

Changing India-Israel relations under Modi Government

***Dr.Mohd Amin Mir (Assistant Prof. Dept. of Political Science, AMU, Aligarh)**

****Javid Iqbal (Research Scholar Dept. of Political Science AMU, Aligarh)**

Introduction

Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel, during his visit to India in January 2018 has described India-Israel relations as a “marriage made in heaven but celebrated here on earth.”¹ However, it took many decades to celebrate this marriage publicly and enthusiastically as it was only in 1992 that India established full diplomatic relations with Israel, even though India had recognised Israel as an independent country in September, 1950. During these years of non-diplomatic relations, the policy of India towards Israel was guided by social, moral and ideological considerations. When this policy of India failed to produce desired results, India redefined its foreign policy towards Israel in the context of post-cold war situation and globalisation in which India gave preference to security and economic interests over social, moral and ideological factors. This changed policy led to deepening relationship between India and Israel over the recent years in post 90's era and it reached to new horizons during the Modi rule. This paper attempts to understand the relationship between India and Israel in historical perspective. It also analyses that what are the factors which brought a change in India's policy towards Israel and what are the major areas of cooperation between the two and it further attempts to understand the recent developments in bilateral relations under the Modi Government.

Historical overview

After gaining independence in 1947, India adopted its own foreign policy in the light of its needs, requirements and the prevailing international environment. This foreign policy was formulated taking into consideration various factors such as ideology of national movement, Cold War politics, policy of Non-Alignment, feeling of anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism and anti-racism etc. As Non-Alignment was one of the basic principles of India's foreign policy, It started to deal with other countries in an independent manner without dictates and pressures from the politics of cold war and the sole consideration was national interest. One of the complicated and slow relations in post-independence period was relation with Israel.

India recognised Israel as an independent State in 1950, but its support and empathy for Palestinian cause and desire to have good relations with the Arab World prevented it from establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel until 1992. This India's policy of desertion of Israel during these years was guided by many internal and external compulsions. like legacy of freedom movement to oppose any form of colonialism and imperialism, policy of non-alignment during cold war politics, fear of radicalisation in domestic Muslim population, desire to maintain good relations with Muslim world and not to antagonise it as it was deeply attached with the cause of Palestinians and most importantly to garner the support of Muslim world over Kashmir and reduce influence of the Pakistan in the Muslim world. Keeping these considerations in mind, the national leaders like Gandhiji and Nehru became staunch supporters of Palestine cause and opposed creation of Jewish state and this tendency continued when Britain assigned the Palestine problem to the United Nations. At UN, India joined the Arab and other Muslim countries in voting against the Partition Resolution adopted by the UN on November 29, 1947, and in May 1949 opposed Israel entry into the United Nations² on the ground that Jewish state was created on the basis of force and the land of Palestine belongs to the Arabs not to the Jews, therefore, creation of Israel is illegal and illegitimate. India was the first Non-Arab State to recognize PLO as sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in 1974³. Under changed circumstances, however, India gave recognition to Israel on 17 September 1950 as India felt that Israel is now reality which can not be denied as well as Arab and Muslim countries failed to reciprocate and reward to India's support to Palestine. Though India was in favour of normalization of relations with Israel but the Israel led aggression against Egypt in 1956 over Suez canal crisis made the situation complicated as it goes against the basic principles of India's foreign policy and India became critical of Israel in subsequent years in various international and regional forums. So, during these years India adopted a pro-Palestinian policy as India was looking at the issue through Arab lens.

Why shift in India's policy towards Israel

The end of cold war with the collapse of USSR and the emergence of USA as sole global power, the onset of globalization and liberalization in the post -cold war era as well as some important developments in West Asia like Madrid Peace Process, Oslo Accord in which the Arab world and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) were willing to negotiate with Israel and sat down at a table together for a political settlement. By this time, India also

realized that its unqualified support for the Palestinians had not achieved any dividend for New Delhi over the Kashmir issue. These things prompted India to conclude that New Delhi had no reason to maintain the status quo with regard to Israel and finally India established full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992 under the P V Narsimha Rao government. While establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, India reiterated that its support to Palestine cause does not diminish with the growth of its relations with Israel. These developments in the post cold war era not only led to normalization of relations between India and Israel but also led to dramatic shift in the foundation of India's foreign policy as element of idealism which was dominant many decades was now replaced by element of pragmatism and realism. The most important turning point in the history of bilateral relations between India and Israel came in the form of 11 September 2001 terrorist attack on USA which made terrorism a global problem. Both countries, India and Israel consider themselves as victims of terrorism emanating from their neighborhood as a result of this common feeling, both these countries came closer to each other. These developments led to a shift in India's policy towards Israel and resulted into warm bilateral relations which were gradually raised to strategic partnership. This strategic partnership has developed cooperation in many areas, the main areas of cooperation are.

