli rhetoric had become integral to the political discourse of "progressive" countries, whether part of the Soviet-led communist bloc or non-aligned like India. Moreover, the economic crisis facing India and the need for financial aid from international financial institutions pushed New Delhi to come to terms with the new international order dominated by the United States. Rao had to signal to the outside world that India was ready and willing to come to terms with the post-Cold War world order. He did this by reversing Nehru's policy on Israel.

Prime Minister Rao was helped by emerging regional geopolitics in the wake of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat endorsed President Saddam Hussein's linkage option whereby Iraq offered to withdraw from Kuwait if Israel withdrew from the occupied Palestinian territories. Some saw this as a tacit Palestinian endorsement of Iraqi aggression, occupation, and annexation of Kuwait. That Arafat had founded Fatah, which would later form the largest faction in the Palestine Liberation Organization, during his student days in Kuwait made matters worse. Thus, once the Iraqi aggression was reversed through the U.S.-led international coalition in February 1991, the Palestinian leader became persona non-grata and could not visit the emirate up until his death in April 2004.

On a larger scale, the Palestinian cause lost its importance in intra-Arab relations and India could no longer further its interest in the Arab Middle East by flagging its consistent support for the Palestinian cause, or the absence of relations with Israel. The Madrid Peace Conference signaled Palestinian willingness to seek a negotiated political settlement with Israel through coexistence. Once Arafat agreed to go to the Spanish capital to negotiate—as part of a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation—it was no longer necessary for India to be more Palestinian than "Mr. Palestine."

In the 1990s, during the second phase of bilateral relations, India balanced its new-found relations with Israel with its traditional support for the Palestinian cause; all major bilateral developments with Israel were accompanied by high-profile contacts with or statements on Palestine. For example, Rao's decision to normalize relations with Israel was preceded by the visit of Arafat to India. This period witnessed an emerging all-party consensus as governments headed by the Congress Party and Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) favored closer ties with Israel. For a while after normalization, even the communists who were ideologically opposed to Israeli policies vis-à-vis Palestinians were not averse to courting Israel. This period also witnessed Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon being hosted by Atal Bihari Vajpayee in September 2003.

The third phase of bilateral relations largely coincided with Congress Party returning to power as head of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in 2004. By then the relations with Israel had become more stable. New Delhi was able to manage its interests as well as differences with Israel in a matured manner. It was able to segregate the bilateral interests from its differences over the peace process. Thus, in January 2008, India launched an Israeli satellite which some analysts argued would be used for monitoring the sites associated with the Iranian nuclear program.

Indian pronouncements on the upsurge of violence have also been balanced and nuanced. Far from criticizing Israel for the stalemate, New Delhi has been urging both sides to eschew violence and unilateralism and seek a negotiated settlement. By delinking the bilateral track from the multilateral issues, India has been able to pursue its economic and security interests with Israel even while disagreeing with the Jewish state over issues such as Palestinian statehood, settlements, refugees, and borders where it supports the Palestinian positions. During this phase, Israel has also emerged as a major supplier of military weapons and systems to India and both countries forged cooperation in a host of fields such as counterterrorism, border management, avionics, surveillance, and intelligence sharing. Israel has emerged as a major arms supplier to India and the latter has become the largest market for Israeli arms exports.

In 2014, Prime Minister Modi inherited a policy, which was carefully crafted and enjoyed wider political support. The friendship with Israel was not accompanied by the abandonment of the Palestinian cause and this firmed up greater domestic support for the Indian approach toward Israel.

### **Modi's India**

Since the days of Nehru, prime ministers have been the chief architects of foreign policy in India. The fourth and the latest phase began with the arrival of Modi on the national scene and can be termed as "constructive engagement." Since becoming prime minister

in May 2014, Modi has transformed the face of India's relations with the outside world through his periodic foreign visits and summit meetings. Between May 2014, when he took over the mantle of the premiership, and until July 2017, Modi had undertaken thirty-one foreign trips, which took him to six continents and forty-nine countries, including to the United States for the annual sessions of the UN General Assembly. While he has yet to take part in any summit meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement, he has been attending various bilateral and multilateral summit meetings such as the G-20 summits.

