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Report

India's Israel Policy



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"There is no issue more important for peace and stability in the region than the question of Palestine. For far too long the brave people of Palestine have been denied their just, legitimate and inalienable rights, including most of all the establishment of a sovereign, independent and viable Palestinian state."

Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India, Shura Council of Saudi Arabia, 1 March 2013.

Between 1948 (the founding of Israel) and 1992, the government of India had no formal relations with the state of Israel. In 1992, the Congress-led government of P. V. Narasimha Rao, for reasons having to do with India's new economic and political direction, sought out the Israeli government. Close ties to Israel developed with the United States playing chaperone. India's governments, whether the center-right Congress-led coalitions or the hard right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalitions, have enhanced India's purchases of Israel's military equipment. The Congress governments saw friendship with Israel opportunistically: it was to be the springboard for India to develop a new entente with the United States. Yiftah Shapir of Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies recognised the Congress's lack of enthusiasm for a full tilt toward Israel. India is not a reliable ally since it has not fully "given up its non-aligned identity....India's behaviour in international forums does not indicate that it can be relied on to help Israel in any difficult situation. India's position on all aspects of the Israeli-Arab conflict is not a neutral one, rather is decidedly pro-Palestinian."¹ The BJP-led coalition (1998-2004), however, wanted not only to expand the arms purchases and develop the pipeline to Washington via Tel Aviv, but also to build an ideological and institutional linkage with Israel in what it sees as a civilisational war against "a common extremist enemy," namely radical Islam.² Between the Congress and the BJP, then, there is a no difference regarding the arms purchases, but there is a sharp divide around the utility of this alliance for a broad understanding of the links between India and Israel. In the Indian political firmament, it is only the Communist parties that have opposed any strategic and economic ties to Israel, calling, in essence, for a boycott-divestment-sanctions campaign.³

Before 1992

"Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French...Surely it would be a crime against humanity to reduce the proud Arabs so that Palestine can be restored to the Jews partly or wholly as their national home."

-Mahatma Gandhi, 1938⁴

Forged in the anti-colonial movement, the new India of the 1940s did not form relations with the new state of Israel. Instead, India emerged in the United Nations as a consistent champion of the rights of the Palestinians. Walter Eytan, the Director General of the Israeli Mission of Foreign Affairs, blamed India's position on "Moslem hostility to Israel."⁵ But what Eytan failed to see is that Israel, like Taiwan, was rejected by the emergent non-aligned bloc not on the grounds of religion or prejudice, but for its close ties to the imperial bloc.⁶ India was the first non-Arab state to recognise the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), opening a PLO office in New Delhi in 1975. India was a lead player in the 1975 United Nations vote that equated Zionism with racism.

After 1992

Two early indicators of a change in Indian policy came in 1991. First, the Indian government gave US fighter jets access to Indian bases on their way to bombard Iraq. Second, India voted with the majority in December 1991 to repeal the 1975 resolution on Zionism. Complex negotiations with the International Monetary Fund and THE World Bank were ongoing in 1991, as India moved away from an economic *dirigiste* policy to a neo-liberal policy framework (called liberalisation). These political decisions smoothed discussions with Washington over various loan agreements.

India sought an entente with the United States after 1990, when it became clear that the era of US primacy was on hand. One easy way to go to Washington was through Tel Aviv. Two of the main areas where this collaboration manifested itself was in arms purchases and counter-terrorism.

Arms Deals

From the very beginning, India's relations with Israel were founded on arms purchases. In March 1992, when the Israelis came to open their embassy in Delhi, their spokesperson stated, "Nobody told us of Indian needs in the areas of defense."⁷ Two months later, Israeli defence industrialists came on an official visit to discuss arms purchases. The Confederation of Indian Industry met with the Israeli Manufacturers Association, and at the Bangalore Air Show (December 1993), the Israelis organised the second largest demonstration (after the Russians, the historic source of Indian arms). The Indian nuclear tests of 1998 triggered a US law that prevented US firms from supplying India's armed forces. Israel, which has joint ventures with US producers, filled the breach. It is now the largest exporter of arms to India, with half of Israeli arms production purchased by India.