Defence Cooperation

The core area of cooperation between India and Israel is defence. The defence relations grew rapidly between these two countries since the establishment of diplomatic relations. India is the largest buyer of Israeli military equipments and Israel is the second largest defence supplier to India after Russia⁴. If defence ties keep increasing at the same pace, Israel may replace Russia as India's largest arms supplier. The defence cooperation extends to intelligence sharing on terrorist groups, joint military training, police modernization, capacity building for combating crime and many other activities related to the defence of the countries. Israel is considered as the most reliable arms supplier to India as it provides sophisticated military equipments and weapons to India. Israel is also reliable as it supplied arms to India during the 1965, 1971 wars, Kargil crisis in 1999 and many other crisis situations⁵. Arms trade between the two nations reached almost \$600 million in 2016. India has purchased Barak-I missiles, 3 Phalcon AWACS, and Israeli Spike anti-tank missiles from Israel. In 2017 India signed the biggest weapons deal in the defence history of Israel

which is nearly 2 billion. This will provide India with an advanced system of medium- range surface to air missiles, launchers and communications technology. Though Israel is reliable defence partner to India, It is in the national interest of India to go beyond the cash and carry mode of defence equipments and should incorporate in defence relations with Israel, the provisions of joint research, development and production of military equipments and technologies so that India can get benefit from the technological know-how and expertise of Israel and this would help in modernizing Indian defence forces and also help India to become self-sufficient in defence in the long run.

Trade Cooperation

Bilateral trade between India and Israel grew from 200 million in 1992 to\$ 4.52 billion in 2014. There is a healthy growth in trade relations as India is Israel's tenth- largest trade partner and import source and seventh- largest export source. India's major exports to Israel include precious stones and metals, organic chemicals, electronic equipments, plastics, vehicles, machines, engines, pumps, clothing and textiles, and medical and technical equipments. Israel's major exports to India include electronic equipments, organic and inorganic chemicals, salt, sulphur, stone and cement⁶. As of 2015, negotiations are on for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in order to strengthen the ties in economic and commerce. Recently, New Delhi promised Israeli companies that it would deal with their concerns and make it easier for them to do business in India⁷ so it shows interest to strengthen the economic relationship.

Counterterrorism Cooperation

Another core area of cooperation is counterterrorism. India and Israel are boosting up the counter-terrorism cooperation and sharing real-time intelligence on issues related to their national security. Combating terrorism is a challenge for both countries, though the nature and roots of terrorism are different, both India and Israel face the threat of terrorism emanating from the neighbourhood. Mr. Modi was asked during his visit to Israel that "whether both countries are facing the similar threat of terrorism" Mr Modi replied that we recognise that cross-border terrorism is a global challenge for us,⁸ Therefore, both countries recognise that they are facing terrorism from their neighbourhood. This problem of terrorism brought these two countries together and are collaborating with each other to fight this menace and even hail each other's efforts to fight the problem of terrorism.' This common

problem brought the intelligence agencies of these two countries closer. It was during the Indira Gandhi rule that the Research and analysis wing (RAW) started cultivating links with Mossad of Israel⁹. The strategic partnership now paved the way for dialogue at National Security Adviser-level. New Delhi has found it profitable to learn from the Israel in tackling the problem of terrorism, because Israel has developed extraordinary technological and operational capabilities in its fight against cross-border terrorism¹⁰ like Spice 2000 bombs used by India in Balakot strikes have been acquired from Israel. The terrorist attacks and increasing threat from the neighbourhood have prompted Indian decisions makers to expand counter-terrorism cooperation with Israel.

