

Research Article

India and Israel: A New Era of Relations

Susmita Gogoi

Department of Political Science, Kendriya Vidyalaya, Dibrugarh, Assam.

I N F O

E-mail Id:

susmitagogoi60@gmail.com

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A B S T R A C T

India and Israel both share similar ideological and cultural bond in the 21st century but India had not recognize Israel as a state till 1950 and today it has been more than 30 years of diplomatic ties with growing economic, defense and strategic relationship. Diplomatic relations formally developed between the two after the opening of Israeli embassy in India in 1992. After the establishment of formal diplomatic relations, the relations between the two countries started gaining firmness in 1996 and 1998 onwards. In 1999 Kargil Confrontations, unconditional help was provided to India by Israel (to gather intelligence and military support). Relations between the two democratic nations further intensified with the visits of the two Heads of governments. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the first Prime Minister of India to visit Israel in 2017 and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to India in 2018.

Keywords: India, Israel, Defence, Strategic Partnership, Missiles, Export, Trade, Cyber Security

Introduction

To mark the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries, India and Israel launched a commemorative logo. The logo features the Star of David and the Ashoka Chakra- the two symbols that adorn the national flags of both countries- and forms the numeral 30 depicting the 30th anniversary of bilateral relations.



Figure 1

Nearly 45 years after Independence, due to various reasons India's foreign policy with Israel remained largely unexplored notwithstanding the two nations gaining Independence from the British Colonial rule in 1947 and 1948 respectively. Though historical and cultural ties between India and Israel have gone back from time immemorial (during WWII Jewish population took shelter and refugees in India). On November 29, 1947 the UN adopted Resolution 181(also known as the Partition Resolution) that would divide Great Britain's former Palestinian mandate into Jewish and Arab states in May 1948 when the Britain mandate was scheduled to end. When Israel was created, it had its enmity with Arab countries and India on the other hand was in an uncertain situation with regards to its foreign policy towards Israel because half of India's oil is been imported from Arab countries and for this reason, India's dependent on Arab countries failed to developed a good relations with Israel. And at the same time India during the cold war was leading the NAM and also shares good relations with USSR, whereas USA was the first country to recognize Israel. So, India was in a state of dilemma whether to have good relations with Israel or to keep itself away from such complicated situations.

In the post-cold war era India started following a robust realist foreign policy posture and India's approach towards Israel is a classic affirmation of this stand. During our freedom struggle, the top leadership led by Mahatma Gandhi was sympathetic to the Palestine question. During the cold war years, Indian foreign policy was of a moralpolitik and hence India could not appreciate the strategic potential of a robust relationship with Israel as it was unable to move beyond the narrow confines of ideological solidarity with the Palestinian cause. On September 17, 1950, India accorded formal diplomatic recognition to Israel. Soon thereafter, an immigration office was set up in Bombay to be upgraded later into a Trade Office. It was subsequently transformed into a Consulate.

Non Recognition (1948-50)

India was against Israel's membership to UN and did not want to recognize Israel as an independent state, despite repeated requests from the latter, as it would be misread by the Muslim community which had yet to overcome the trauma of partition.

Informal Recognition (1950-91)

While India recognized Israel on Sep 17 1950, a year after it voted against UN membership for the Jewish state full diplomatic ties were established only in 1992, the reticence flowing from India's traditional backing for the Palestinian cause.

Normal (1992-present)

India has continued its consistent and unwavering support to Palestine. But an important change now is the delinking of India-Israel relations from Palestine issue.

With the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1992, embassies were opened in New Delhi. Political relations between the two countries started to gain momentum when two Israeli Presidents have visited India – Ezer Weizmann in 1996 and R. Rivlin in 2016 along with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2003. From India, President Pranab Mukherjee visited Israel in October 2015. Prime Minister Narendra Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel. What was more important was that it was not marked by a conventional balancing act of visiting Palestine also. There has been a plethora of Ministerial-level visits in the recent past External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj visited Israel in January 2016, Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh in September 2016. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited India in 2018 to commemorate 25 years of Indian- Israeli relations, accompanied by a 130-member delegation, the largest that has ever accompanied a visiting Israeli premier.



Figure 2

Cooperation

The two nations have started cooperation in various fields like Diplomatic ties, Cultural Exchange, Defense and Security, Counter terrorism, Space research, Agricultural development.

Diplomatic Ties

Though India officially recognised Israel in 1950, the two countries established full diplomatic ties only on 29th January 1992. As of December 2020, India was among 164 United Nations (UN) member states to have diplomatic ties with Israel.