Ever since Modi visited the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in August 2015, all his visits to the region have been bilateral and stand-alone visits. In the past, Indian leaders tended to visit more than one country due to logistical and scheduling concerns. For example, former External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna visited Jordan, Palestine, Israel in January 2012 and the UAE in April 2012 and likewise, President Pranab Mukherjee visited Jordan, Palestine, and Israel in October 2015. Even Modi's current foreign minister Sushma Swaraj visited Israel and Palestine in January 2015. Prime Minister Modi has been different, and all his visits in the Middle East have been stand-alone and single-country visits. This has enhanced the focus of the host country and resulted in greater engagements between the two sides. This has been the case in his visit to the UAE (August 2015) and to Saudi Arabia (April), Iran (May), and Qatar (June) in 2016, as with his visit to Israel this year.

Moreover, in a clean break from past Indian policy, Modi has skipped visiting Ramallah, the de facto capital of the Palestinian Authority (PA), even though he chose to stay at the historic King David Hotel in West Jerusalem. Indeed, both President Mukherjee and Foreign Minister Swaraj went to Ramallah while visiting Israel. Modi's move can be seen as a clear sign of India dehyphenating its relations with Israel from Palestine and its willingness to deal with both of them separately and independently. This was a total rejection of the pre-1992 zero-sum approach that Indian leaders adopted vis-à-vis both.

Is Modi's government a reversal of India's policy or the abandonment of its support for the Palestinian cause? India has dehyphenated Palestinians in its dealings with Israel. It is a more sophisticated and nuanced approach in furthering its interests in the Middle East. This is a clear reflection of the place of the Palestinian cause in the wider diplomatic discourse in the Middle East and India's desire to pursue its bilateral relations without being influenced by "third party" considerations. In recent years, this approach was manifested in India's willingness to befriend key countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran without the traditional Pakistani factor. It also seeks to befriend both Iran and Saudi Arabia despite being aware of these two neighbors' deep hostility toward each other. Modi has extended this to the Israeli-Palestinian context.

Days before his Israel visit, Prime Minister Modi hosted Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in New Delhi and reiterated India's traditional support for the

Palestinian cause but with a caveat. For quite some time, Indian leaders have expressed their support for “a sovereign Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.” With Abbas standing next to him, Modi reiterated India’s support for “a sovereign, independent, united, and viable Palestine, coexisting peacefully with Israel.” By dropping any direct reference to the city, Modi has placed Jerusalem on the bilateral agenda between Israel and Palestine to be resolved through negotiation and compromise.

The dehyphenation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is India’s recognition of and response to the Middle East’s evolving and complicated political landscape. While periodic violence places the Palestinian cause on the forefront of international attention, its relevance in the inter-Arab and intra-Arab discourse has dwindled considerably. Countries that in the past were in the forefront of the Palestinian cause such as Iraq and Syria are preoccupied with far more critical issues of state survival and territorial integrity. Not that the Palestinian cause has become irrelevant or lost its popular appeal in Arab and Muslim countries, but for many governments in the Middle East Palestinian statelessness is far less important than their own existence and survival. Even Iran, which in the past used the Palestinian cause for political propaganda, has been less vocal during its prolonged negotiations over the nuclear controversy with Western powers.

The internal split between the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip has further damaged the Palestinian cause’s ability to stir up international support. India opened its mission in the Gaza Strip shortly after the Oslo process but moved it to Ramallah when Arafat shifted the headquarters of the PA to the West Bank. New Delhi continues to recognize the Abbas-headed PA as the legitimate Palestinian authority and avoid any direct contacts or indirect engagements with the militant Palestinian group Hamas. However, the absence of internal unity and the Fatah-Hamas power struggle has considerably weakened the Palestinian cause and enabled India to delink the Israel-Palestinian equation.

