

INDIA-ISRAEL RELATIONS UNDER NARENDRA MODI

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Abstract

India's relations with Israel are very extensive and old. India as member of United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) did everything possible to find a just solution to the plight of Jews and proposed Minority plan in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), was rejected. Despite this India became the fifty seventh country in the world to recognize Israel (17 September 1950). Many political parties in India like Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP), Praja Socialist Party (PSP), Janasangh and Swatantra Party stressed on the need for having close economic and political ties with Israel but failed to get desired outcome. Despite having difficulties during the cold war years India took Israel's help in Sino-Indian war of 1962 and all the other wars (1971, 1999) that it fought with its neighbours. India maintained contact with Israel, Mrs. Gandhi Sent the first director of Research and Analyses Wing (RAW) Rameshwar Nath Kao to Israel to seek relation with Mossad and see how it is organized. But never had the courage to fully recognize the help of its friend. From the very beginning India has cautiously planned its policy towards Israel because of the Hostile nature of Arabs towards it and remained neutral during superpower rivalry between Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) and United States of America (USA). Major change in Indian foreign policy came in the year 1992 when India started full diplomatic

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relations with Israel (29 January 1992). But still various governments in India from the cold war years to until Modi came into power failed to recognize the help of Israel. Which could only happened after the minister of external affairs Sushma Swaraj confirmed (on 31 May 2015) that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi proposed to visit Israel. Modi became the first-ever prime minister from India to pay an official visit to Israel. Indian foreign policy has gained nothing from being in favour of Palestinians in the Israel-Palestine conflict. This paper is an attempt to see how the recent government has taken the India-Israel relations to other level for greater cooperation and partnership under the Modi government.

1. Introduction

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Narendra Damodardas Modi came into power on 16 May 2014 after winning the general election for sixteenth Lok Sabha by securing 31 percent of the total vote, 282 seats, and formed National Democratic Alliance (NDA) (2). From the very beginning Modi made it very clear that his policies would not to be a repetition of United Progressive Alliance (UPA) policies which was very much visible since his swearing-in ceremony which took place on 26 May 2014. It was attended by various South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) leaders like Nawaz Sharif (Pakistan), Mahindra Rajapaksa (Sri Lanka), Hamid Karzai (Afghanistan), bollywood celebrities, business tycoons, and more than 4000 other guests attended this ceremony. (3)

Foreign policy was the area where Prime Minister (PM) Modi was expected to find difficult due to not having enough or any experience in the field. But PM Modi successfully proved all the assumptions wrong especially which others made about him. He not only disproved assumptions about himself but also changed the way of Indian foreign policy deliberations by thinking very differently. He chose the way for India to be the rule framer than rule taker. (4)

This was very much visible in India's approach to West Asia (WA) under Modi government. NDA led by BJP brought major changes in its approach towards Israel and WA in particular. The establishment of full diplomatic relations with Israel on 29 January 1992 after 42 years of recognising its existence on 17 September 1950 did not make Israel an 'ally' of India. (5) It was primarily due to the miss understanding of the congress party in understanding the approach of Jawaharlal Nehru towards WA.

He started the tit-for-tat approach especially towards the Arabs whenever the Republic of India was at stake; the biggest example of this approach was visible in India's approach towards Israel. India did not recognize Israel after its proposal at United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) for 'federal Palestine' was rejected for voting. India as member of United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) proposed Minority Plan along with Iran and Yugoslavia but UNGA adopted Majority Plan and passed resolution 181 that called for the two independent states Israel and Palestine. India under Nehru for the two consecutive years did not recognise Israel but it could only happen when King Farouq of Egypt supported the Nizam of Hyderabad Osman Ali Khan's application to United Nations (UN). Under the article 35 (Z) of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Hyderabad notified the council regarding the dispute that aroused between India and Hyderabad. (6) But Egypt's involvement in the issue made India to recognise the fact of Israel.

Nevertheless, things changed when India became major ally of Egypt and signed treaty of friendship on 6 April 1955. (7) But, after the death of Nasser in 1970 and India's war with china in 1962, with Pakistan in 1965 and Bangladesh crisis in 1971 changed the outlook of Israel and it emerged as major supporter of India in times of crisis. But due to the harsh reality of superpower rivalry and opposition of Arabs towards the state of Israel, made India to have secret cooperation with Israel because seen in public could damage and disrupt the stakes that India had in the WA region.