India is, as congress politician Shashi Tharoor put it, "Israel's largest market for defense products," and "Israel is apparently willing to offer India equipment and technology unavailable from any other country, and to provide indigenously developed defense technologies that are therefore less vulnerable to third-party pressures."⁸ There is consensus across the BJP and congress on these arms purchases. In 2009, bilateral military trade between the two countries reached \$9 billion. As one of the main consumers of the Israeli weapons industry, India provides an unwitting subsidy from afar for the occupation of the moth-eaten Palestinian territory.⁹ Israel's flagging economy has been buoyed by its arms sales sector. The government-owned Israeli Arms Industry (IAI), the Israel Military Industries and the Rafael Arms Development Authority anchor Israel's 150 defense firms, which collectively employ 60,000 people and earn over \$4 billion in revenues. India has been buying missile systems, radars and early warning systems, unmanned aerial vehicles and field guns from Israel. On March 8, 2012, the Indian Ministry of Defense banned the Israel Military Industries for 10 years over a 2009 bribery scandal, where Israeli bribes opened doors at the Ordnance Factory Board of India.¹⁰ Selling arms is central to the Israeli economy, and selling arms to India has become essential at any cost.

Currently, India and Israel are negotiating a free-trade agreement, which both sides hope will increase bilateral trade to \$15 billion and with arms playing a large part of this trade aside from agriculture, water technology, homeland security, nanotechnology and aerospace production.

Counter-Terrorism

When the parties of political Hinduism took control of New Delhi in 1998-2004, their main leaders turned to Tel Aviv for inspiration. The BJP, which is programmatically given over to Islamophobia, developed an understanding that the Israelis had found a magical solution to their own neighbourhood and their domestic Palestinian population that could be emulated in South Asia and India. What Israel had devised was an iron fist in the neighbourhood, including a wall around its territory, with the promise to its domestic Palestinians of expulsion or a swift clobbering if they made demanded equality. The main admirer of the Israeli route was the BJP's leader, L. K. Advani, who went to Israel in 1995, brought back notes from his visit to the generals and spooks, and returned to India filled with the vocabulary of hot pursuit and terrorism. Five years later, Advani returned to Israel, this time as India's home minister. At the Indian Embassy, Advani said, "In recent years, we have been facing a growing internal security problem. We are concerned with cross-border terrorism launched by proxies of Pakistan. We share with Israel a common perception of terrorism as a menace, even more so when coupled with religious fundamentalism. Our mutual determination to combat terrorism is the basis for discussions with Israel, whose reputation in dealing with such problems is quite successful."¹¹

Israel sent a slew of Mossad agents into India to give the party of political Hinduism a hand. Israel's former Ambassador to India, Yehoyada Haim acknowledged that the Israelis helped India during the 1999 Kargil war with Pakistan, but hastily pointed out, "The less we said about these matters, the better for both our countries."¹² In 2000, Haim spoke highly of the Indian many consider to be close to Likud, "Mr. Advani is a very unique man. I like him very much. Ideologically and personally, he reminds me of some people from an earlier generation of Israelis. He was very happy as he could personally see the methods we've developed to fight terrorism. He also met Mossad's head. Now, we're going to examine what counter-terrorism methods are appropriate for India. For example, Israel is totally fenced by the most sophisticated electronic fences, but how can India achieve that in a jungle or high up on a mountain? The head of Mossad took down notes and is now doing his homework (on India)."¹³

Not only did the BJP import Mossad-type methods to deal with terrorism, but the political Hindu parties have also adopted Tel Aviv's geopolitical theory of terrorism. Congress MP Shashi Tharoor notes that over the past two decades the "two countries' shared concerns about Islamic extremism have offered common ground for cooperation." Nevertheless, Tharoor indicates that congress elites, unlike their BJP counterparts, are less willing to fully embrace the Israeli narrative. "India is not ready to adopt Israeli methods to deal with terrorism in its own borderlands; it has consistently been critical of Israeli attacks on Gaza and Lebanon, and it is unlikely to see Israel as a tutor for its own approaches to similar problems in its neighborhood." Despite this reticence, Tharoor notes that the "shared concerns about Islamic terrorism and largely (though not wholly) compatible strategic interests make this an indispensable relationship."¹⁴