Defence and Security

India is the largest buyer of military equipment from Israel, which, in turn, is the second-largest defence supplier to India, after Russia. The Indian armed forces have inducted a wide array of Israeli weapon systems over the years, which range from Phalcon AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control Systems) and Heron, Searcher-II and Harop drones to Barak anti-missile defence systems and Spyder quick-reaction anti-aircraft missile systems. The acquisitions also include a host of Israeli missiles and precision-guided munitions, from Python and Derby air-to-air missiles to Crystal Maze and Spice-2000 bombs. At the 15th Joint Working Group (JWG 2021) meeting on Bilateral Defence Cooperation, countries agreed to form a Task Force to formulate a comprehensive Ten-Year Roadmap to identify new areas of cooperation. There are regular exchanges between the armed forces. The last major visit from the Indian side was that of the Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal B.S.Dhanao, who visited Israel from 22-24 May 2018 to attend the multilateral conference of Air Chiefs and Commanders. Naval Staff Admiral Sunil Lanba visited Israel in June 2017 in his capacity as Chairman of COSC.

There is cooperation on security issues, including a Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism. In February 2014, India and Israel signed three important agreements.

- Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters
- Cooperation in Homeland Security
- Protection of Classified Material

There is a Joint Steering Committee under the agreement on Homeland Security, aided by thematic Joint Working Groups. Since 2015, IPS officer trainees have been visiting the Israel National Police Academy every year for one-week long foreign exposure training at the end of their training in the National Police Academy, Hyderabad. New Delhi found the defence industry of Israel a useful source of weapons, one that could supply it with advanced military technology. Thus, was established the basis of a burgeoning arms trade, which reached almost \$600 million in 2016, making Israel the second-largest source of defence equipment for India, after Russia.

Economic and Commercial Relations

From US\$ 200 million in 1992 (comprising primarily trade in diamonds), bilateral merchandise trade stood at US\$ 5.65 billion (excluding defence) in 2018-19, with the balance of trade being in India's favour by US\$ 1.8 billion. Trade in diamonds constitutes close to 40% of bilateral trade. India is Israel's third largest trade partner in Asia and seventh largest globally. In recent years, the bilateral trade has diversified into several sectors such as pharmaceuticals, agriculture, IT and telecom, homeland security. Major exports from India to Israel include precious stones and metals, chemical products, textiles etc. Major imports by India from Israel include precious stones and metals, chemicals and mineral products, base metals and machinery and transport equipment. Potash is a major item of Israel's exports to India, with India buying a significant percentage of its requirement from Israel. In recent years, Israel has taken a strategic decision to strengthen economic relations with India, China and Japan. Indian software companies, notably TCS, Infosys, Tech Mahindra and Wipro, are beginning to expand their presence in the Israeli market. During PM Modi's visit in July 2017, the first meeting of the newly established India-Israel CEOs Forum took place, while its second meeting took place during PM Netanyahu's visit to India.

Agriculture

Under a comprehensive Work Plan for cooperation in agriculture signed on 10 May 2006, bilateral projects are implemented through MASHAV (Center for International Cooperation of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and CINADCO (Centre for International Agricultural Development Cooperation of Israel's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development). Agricultural cooperation between the two sides is formalized through 3year Work plans wherein 3year Action plans are developed. The two sides signed the fourth phase of the joint action plan (2018-20) in July 2017.

Thus far, out of 29 Centers of Excellence expected to be fully active by 2020 in twelve Indian states (Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Mizoram,hra Pradesh and West Bengal), 25 have been commissioned.

India has benefited from Israeli expertise and technologies in horticulture mechanization, protected cultivation, orchard and canopy management, nursery management, micro-irrigation and post-harvest management particularly in Haryana and Maharashtra. Israeli drip irrigation technologies and products are now widely used in India. Some Israeli companies and experts are providing expertise to manage and improve dairy farming in India through their expertise in high milk yield.

In May 2021, "a three-year work program agreement" for development in agriculture cooperation, was signed. The programme aims to grow existing Centres of Excellence (CoE), establish new centers, increase CoE's value chain, bring the Centres of Excellence into the self-sufficient mode, encourage private sector companies and collaboration

Science and Technology and Space

India-Israel cooperation in Science and Technology is overseen by the Joint Committee on Science and Technology, established under the Science and Technology Cooperation Agreement signed in 1993. Its last meeting took place in March 2019 in Israel.

During the visit of PM Modi in July 2017, a MoU for establishing India-Israel Industrial Research and Development and Innovation Fund (I4F) by the Department of Science and Technology, India and the National Authority for Technological Innovation, Israel was signed. This MoU, with a contribution of \$ 20 m from each side over 5 years, is expected to play an important role in enabling Indian and Israeli enterprises to undertake joint Research and Development Projects. Along with it three more agreements were signed on space agencies-ISRO and Israel Space Agency- cooperation.