### **India’s Economic Pragmatism**

Contrary to earlier expectations, no major policy announcements were made during Modi’s visit to Israel nor were any new defense agreements signed. The joint statement issued on July 5 was general and contained nothing more than a diplomatic expression of shared interests between the two countries. Five out of the seven agreements were Memorandums of Understanding and pertained to agriculture, water, and space, which could provide the template for further cooperation in the years to come. It is obvious that India looks to Israel as a major partner in its search for food security through technological support in the field of high-yielding crops and water management. Prime Minister Netanyahu spent a considerable amount of time with Modi and accompanied the Indian leader during the latter’s socio-cultural engagements in Israel.

This would have enabled both to reach a better understanding of one another and plan the future trajectory of the bilateral relations. For his part, Netanyahu accepted Modi's invitation to visit India at the earliest opportunity and one could expect the operationalization of the Modi-Netanyahu understanding in the coming months when these agreements are put in place.

The broader importance of Modi's Israel visit is having brought down the politico-psychological barrier, even taboo, in forming closer relations with the Jewish state, and helping to facilitate, as a result, growing economic and technological cooperation between the two business communities. The India-Israel CEO Forum, which had its inaugural meeting during the state visit, had already announced the conclusion of deals worth \$4.3 billion in civilian technology. Considering that the total bilateral trade is just under \$6 billion, this is not a meager amount.

The timing of the visit also indicated India's overall calculations vis-à-vis the wider Middle East. Since his election, Modi has visited four countries in the Persian Gulf, as well as Turkey for the G20 summit in 2015, and met with Saudi Arabia's rulers during multilateral summits in Australia, Turkey, and China. He hosted Emirati Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed Bin Sultan Al-Nahyan as the chief guest of the Republic Day celebrations last January. In the past, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia (2005) and Iranian President Mohammad Khatami (2003) were given the same honors. Even though he did not visit Egypt, Modi has hosted President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi twice; first during the India-Africa Forum Summit in October 2015 and subsequently during a state visit in September 2016.

Modi's Middle East policy has a familiar agenda. He does not want to be a one-time prime minister, and his ability to secure reelection in the summer of 2019 depends upon his success in uplifting the economic conditions of millions of impoverished Indians. This means economic development is his prime foreign policy goal. This manifests itself in his engagements with foreign leaders from the region. He looks to the Arab countries for investments and energy security and seeks technological support from Israel. If the Gulf region meets about 60 percent of its energy needs, India is also emerging as a major and stable market for Gulf producers such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Some have attributed Modi's visit to Israel and his personal bonhomie with Netanyahu to the ideological convergence of the Hindu right and Likud in Israel. Though interesting, this line of argument misses out the wider picture of Modi's engagement with the Middle East. If a rightwing anti-Muslim agenda is the driving force, how does one explain Modi giving high priority to countries such as Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE? These countries are no less ideological than Israel. On the contrary, eschewing any judgment over the political system of these countries, Modi

is prepared to see all the states in the Middle East, Arab and non-Arab, as potential partners in his economic and trade development agenda.

Have the Arabs lost India to Israel? This would have been the case, if Israel were Modi's first port of call after becoming Prime Minister in May 2014. This is not the case. Modi has delinked the Israel-Palestine equation and is suggesting an independent policy toward both. Better relations with Israel would not dilute India's support for the Palestinians and at the same time, support to the Palestinian cause will not impede it from benefitting from Israeli expertise. This is primarily a response to the ground realities and internal Palestinian squabbles and disagreements. Modi has been developing closer ties with all the prominent countries of the region with economy as his prime foreign policy agenda. His visit to Israel was the culmination of a journey, which began in 1992, leading toward a pragmatic understanding with Israel. Far from an ideological convergence between two rightwing governments, it is a reflection of India's understanding of Middle Eastern realities and an attempt to navigate through those troubled waters for India's economic progress and trade development.