India and the Palestinians

India's response to Israel's asymmetrical assaults on the occupied Palestinians and the Lebanese has deteriorated as a consequence, perhaps, of this new alignment. Gone are the days when India expressed 'grief and indignation' at an Israeli attack on Gaza. (These words were from Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1967 after Israel killed five Indian peacekeepers and seized Gaza Strip.) Gone too is the adverse reaction to Israeli diplomats who make offensive statements about Indian politics. In 1982, three weeks after the invasion of Lebanon, the Israeli Consul in Bombay, Yosef Hassin, described Indian policy toward Israel as a victim of India's capitulation to Arab money. Indian politicians are "afraid of the Arabs, they are afraid that Iraq will cancel their contracts, Saudi Arabia will stop accepting labourers," he told the *Sunday Observer*. "India is always asking for floor at the UN and other international forums to denounce Israel and prove to the Arabs that you are doing more than Pakistan. That way you think you will impress the Arabs." Consul Hassin was declared *persona non grata* and asked to leave the country. He returned to Israel with a promotion.¹⁵

Since 1992, India has been measured to the Israeli narrative to the point of accommodation. After Operation Cast Lead (2009), the UN Human Rights Commission formed a special panel chaired by South African jurist Richard Goldstone to study accusations of human rights violations by Israel. The report found that Israel's blockade of Gaza is illegal, berated Israel for targeting civilians, and accused it of major violations of international law for, among other things, using white phosphorus bombs (chemical weapons). The report goes into minute detail about how Israel needlessly attacked al-Maqadmah mosque, al-Fakura school and other such places. The accumulated evidence led Goldstone to refer the matter to the International Criminal Court. India indicated that it would vote to accept the findings of the Goldstone report and its implications for further action. At this point, the Israeli and United States governments lobbied the Indians. On 25 September 2009, the US embassy reported that its political officer had visited the Indian Ministry of External Affairs under the Secretary for UN Economic and Social Division, Abhishek Verma. The American diplomat told Verma that "India's support for a balanced resolution, based on an unbiased approach to the Goldstone report, was of great importance to the United States."¹⁶ In early November, the head of the Indian delegation, B. K. Hariprasad (Member of Parliament, Congress Party) stated, "We have reservations in making unqualified endorsement of the various recommendations as well

as some of the procedures adopted by the Goldstone report, including the involvement of the International Criminal Court and that of the Security Council."¹⁷ This was precisely the red line sought by the United States and Israel: that the Goldstone Report be shelved, far from any claims to account. India went along with that.

When the most recent war on Gaza broke out (Pillar of Defence, 2012), even the language of 2009 was not available. During Cast Lead, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) called for "an immediate end to military action" and supported "all efforts aimed at securing an immediate ceasefire." After Israel's attack on the 2010 Gaza Flotilla, the MEA "deplored the tragic loss of life," pointing out that "there can be no justification for such indiscriminate use of force, which we condemn." As recently as 6 September 2012, in anticipation of Mahmoud Abbas's visit to India, the MEA reinforced India's "consistent and unwavering support to the Palestine issue." India noted its support for the various United Nations resolutions that Israel has ignored, and it called for "an end to illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories."

During Pillar of Defence, MEA spokesperson Syed Akbaruddin said that Delhi was concerned about events in Gaza. The language was so tepid that Palestine's Ambassador to India, Adli Shaban Sadeq felt that India was being "too cautious." He told the MEA that the statement on 18 November "was not enough." India then released a second statement that was critical of the "disproportionate use of force by Israel which resulted in the death of innocent people including women and children." India, Brazil and South Africa (the IBSA bloc) subsequently had an even stronger stance against the Israeli war. But it took the Palestinian ambassador's going public and Brazil and South Africa's much more robust politics to move India to a reasonable position. India, which once led on this issue, is now either reticent or forced.

Meanwhile, as Israel pummeled Gaza during Pillar of Defence, on November 19, 2012, the Indians and Israelis released commemorative stamps to mark twenty years of ties. The stamps celebrate the festival of lights in Hinduism (Diwali) and Judaism (Hanukkah). Curiously, the link between the two putatively secular countries with substantial minority populations was forged around their majority religions. The two governments had set the timetable for the stamp release months before. Nonetheless, given the massive bombardment of the occupied Palestinian zone of Gaza by the Israelis, the timing could not have been more uncomfortable, and the message more germane.

