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Indian Responses to Israel's Gaza Operations

S. Samuel C. Rajiv



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines Indian governmental responses to the three major Israeli military interventions in the Gaza Strip in the aftermath of the 2005 disengagement. The responses of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) were remarkably consistent, though different political parties were in power during each of the conflicts. The MEA was critical of the 'disproportionate' use of force by Israel while simultaneously acknowledging the 'cross-border provocations' that preceded Israeli response.

The study covers in detail the unprecedented parliamentary debate that took place in India during 'Operation Protective Edge', during which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government dismissed the opposition's charge that it had deviated from India's longstanding positions on the Israel-Palestine issue and sidestepped its demand for a resolution critical of Israel. The penultimate section assesses the broad contours of the Modi government's Middle East policy, which has engaged the countries of the region at the highest political levels. The study closes with the implications for India-Israel relations arising from the Modi government's strategic priorities.

The study notes that while the Indian government has clearly advertised its intention to inject new dynamism into the India-Israel relationship, to be capped by the possible visit to Israel by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2016, it has at the same time reiterated India's long-held position on its support for the Palestinian cause in both bilateral and multilateral fora.

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INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of Israel's disengagement from Gaza in August 2005, Hamas won legislative elections in January 2006. In June 2007, it took full control over the territory after engaging in a bloody fight with Fatah. Since then, there have been three major military interventions by Israel in the Gaza Strip. These were 'Operation Cast Lead' (December 27, 2008-January 18, 2009), 'Operation Pillar of Defense' (November 14-21, 2012) and 'Operation Protective Edge' (July 8-August 26, 2014).

Israel undertook these initiatives in order to stop constant enemy rocket barrages that had compromised its sense of security. The Israel Defense Force (IDF) contends that over 11,000 rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip towards Israel in the period between Israel's 2005 disengagement and July 2014. While military intervention did provide some respite, enemy military infrastructure was invariably replenished, leading to repeated escalation.

These conflicts have resulted in the deaths of over 3,600 Palestinians (both militants and civilians) and approximately 100 Israeli soldiers and civilians. The hugely disproportionate loss of life has led to criticism of the rationale behind Israel's military strategy. Israel as well as its antagonists have been criticized by United Nations agencies and other international observers for undertaking actions "in contravention of customary international humanitarian law".¹

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Israel takes issue with this latter equivalency, contending that the IDF took unprecedented steps to minimize civilian casualties while its enemies wilfully put civilian lives at risk. It charges Hamas with turning the Gaza Strip into a “fortress for terror activity, knowingly putting its civilians and infrastructure in danger”.² Israel also points out that from 2000 onward, over 1,200 Israelis were killed in the terror campaign engaged in by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups.³

This monograph seeks to examine Indian responses to Israel’s major military interventions in the Gaza Strip following disengagement. The strategic context underpinning this evaluation is Israel’s emergence as one of India’s most critical providers of defense technology and equipment. At the same time, India remains consistent in its support for the creation of a Palestinian state and for negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians to achieve that objective.

The conflicts under examination occurred when two different political parties were in power in New Delhi. These were the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition led by the Indian National Congress (INC) (in power from 2004-14) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which has been in power since June 2014.

The BJP secured an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) in the general elections conducted in May 2014, securing 31.34 percent of the total valid votes polled and winning 282 of the 428 seats it had contested. This was the first time a single party had crossed the absolute majority mark (272 out of a total 533 seats) since the massive victory of the INC in 1984, when it won 404 seats of the 491 seats it had contested with 49.1 percent of the vote. In 2014, the INC won just 44 of the 464 seats it contested, securing 19.52 percent of the vote.

The monograph begins by sketching the contours of the burgeoning India-Israel strategic partnership and the historical depth of the India-Palestine engagement. The next section is the main focus of inquiry, examining the Indian responses to the three major Israeli military interventions in the Gaza Strip in the aftermath of disengagement. The reactions of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) to these conflicts are discussed, and the robust parliamentary debate on ‘Operation Protective Edge’ and

the stances of representatives belonging to different political parties are covered in detail. The subsequent section broadly examines the attention given by the Indian parliament to the Israel-Palestine conflict and issues relating to the India-Israel relationship in the recent past.

The next section assesses the broad contours of the Modi government’s Middle East policy, which has seen a greater inclination to engage with the countries of the region at the highest political levels. The study closes with the implications for India-Israel relations and India’s Palestine policy flowing from the Modi government’s strategic priorities.