Cooperation in Water and Agriculture

Water and agriculture are other important areas of cooperation which became focus during Modi rule. Israel in contemporary period has emerged as super power in water management. It has converted a desert into a fertile land by innovating new techniques in water management like rainwater harvesting, desalinating seawater, recycling wastewater etc; these techniques would help India to overcome its water stressed condition. Israel has also expertise and technologies to modernise the agriculture which would help India to ensure food security to its citizens. To further relationship in these areas, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in water resources management as well as a declaration of intent to further cooperation in agriculture during the November 2016. Till now, the bilateral relations have been located only in context of military and security but Modi started to look at the benefits accruing to India in the food security.

Besides these main pillars of cooperation, there are other areas of cooperation like collaboration in space research, science and technology, education, energy and cultural relations are also thriving between India and Israel. These are the areas where interests of these countries converge but there are certain divergences in interests also like New Delhi has differences with Israel over issues such as Palestinian statehood, settlements, refugees where it supports the Palestinian positions whereas Israel has differences with India over Iran. However, India was able to handle its interests along with differences with Israel in a matured way. Both countries forged collaborations in a host of fields such as counterterrorism and intelligence sharing,’’¹¹

Modi moving towards Israel

For most of its pre and post-independence history, India looked at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through an ideological lens and pursued a policy which was antagonistic towards the Israel. Since normalisation of ties between India and Israel in 1992, New Delhi has been balancing the relations with the Israel and Palestine. However, The BJP leaders have always been zealous advocates of strong ties between New Delhi and Jerusalem and even before the establishment of diplomatic relations Mr. Vajpayee was an ardent supporter of establishing relations with Israel. The era of BJP- led government (1998-2004) was ideal era in the ties with Israel and this period witnessed major developments in ties between the two countries and reached to new heights when L. K. Advani, the then home minister, and external affairs minister, Jaswant Singh made visit to Israel in May 2000¹². During this time substantive cooperation between the two countries increased manifold and reached its pinnacle with the first visit of Israel's Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon to India in September 2003. Though, the Modi government follows the policy of previous NDA regime in their cordial relations with Israel but made it more open and public. Modi became the first Indian prime minister to visit Israel in 2017 while skipped visiting to Ramallah. This visit signalled a departure from the past Indian policy towards Israel and willingness to deal with Israel openly. This visit to Israel is also symbolic in nature as it reflects India's objective to de-hyphenate Indo-Israel bilateral relationship with Palestine question and ties with the larger Arab World and Iran.¹³ The first sign of this policy of de-hyphenation came in July 2015 when India abstained from voting in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on alleged 'war crimes' being committed by Israel during the Gaza conflict of 2014. Just a year earlier, the Modi government voted with majority on a resolution that was critical to Israel. In December 2017, New Delhi voted in favour of a UN resolution denouncing US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. In spite of this, these things did not have minor impact on the mutual relationship between India and Israel. There were many disappointments and interests behind this policy of Modi especially emergence of militancy in Kashmir during Modi rule, As Harsh V. Pant, commented *"this re-evaluation has been based on a realisation that India's largely pro-Arab stance in the Middle East has not been adequately rewarded by the Arab world. India has received no worthwhile backing from the Arab countries in the resolution of problems it faces in its neighbourhood, especially Kashmir. There have been no*

serious attempts by the Arab world to put pressure on Pakistan to reign in cross-border insurgency in Kashmir.”¹⁴