Therefore India chose to have secret relations; Israel tried it best to have the exchange of diplomats and sent Moshe Dayan (the then foreign minister of Israel) to India during the Janata Dal interlude in 1977. However, Morarji Desai (the then PM of India) notified him that "Nehru

could have should have started relations since he had not done so we also see our hands tied". (8) But the realities of cold war made India to distant itself from tit-for-tat approach.

The disintegration of Union of Soviet of Socialist Republic (USSR) brought new changes in the Indian foreign policy and provided the opportunity for having diplomatic relations with Israel. It was primarily due to the harsh realities of globalization in which P V Narasimha Rao's government only had two options either continue on the same path of nehruvian socialism or open the gate for opportunities put forward by globalization and market economy. Since economic situation was bad at home the government of Narasimha Rao chose the second option because it was the time when India needed money from the international monetary institutions. (9)

2. BJP's Stand on Israel

It was the convention of BJP in October 1991 that called for establishing diplomatic relation with Israel. (10) The normalization of relations in January 1992 did not brought major changes in New Delhi approach towards Tel-Aviv because diplomatic relations were commenced due the success of American and USSR's foreign policies in getting the two rival communities namely Palestinian and Israeli's on the table at Madrid (Spain) and subsequent meetings at Washington (9 December 1991-28 January 1992) where they had talks over Palestinian-Israeli peace process that actually provided an excuse to India for starting full diplomatic relations with Israel (29 January 1992).

It was the formal acceptance, due to the fact that Palestinians had sought agreement with the Israeli's for peace. Although, failure in getting desire outcome under this initiative changed the tuning between Israel and Palestinians. All this had major impact on New Delhi approach towards Israel. Various heads of state of Israel visited India soon after the commencement of full diplomatic relations like Ezer Weizmann (the then President of Israel) visited India in December 1995 and January 1996. On the other hand all these visits failed in getting the similar visits from the heads of state of India. But it was BJP that admired Israel's achievements in several sectors such as defence, respect for military, and pride in nationalism. (11)

In fact, it was BJP and its rise to power on 19 March 1998 which brought Atal Bihari Vajpayee into power which further opened the gates for greater cooperation between India and Israel. It was under Vajpayee, who as the external affairs minister of India under the Janata Dal interlude arranged a secret visit of Moshe Dayan (the then Israel's minister of foreign affairs) to India, in which Dayan approached its Indian counterparts for establishing diplomatic relations but failed in getting desired response. BJP has been the great admirer of Israel's help especially in 1999 Kargil war and always had been eager for recognising the help of Israel.

As gesture for their help the BJP chose the mantra where it decided to have less hiding more openness in its relation to Israel which is visible since the days of Vajpayee government, Vajpayee as the PM of India hosted Israel's PM Ariel Sharon in September 2003 during this visit Brajesh Mishra (the then national security advisor) argued that "India, United States and Israel share the same interest in twenty first century" hinted on deep economic and defence relations with Israel. (12) But, the return of Congress party in 2004 brought the bilateral relations between two countries to 'pre-cold war phase' which "failed to delink bilateral relation from the vagaries of the peace processes". (13) following the rise of terrorism in India as it was visible during the 26/11 attack on Mumbai India began to increase the export of Israeli defence equipments it reached an record high level where it even surpassed Russia as number one arms exporter to India.

The advancement of Israel in sectors such as defence, military hardware has brought acclamation from various counters for its technical superiority in such sectors. Even the countries that do not recognise or have diplomatic relations with Israel are having secret cooperation with it. Despite having no relations countries such as Pakistan, UAE, Morocco, Algeria imported defence equipment from Israel, according to reports from Britain's Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), which oversees the export of defence equipments, these countries imported various defence equipments from Israel from the year 2008 to 2012. (14) It included electronic warfare system, radar system, parts of jets as well as aircraft engines.

Under this scenario, the decision of NDA for having greater cooperation with Israel is not wrong. Because in the globalized world as it is today economic activities are taking precedence in

bilateral relations despite of political differences on various issues, nations are finding ways for having bilateral negotiations, sharing of technology to meet a common challenge, equipments for advancement in various fields such as defence which is quite visible in cooperation that Israel have today with countries that do not have diplomatic relations with it. It is sharing defence equipments even with countries which were threat to its own national security once upon a time. The decision of PM for visiting Israel comes at right time for having openness in its relation with Israel. The Government of PM Modi came with a vision that is the development of India in various sectors and defence is one of them.