Israel expressed interest in participating in ISRO's proposed mission of sending an unmanned craft to the moon. In 2005, Israel launched TecSAR, its first synthetic aperture radar imaging satellite on PSLV. TecSAR was chosen to launch through India's PSLV due to Israeli concerns about the reliability and technical limitations of its own Shavit space launch vehicle, economic considerations, also due to Israel's desire to increase strategic cooperation with India.

Culture and Education

India is known in Israel as an ancient nation with strong cultural traditions, in popular Israeli perception, India is an attractive, alternative tourist destination. More than 50,000 Israelis visited India in 2018, whereas more than 70,000

Indian tourists visited Israel during the year. Air India started direct flights between New Delhi and Tel Aviv in March 2018, with 5 flights per week currently. Israeli carrier, El Al, operates direct flights between Mumbai and Tel Aviv.

Several courses related to India are taught at Tel Aviv University, Hebrew University and Haifa University. Several private and public Indian universities have entered into academic agreement with their Israeli counterparts. In May 2013, India and Israel launched a new funding programme of joint academic research with the University Grants Commission and the Israel Science Foundation as nodal organizations.

There are approximately 550 Indian students in Israel, mostly at doctoral and post-doctoral level. Since 2012, Israel has been offering post-doctoral scholarship to students from India and China in all fields. The Government of Israel also offers short term summer scholarships for Indian students and India offers ICCR scholarships to Israelis every year for various courses in Indian institutions.

Indian Community

There are approximately 85,000 Jews of Indian-origin in Israel (with at least one Indian parent), who are all Israeli passport holders. The main waves of immigration into Israel from India took place in the fifties and sixties. The majority is from Maharashtra (Bene Israelis) and relatively smaller numbers from Kerala (Cochini Jews) and Kolkata (Baghdadi Jews). In recent years some Indian Jews from North Eastern states of India (Bnei Menashe) have been immigrating to Israel. While the older generation still maintains an Indian lifestyle and their cultural links with India, the younger generation is increasingly assimilated into Israeli society.

Shri Eliyahu Bezalel hailing from Chennamangalam, Cochin has distinguished himself as an eminent agriculturalist and became the first Israeli of Indian origin to receive Bhartiya Pravasi Samman in 2005. Sheikh Ansari, who manages the Indian Hospice in Jerusalem, a unique Indian connection to the Holy City, was honoured with the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman in 2011. In 2017, Dr. Lael Best, an Israeli cardiothoracic surgeon of Indian origin, was also conferred the award. In 2013, the Indian Embassy in Tel Aviv facilitated the first-ever National Convention of Indian Jews in Israel that was held on September 23, 2013 in Ramla. The event brought together nearly 5,000 people from all the four major groups of Indian Jews. Four more annual Conventions have since been held in subsequent years in cities of Yeruham (2014), Ramla (2015), Kiryat Gat (2016) and Ashkelon (2017). The Know India Programme has been effective in binding the Indian origin youth to India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed a gathering of around 8000 PIOs and Indian nationals working in Israel at the Tel Aviv Exhibition grounds during his visit in July 2017.

Others

Israel is also joining the India led International Solar Alliance (ISA), which aligns very well with the objectives of both countries to scale up their cooperation in renewable energy and partner in clean energy. Israel has also offered to help the Indian government with a project to clean the Ganga. An Israeli delegation visited India in August 2015 and met with officials of the Union Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation.

Concerns

Arab

Due to longstanding relations, the large Muslim community in India, geographic proximity, energy dependence and labor migration, it is unlikely that India will abandon its close ties with the Arab world, even as it deepens its relations with Israel.

Iran

India is unlikely to share Israeli apprehensions over neither Iran nor Israel shares India's concern over China.

Pakistan

In early 1990s, immediately after normalization, Israel maintained Kashmir to be an integral part of India. However, the Delhi Declaration issued at the end of PM Sharon's India visit in 2003, did not carry any reference to the Israeli position on Kashmir.

The ties between the two nations have flourished since 1992, primarily due to common strategic interests and security threats. Indians are sympathetic towards Israel and the government is balancing and recalibrating its West Asia policy on the premise of its own national interest. India and Israel need to overcome the vulnerability of their religious extremist neighbours and work productively on global issues like climate change, water scarcity, population explosion and food scarcity. A more aggressive and proactive Middle Eastern policy is the need of the hour for India to reap the maximum benefit of the geopolitical realignments gradually being brought in by the Abraham Accords.

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