There were many voices of dissent over Modi's standalone visit to Israel on the ground that India was one of the earliest champions of the Palestinian cause and visit of Modi to Israel could seriously dilute India's traditional policy towards Palestinian question. To silent his critics, Modi hosted the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas in May 2017 and in the public statement with Abbas, Modi observed: *The relationship between India and Palestine is built on the foundation of long-standing solidarity and friendship since the days of our own freedom struggle. India has been unwavering in its support of the Palestinian cause. And, we hope to see the realization of a sovereign, independent, united and viable Palestine, co-existing peacefully with Israel. I have reaffirmed our position on this to President Abbas during our conversation*¹⁵. To substantiate it, when Benjamin Netanyahu, The Prime Minister of Israel, visited to India in Jan 2018, Modi visited Ramallah. These visits and hosting indicate India's policy of de-hyphenation towards Palestine and Israel as USA is practising it vis-à-vis India and Pakistan. Many observers attribute Modi's closeness towards Israel to ideological convergence between Hindutva and Zionism. Such argument is not new and was made even during the previous pro-Israel NDA regime. If such is the case, then how one can explain the Modi's engagements with UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran and many other Muslim countries and Modi expressed in these engagements his desire to develop 'strategic partnership' with these Muslim countries. The great success of Modi's foreign policy lies in the fact that Modi had meticulously forged close relations with many Muslim countries which is evident from granting highest civilian award to Modi by UAE and Saudi Arabia. India's closeness towards Israel and other Muslim countries including Palestine is presently driven by big market of Indian economy and national security rather than ideology and morality. Modi's visits to Israel in July 2017 and Ramallah in February 2018 were standalone visits; that is, he visited one without feeling compelled to visit the other. Many admired his balanced and de-hyphenated approach.¹⁶ As Shashi Tharoor said in context of change in India's policy towards Israel under Modi rule *"It's very important relationship which I believe India needs to sustain while at the same time making sure it's not at the expense of our traditional loyalty and ties with Palestinians and the Palestinian cause,"*¹⁷

Challenges for India

- Delinking Israel and Palestine in India's foreign policy is not that easy as India continued political, diplomatic and developmental support to Palestine and simultaneously increased closer ties with Israel, Therefore, India must create a balance between traditional support to Palestine and newly emerging geo-political situations which brought India close to Israel.
- It is also challenging for India to maintain its official position that deepening relationship with Israel will further strengthen the Palestinian Cause rather than to weaken it and India's firmst and on a two state solution in which both Israel and the Palestinian state coexist peacefully.
- Growing defence ties with other defence partners like USA, France and Russia and balancing it vis-à-vis Israel is not an easy task.

Conclusion

India's closer ties with Israel are in its national interest. Critics allege that India is now abandoning the Palestinian cause. However, India is just balancing and improving its West Asia policy on the premise of its own national interest. The present Modi government has demystifies the relations with Israel and brought it out from the traditional defence and security paradigm and increased focus on developmental dimensions of the relationship like agriculture, horticulture, water etc and openly publicized closer ties with Israel but at the same time applied diplomatic ability in its West Asia policy by adopting economic approach to normalise and have closer ties with the Middle East countries especially with the UAE, Iran as well as Saudi Arabia in which Modi has achieved great success.

References

1. Malhotara, Jyoti "*Beyond The News: How India-Israel 'marriage made in heaven is shaped by geopolitics'*"The Indian Express, January 2016 .
2. Kumaraswamy, P. R. "Modi in Israel" *Cairo Review*, pp.120
3. Kumaraswamy, P.R., *India's Israel Policy*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010. PP.216
4. Singh, B. D., *India-Israel Nexus- new strategic equations*, summit enterprises, New Delhi. 2016 PP. 205

5. Sharma, G .D, *India Israel defence co- operations*.
6. Singh, B. D. *India- Israel Nexus new strategic equations, Op. Cit.*, PP.213
7. Ibid
8. India-Israel Joint Statement during the visit of Prime Minister to Israel *Ministry of External Affairs*, July 5, 2017
9. Noorani, Shameer, "Increasing relations between India and Israel after 1992: causes and effects" *International Journal of Research*. Volume 2, April 2015, pp. 542-555
10. Pant, V. Harsh, *Contemporary Debates in Indian Foreign and Security Policy: India Negotiates Its Rise in the International System*, PalgraveMacmillan, New York, 2008, PP. 135
11. Kumaraswamy, P .R. Modi in Israel, *Op. Cit.*, PP.123
12. Noorani, Shameer, Increasing relations between India and Israel after 1992: causes and effects .*Op.Cit.*, PP.542-555
13. "Modi in Israel: All that happened during PM's historic trip" *The Indian Express*, July 06, 2017
14. Pant, V. Harsh, *Why Modi's Visit to Israel is Important for India*, NDTV News, 03 June 2015
15. Ministry of External Affairs, Speech of MOS (ST) on the occasion of "International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People", December 2, 2009
16. Kumaraswamy, P. R. "Modi comes out of the closet with Israel" *The Indian Express* 19 June 2017
- 17 Tharoor, Shashi, "NarendraModi in Israel" *The Financial Express*, Retrieved on 29 October 2019.