INDIA-ISRAEL: CONTOURS OF THE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

The burgeoning strategic partnership between India and Israel in the aftermath of the establishment of full-scale relations in January 1992 is one of the most significant aspects of India’s post-Cold War foreign policy. The two countries were brought together by several critical elements: international structural factors (the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, India’s most important strategic ally); positive developments in Israel’s relationship with the Palestinians; and significant domestic policy course corrections, particularly economic reforms. Overlapping interests (Israel’s export-oriented defense industry and India’s need to upgrade its Soviet-era equipment in an increasingly challenging security context), coupled with the requisite political will in Israel and non-partisan nurturing on the part of successive governments in Delhi, have kept the relationship on an upward trajectory.⁴

The partnership involves high-tech cooperation, agricultural cooperation, people-to-people contacts, and most significantly, robust strategic engagement.

Strategic Engagement⁵

The strategic engagement between India and Israel is the defining aspect of their partnership. India’s Ministry of Defense (MOD) lists Israel among the country’s top five “defense partners”, along with the US, Russia, France and the UK. In its Annual Report 2006-07, the MOD

expresses the hope that the “rapidly expanding defense cooperation and ties” with these partners “will enhance not just the security environment in the region, but also the global security scenario.”⁶

In July 2005, the Defense Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), India’s agency for defense research, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Israeli Directorate of Defense Research and Development (DDR&D). DRDO and DDR&D meet annually under the aegis of the Indo-Israel Management Council (IIMC) to pursue defense-related R&D activities. In March 2015, Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar informed the Lok Sabha that “Israel shares technology information, know-how, [and] know-why” with India, noting that “joint R&D” as well as “collaborative research projects” are undertaken within this institutional framework.⁷

Purchase of Equipment

India-Israel strategic engagement took off in the aftermath of the Kargil War (1999), when Israel provided crucial ammunition for artillery guns. India has since bought niche defense equipment like airborne warning and control systems (AWACS), unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), surveillance radar for the Indian Air Force (IAF), anti-missile defense (AMD) systems for naval warships (including aircraft carriers), beyond visual range (BVR) missiles for light combat aircraft (LCA), and more. The Israeli UAVs in India’s arsenal include more than 150 Searchers and Herons manufactured by Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI).

The March 2004 Phalcon AWACS deal with Elta Systems Ltd. (a subsidiary of IAI), worth \$1.1 billion for three such planes, was among the biggest deals either country has ever concluded. The first two AWACS aircraft were delivered in May 2009 and March 2010, respectively. The third was inducted in March 2011. On March 1, 2016, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) cleared a proposal to purchase two additional Phalcon AWACS from Israel (with Russia providing the aircraft) in a deal worth more than \$800 million. Aerostat-mounted surveillance radars made by Elta have been deployed on India’s borders.

The Barak-I AMD system has been successfully integrated into many warships of the Indian Navy (IN), including the aircraft carrier INS Viraat. In September 2014, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) cleared the decks to buy Barak-I missiles worth \$164 million, after the closure of a case by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) pertaining to alleged irregularities surrounding the original October 2000 deal (which involved nine such systems and missiles worth about \$272 million).⁸

Other defense equipment India has bought from Israel include Tavor assault rifles, Galil sniper rifles, forward-looking infrared (FLIR) cameras for the Coast Guard, and Spyder low-level quick reaction missiles for protection of high-value assets (HVA), to be operated by the IAF. In October 2014, India’s Defense Acquisition Council (DAC), headed by Defense Minister Manohar Parikkar, approved the purchase of 8,000 Spike anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM) for over \$525 million, in preference to other options like the US-made Javelin. The need for such third-generation ATGMs was huge: India had over 380 infantry battalions and required over 2,000 launchers and 24,000 missiles to replace second-generation ATGMs in its inventory, like the ‘wire-guided’ Russian-made Konkurs-M and the French MILAN. Israel’s Rafael Advanced Defense Systems Ltd. claimed the initial contract, putting it in the driver’s seat to cater to India’s military needs.

India’s development of corresponding systems like the Nag missile has had an uneven trajectory. The Nag had trouble with its infrared seeker guidance system in user trials in hot desert conditions. The system was fine-tuned, and the Army placed orders for over 400 such missiles in 2010. It is not clear, however, when these missiles will be inducted.

