

## India's Strategic Shift in its traditional Palestinian Stance

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After the October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, attack by Hamas on Israel, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi swiftly condemned the attack on X<sup>1</sup> (formerly twitter) and showed solidarity with Israel. Then, days later the former spokesperson of Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Arindam Bagchi stated that India has always advocated for an independent and a viable state of Palestine.<sup>2</sup> This statement from MEA was a continuation of Indian Foreign policy regarding Israel-Palestine issue. However, it was contradictory to the tweet of the Prime Minister and the things on the ground also showcased a different view. Many Hindu Nationalists<sup>3</sup> are of the opinion that Israel's efforts for the establishment of a Jewish state is the same as India's struggle to establish a 'Hindu nation'<sup>4</sup> in South Asia. Similarly, prominent Indian news anchors declared Israel's war on Hamas as 'war for all of us.'<sup>5</sup> These statements evidence that New Delhi, which is known for its 'neutrality' during the times of conflict has taken a side of its strategic partner Tel Aviv.

### Reasons for change in India's stance

Historically, India has always sympathised with the Palestinian cause and has advocated for it internationally. Even though India recognised Israel in 1950, it was reluctant to form full diplomatic relations. It was not until 1992 when formal diplomatic ties were developed between the two states. Once official ties were established, cooperation in

defense and trade kicked off. In a historical milestone, the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon became the first to visit India in the year 2003. Even after this visit both countries were not on friendly terms.

The relations between the two states took a new turn soon after the Indian Lok Sabha elections of 2014 in which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) assumed power with Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister. Narendra Modi openly embraced the Jewish state, as he had a personal relationship with Tel Aviv even before coming to power. Modi visited Israel in 2006 as the Chief Minister of Gujrat where he spoke openly about affairs where India could draw lessons from Israel. Due to this open embrace from the Modi government, the Indian Foreign Ministry during the Protective Edge Operation, released a balanced statement on the situation, not only stating condemnation over civilian casualties but expressing concern over the 'cross border provocation resulting from rocket attacks' in Israel.<sup>6</sup> This was the first deviation from traditional pro-Palestinian stance of India. Additionally, in 2015 and 2016, New Delhi also abstained from voting in the United Nations on the matter of bringing Israel to the International Court of Justice for its alleged crimes in Gaza crisis of 2014.<sup>7</sup> Taking this relation forward, Narendra Modi became the first Prime Minister of India to ever visit Tel Aviv, he called this trip 'ground-breaking.'<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, his counter-part Netanyahu referred it as a 'historic' trip saying, "it would deepen cooperation in wide range of field security, agriculture, water,

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energy - basically in almost every field Israel is involved in.”<sup>9</sup> This marked the dawn of a new strategic era between India and Israel. However, it is pertinent to question the underlying reasons behind New Delhi’s overt relations with Tel Aviv, especially after 2014?

### **Cooperation in Defense**

New Delhi was hesitant to develop formal relations with Tel Aviv even after accepting it in 1950. The reason for this hesitation was the need of the Arab world’s favor for the Kashmir issue with Pakistan, though it secretly accepted military and intelligence assistance<sup>10</sup> from Israel during war of 1962 with China and Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971. Even after Israeli Embassy was opened in Mumbai on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1992, India kept its cooperation with Israel a secret and never expressed its sympathies openly, but immediately after the assumption of power by BJP in 2014, the ties between India and Israel became friendly and the cooperation was enhanced in many fields especially in the domain of cybersecurity, military and defense equipment. During Narendra Modi’s visit to Israel in 2017, it is believed that India got a controversial spyware pegasus and a missile system worth US\$ 2 billion. Moreover, according to SIPRI report,<sup>11</sup> since 2017 Israel is the largest arms exporter to India. Likewise, India and Israel made a 10-year deal in 2022 during Israel’s Defense Minister Benjamin Gantz’s visit to New Delhi. The aim of this ten-year deal was to expand India-Israel Vision on Defense Cooperation. The Indian military is currently using several Israeli defense technologies. Key aspects of their collaboration, valued at about \$4.2 billion from 2001 to 2021, include armed drones, missiles, and radar systems. Israel exports a range of advanced