Conclusion

India's relations with Israel are cemented around commerce, with arms deals at the forefront. The parties of political Hinduism, such as the BJP, are committed to a "civilisational" tie with Israel, but this is not a consensus in India. The weakness of the BJP and its allies provides space for robust dialogue within India about the political consequences of such an alliance. That the Indian government was forced to release more robust criticism of Israel for Cast Lead and Pillar of Defence shows that there remains currents in India committed to the cause of the Palestinians.

The recognition of space for revived Indo-Palestinian relations has led to the creation of the Indian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, the local variant of the global BDS movement. This campaign emerges from the Indian Left, which has incubated pro-Palestinian sentiment for decades. If the two mainstream coalitions are programmatically tied to Israel (as with the BJP) or pragmatically linked to its commercial and military supply lines (as with the Congress), it remains up to the left to revive a popular cultural movement to remind Indians of our historical relations with the Palestinians.

Over the past two years, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) bloc has waded into the Israel-Palestine standoff to provide the kind of balanced leadership that is not forthcoming from the West. India's role in the BRICS, and in the crafting of the statement, indicates that there is policy space available for a more pro-Palestinian approach. (It is important to indicate that from the standpoint of Tel Aviv, anything short of absolute fealty to the Israeli line is taken as pro-Palestinian.) The pressure on India

from its fellow BRICS members seems to have made a greater impact than pressure from Arab states. Senior members of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs have informed me that two of the major political issues that have overshadowed dialogue on Palestine have been the Western-led attempt to isolate Iran and the chaos in Syria. Arab states have not raised the matter of Palestine with India as forcefully as they once did, allowing Indian policy to drift further toward Tel Aviv. More robust reminders from the Arab world of the importance of the Palestinian issue, particularly from energy-exporting states, would be a reminder to India of the stakes at hand with this new emergent tilt toward Israel. Nevertheless, during his visit to Saudi Arabia in March 2013, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told the Shura Council, "There is no issue more important for peace and stability in the region than the question of Palestine. For far too long the brave people of Palestine have been denied their just, legitimate and inalienable rights, including most of all the establishment of a sovereign, independent and viable Palestinian state." If these are not mere words, the Indian government might be asked to re-consider its arms purchases from Israel which underwrite the very occupation that Prime Minister Singh decries.

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¹Y. S. Shapir, 'Israel's Arms Sales to India,' *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2009), 37.

²Vijay Prashad, *Namaste Sharon: Hindutva and Sharonism Under US Hegemony* (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2003).

³Githa Hariharan *From India to Palestine: Essays in Solidarity* (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2013).

⁴M. K. Gandhi, "The Jews," *Harijan*, 26 November 1938.

⁵Walter Eytan *The First Ten Years: A Diplomatic History of Israel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958), 183.

⁶Eytan's argument has been elaborated recently by P. R. Kumaraswamy, *India's Israel Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). My review of the book shows that they overestimate the "Moslem factor" and cloud their own judgment of the real issues involved. Vijay Prashad, "Why India and Israel Were Not Friends, 1948-1991," *MERIP*, No. 257 (2010).

⁷Manoj Joshi, "Changing Equations: The Coming Together of India and Israel," *Frontline*, 4 June 1993.

⁸Shashi Tharoor, *Pax Indica* (Delhi: Penguin, 2012).

⁹Prabir Purkayastha and Vijay Prashad, "Break Free of US-Israel Shadow," *The Hindu*, 10 August 2012.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Aluf Benn, "Gingerly forward," *India Today*, 26 June 2000.

¹²Prashad, 2003.

¹³Janaki Bahadur Kremmer, "Mossad is Doing Its Homework on India," *Outlook*, 17 July 2000.

¹⁴Tharoor, *op. cit.*

¹⁵Kumaraswamy, *op. cit.*

¹⁶Hasan Suroor, "Indian Support for UN Resolution on Israel Angers US," *The Hindu*, 25 March 2011.

¹⁷"India Expresses Reservations on Goldstone Report," *Indian Express*, 5 November 2011.