BJP under PM Modi has personal respect for Israel and its people and most importantly its advancement in various fields such as cyber security, space, defence, counter terrorism, agriculture, water, solar energy, intelligence cooperation can become a main source for major transformation in India. As the PM also said i4i “India for Israel and Israel for India” Which can be helpful in various programmes of government of India such as ‘Make in India’, his desire for to “develop India into a knowledge based, skilled supported and technology-driven society”.

Although, his decision to visit Israel which was announced on 31 May 2015 drawn criticism from various corners but he succeeded in playing a diplomatic stroke. Modi knows the importance of Israel as people earlier predicted during the elections in 2014 that his rise to power can bring a ‘diplomatic renaissance’ in India. (15) Moreover, his decision to visit Israel was nothing new; he had earlier visited Israel as the Chief Minister of Gujarat in 2006 and was ebullient about his visit to Israel and its people. Modi believes that “there many ideas and technologies that can be useful for or can be commercially scaled up in India”. (16)

3. Palestine/Jerusalem Question

Modi’s hardcore approach on terrorism has aligned him to Israel during his visit to USA in September 2014 he met with American Jewish committee and promised to visit Israel soon. Israel welcomed modi’s decision of visiting Israel and welcomed Indian premier to Israel. But all this did not mean that India has changed its stand towards Palestine. The minister for external affairs Sushma Swaraj clarified to media in one of her interviews that “We reiterated our support to the Palestinian cause. We said there is no change in India’s position. The President of India

will visit Palestine, Israel and Jordan together, and our basic support for the Palestinian cause will remain undiluted in future”. (17) Before visiting Israel PM Modi invited and hosted Mahmoud Abbas (president of Palestine) for a state dinner in New Delhi and reassured the support for Palestinian cause and expressed hope for talks between Israel and Palestine would resume and fruitful. (18)

The attempt of NDA for having open relations with Israel did not make it overrule the fact of Nehruvian influence over the Indian foreign policy that gave prominence to non-violence, morality, support to freedom struggle, anti-apartheid, anti-colonial, and solution of conflict through international law. Due to which Indian foreign policy from cold war to till today remains supportive of Palestinians struggle for statehood and self determination. India’s abstention on 3 July 2015 over resolution (A/HRC/29/L.35) “Ensuring accountability and justice for all violations of international law in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem” held Israel responsible for “alleged war crimes” during 2014 Gaza conflict. (19)

The reason for abstention was India was not party to Rome stature does not mean India has changed its commitments to Palestine. Actually, Indian approach towards Palestine remains intact to the core principles of Indian foreign policy on the question of Palestine. Moreover, India on 23 July 2014 actually voted in favour of resolution A/HRC/RES/S-21/1 that condemned the violence and called for inquiry commission to be established to “investigate all violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, particularly in the occupied Gaza Strip”. (20)

Despite having trade worth of \$5 billion with Israel during 2016-2017 (accounts for less than 1 percent of total trade of India) India voted against Donald Trump (president of USA) decisions to recognize Jerusalem as capital of Israel in UNGA on 22 December 2017. Decision came one month before the visit of Benjamin Netanyahu (PM of Israel). (21) Indian foreign policy has always has always been independent and had chose morality over the strategic gains and it is most visible in its relation to Palestine-Israel conflict.

India's friendliness with Israel does not mean a change in its policy towards Palestine. Narendra Modi himself has made it clear by arguing that "there should be a sovereign, independent, united and viable Palestine, co-existing peacefully with Israel". (22) The statement came ahead of 'Day of Solidarity' with the people of Palestine. New Delhi has always informed Ramallah over its growing ties with Israel Mahmoud Abbas (president of Palestine) was received in Delhi on 14 May 2017, Month before his visit to Israel. The PM assured the Palestinian counterparts India remains committed to the cause of Palestinians and go on to help building infrastructure and progress of Palestine. (23)

4. Growing Cooperation between Israel and Arabs

The visit of PM Modi to Israel came on 4 July 2017. The government used two years time in creating a conducive environment for PM Modi's visit to Israel. During this period Modi visited United Arab Emirates (UAE) on 16 August 2015 and this visit came after 34 years after Indira Gandhi who visited UAE in 1981. During this visit the crown prince of Abu Dhabi (Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan) along with his five brothers came to airport to receive the PM and violated the protocol. (24)

During this visit Modi visited Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and also addressed the 'India Diaspora' in UAE, India also agreed to set up a Strategic Security Dialogue with UAE, to enhance counter-terror cooperation. (25) Similarly the PM visited Saudi Arabia on 2 April 2016 and became the first non-Muslim person to receive a highest civilian award in Saudi Arabia; he received 'King Abdul-Aziz Sash'. These two visits helped Modi in establishing himself as someone who could be trusted and can bring change in the outlook of Indian foreign policy that works on set principles in WA landscape which is in need of change.