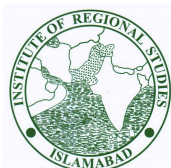
defense equipment to India, such as Beyond Visual Range Air-to-Air Missiles (BVRAAM), Air-to-Surface Missiles (ASM), guided bombs, anti-tank guided missiles, loitering munitions, and SPICE-2000 guided bombs, which were notably used in the Balakot airstrikes<sup>12</sup>. They also provide various types of sensors and radars, including early warning radar systems, electro-optical infrared sensors, and naval radars.

### **India: The Second Largest Trading Partner**

This increased interaction between both countries has made India the second largest trading partner of Israel in Asia, where some of the major export materials include chemical and mineral products, automotive diesel, electrical equipment, precious stones, and agricultural equipment. Similarly, both countries signed MoUs on National Campaign for water conservation in India and the reforms of UP Jal Nigam in 2017. In addition to these agreements, both states signed a letter of intent in May 2023 which aimed to open Center of Excellence in Indian Institute of Technology Madras and Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee. The major objective of these institutes will be to implement Israel’s water technologies.<sup>13</sup>

### **Commonalities in political ideologies**

Apart from this cooperation, scholars have argued that Bharatiya Janata Party and Benjamin Netanyahu’s right wing Likud have some common grounds in their political ideologies like hate against Muslims and ethno-nationalism.<sup>14</sup> These are some of the core ideological points of BJP as it is based on the ideology of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) which creates divide in the Indian



society,<sup>15</sup> and wants to settle Hindus in Kashmiri territory like Israel is doing in Gaza. Some have also pointed out that both Modi and Netanyahu are fighting against radical Islam and state-sponsored terrorism, as BJP and Likud are right-wing political parties, and these common points have brought two countries very close.<sup>16</sup> Both the leaders also share a very good personal relations. When the Israeli Prime Minister congratulated India on Constitution Day, the Indian Prime Minister replied with "My dear friend Bibi."<sup>17</sup> The Modi-Bibi 'bromance' also made headlines during Indian Prime Minister's 2017 visit to Israel. This shows how both leaders have turned a once hesitant affair into a very friendly relation.

### **Cooperation during Gaza Conflict**

The ideological similarities and strategic partnership have not only forced New Delhi to choose sides during the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas but also provide military and labour assistance to its beloved strategic partner, a report from Al-Jazeera revealed. On June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2024, when Israel bombed United Nations shelter at Nuseirat refugee camp in Gaza, the Quds news agency released a video of a missile which was used in the bombing, the label wherein clearly read "Made in India."<sup>18</sup> This is the first time Indian weapons have been used by Tel Aviv against Palestine. Similarly, ten thousand Indian workers were sent to Israel as labours considering that most of the construction has been done by Palestinians before the Gaza conflict, but after October 7<sup>th</sup> attack, huge

number of workers were fired, and to fill this gap Prime Minister Netanyahu requested his friend Narendra Modi, the Indian Prime Minister for labour support, and as expected he acquired the assistance from his partner. Therefore, these incidents are a proof that post-independence India has taken a very clear side on this issue. In the past few years however, the affair between New Delhi and Tel Aviv has been turned into a good relationship by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Benjamin Netanyahu.

During a very crucial conflict, India ditched its neutrality supporting its strategic partner and giving up on the Palestinian cause speaking volumes about the nature and the kind of relations that the two countries have managed to develop over the years. This relationship is benefitting India in many ways, especially in terms of defense cooperation while enhancing its ties with the United States, as Israel is the most favored ally of the US in the Middle East.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, India has always given precedence to its own national interests whether peace or war and has always exploited the major powers' rivalry to gain benefits. The gains that India is acquiring from Israel are more important for her to achieve its foreign policy objectives and to expand its occupation in Kashmir with the similar pattern her ally is using in Gaza. The benefits from these relations have forced India to give up its so-called neutrality during the times of conflicts and has the hollowness of its claims clear to the world.

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