Apart from two visits the major reason for diplomatic stroke played by Modi government was his decision to visit Israel came at a time when most countries in the WA region are having greater cooperation with Israel. The nations in the region are busy fighting terrorists (ISIS); it is facing a situation where Republic of Turkey is busy killing the Kurds in Syria, Iran and Saudi busy killing the Yemenis for regional hegemony in the region. That has given rise to personal rivalry and

distrust among the Arabs for each other and raised the desire for self security that resulting in cooperation with Israel on defence Issues.

WA region today is going through a rapid transformation. There is ISIS, Yemen Crisis, Qatar Crisis, Iran- Saudi Arabia rivalry for regional hegemony that created distrust among the Arabs. Due to which there traditional opposition to Israel is melting. Therefore having greater cooperation with Israel, it has successfully opened its diplomatic mission in UAE (2015). Saudi officials are meeting Israeli officials publically. Prince Turki al-Feisal (Former Saudi intelligence chief) and General Yakov Amidror (former senior advisor to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu) met publicly at the Washington Institute in Washington, D.C. in 2016. In November 2017, 'The Elaph' became the first Arab newspaper to interview General Gadi Eisenkot (Israel chief of staff) where he spoke about Iran's plans to control WA. The chief of staff argued that "Israel and Saudi Arabia share same interests against dealing with Iran". He emphasized on the "need to establish an alliance in the region to confront Iranian tide". He was asked "have you shared information with Saudi Arabia lately?" he replied that "We are ready to share information if necessary. There are many common interests between us and them".(26)

There is extensive business ties between Israel and Gulf countries valued at hundreds of millions of dollars. Israel and the Gulf States also share common enemies: Iran and ISIS. Egypt (26 March 1979) and Jordan (26 October 1994) already have longstanding peace treaties with Israel. And Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu has reached out to more of the Arab world as efforts for a deal with the Palestinians have foundered. Egypt has better relations with Israel. It has grown under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. It is to an extent that Israel helping Egypt and sharing intelligence in tracking ISIS in Sinai Peninsula. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States share common goals with Israel, one of which is developing new energy, water, and agricultural technology. (27)

Under this scenario, the decision of Modi government for dealing with Israel independently and openly is based on a belief that countries can have bilateral cooperation in the globalized world despite having various disagreements at political level on various issues. In her address to the 'Third Raisina Dialogue' in Delhi Sushma Swaraj (Minister of external Affairs of India) made it

clear that “The manner, in which international politics is being conducted, is itself undergoing a significant change. Understandably, diplomacy has become more bilateral, of late, with nations, pursuing their immediate interests with greater focus and vigour. Having noted that, we cannot overlook the fact that regional and multilateral efforts remain in play to a large measure”. (28)

Modi’s approach to Israel is different from his predecessors. He sees it as technologically advanced country which has upper hand in modernising defence equipments and which can be a great source for dealing with many issues at home such as cyber security, innovation, agricultural sector, defence, water, space technology.

5. Conclusion

The growing cooperation of Arabs with Israel has provided leverage to India for having open relations with Israel. India-Israel relations under Modi government have gained new heights. Relations have successfully come out of the pre-cold war strategic, traditional settings which dominated India-Israel relations for years. The technical advancement of Israel in various fields has made it important for various programmes which have been launched by NDA government such as Make in India, Digital India, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Skill India, Smart Cities, NamamiGange, National Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Gram Sinchai Yojana, Soil Health Card Scheme, Stand Up India scheme etc. In all these programmes India wishes to see Israeli innovative skills and partnerships. The bold step for having openness would lead to direct technology transfer or not? Would decide the future course of action in India-Israel relations, because in Arab countries India’s stakes are huge and how Israel tries to balance that would remain a challenge.

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