Reports from late June 2015 indicate that Rafael will enter into a joint venture (JV) with India’s private sector Kalyani Group to set up a manufacturing unit near Hyderabad in South India exclusively to make the Spike ATGM.⁹

Joint Development

In January 2006, India and Israel signed a contract worth over \$350 million for the joint development of long-range surface-to-air missiles

(LRSAM) for the Indian and Israeli navies. The system was to have come to fruition by 2012, but the project was plagued by delays. Consequently, India's largest guided missile destroyer, the INS Kolkata (inducted in August 2014), was equipped with the Barak-1 system instead. Reports indicate that the DRDO-made boosters to fire the LRSAM missiles failed.¹⁰

Unlike the Barak-I system, which has a range of 9-10 kms, the LRSAM system "has a range of 70 km using dual pulse rocket motor and active radar seeker in terminal phase and inertial/ mid-course update for guidance".¹¹ Despite the delays, the system has made some progress, including two successful control and navigation flight tests completed in Israel in July 2012.¹² In August 2013, 'home-on-target' flight tests were conducted after the system was integrated onto one warship.¹³ The missile was successfully tested against a flying target in Israel on November 10, 2014. Former DRDO Chief Avinash Chander, who witnessed the event, termed it a "milestone in cooperation between the two countries in developing advanced weapons systems".¹⁴ The LRSAM was successfully test-fired from INS Kolkata in December 2015. In addition to the guided missile destroyers INS Kochi and INS Chennai, more than ten other upcoming destroyers and frigates of the IN are to be equipped with the system.¹⁵

The contract for the joint development of Medium-Range SAMs (MRSAM) for the Indian Air Force (IAF), worth over \$1 billion, was entered into with IAI in 2009. MRSAM is a land-based air defense system "capable of neutralising a variety of targets, like Fixed Wing Aircraft, Helicopters, Missiles (sub sonic, supersonic and tactical ballistic missiles) within a range of 70 km and up to an altitude of 20 km. The Firing Unit is equipped to neutralise threats from multiple targets simultaneously."¹⁶

Bharat Dynamics (BDL) is the lead system integrator for the missile, along with IAI. The MRSAM systems are slated for induction in 2017, three years behind schedule. India and Israel are also reported to have agreed to adapt the MRSAM system for the Indian Army, to replace Russian systems procured in the 1970s and 1980s. While the initial requirement for such systems for the Army was on the order of \$1.5 billion, the total requirement has been pegged at nearly \$6 billion.¹⁷

Other programs include 130mm artillery ammunition, produced by India's Ordnance Factory Board (OFB) in technical collaboration with Israel Military Industries (IMI); advanced electronic warfare (EW) suites for light combat aircraft (LCA) (DRDO in association with Elisra, Israel); dual color missile approach warning systems (DCMAWS) for Su-30 MKI fighter planes (DRDO with Elisra); as well as efforts to improve the accuracy of Pinaka multi-barrel rockets, in collaboration with IMI.

Such joint development projects are viewed by members of the armed forces as "symbiotic" and a "win-win for both countries". Lt. Gen. Prakash Katoch (Retd.), for instance, noted that Israel gave India "the best technology as compared to other countries".¹⁸ Former Navy Chief Arun Prakash called the LRSAM agreement "path-breaking", noting that the weapons system was "contemporary" and "state-of-the-art".¹⁹ Admiral Prakash pointed out that in 2004-05, when the Israeli Navy made the initial offer to the Indian Navy to jointly develop the LRSAM (Barak-8) project (along with the multi-function phased array radar, which he described as the "cherry on the cake"), the small quantity required by the Israeli Navy would have made the project economically unviable in the absence of a trusted joint development partner. He stated that "there were not many nations [Israel] could trust with such sensitive technology".²⁰

Despite the delays, MRSAM and LRSAM are examples of successful cooperation. Less successful examples include the effort to develop EW suites for Mig-27 fighters, which involved Israel's Elta and India's Defence Avionics Research Establishment (DARE). The system as fielded at testing was unable to satisfy many technical specifications and could not be improved quickly enough to be financially or technologically viable, particularly in view of the fact that the aircraft itself was being phased out. India's audit watchdog termed the joint development effort "injudicious".²¹

Financial Volume

India is estimated to have purchased \$8-10 billion worth of defense equipment from Israel. In August 2005, then Deputy Defense Minister B.K. Handique told the Rajya Sabha (the upper house of the Indian Parliament) that "the total value of the purchase contracts concluded

[with Israel] during the last three years [2002-05] is 11882.54 crores”,²² or about \$2.7 billion.²³ In May 2007, then Defense Minister A.K. Antony informed the Rajya Sabha that defense purchases from Israel during the period 2002-07 were over \$5 billion.²⁴ In August 2013, Antony told the Lok Sabha that Israeli products accounted for 29 percent of the Indian Army’s total capital expenditure during 2010-13.²⁵

Keeping It Under Wraps

These disclosures notwithstanding, the Indian government is not by any means inclined to tell Parliament any specifics about the financial volume of India-Israel defense cooperation. All the ruling parties have displayed a preference for non-disclosure on the subject. In November 2001, for instance, then Defense Minister George Fernandes (of the NDA alliance headed by the BJP) was asked in the Rajya Sabha whether the defense contracts India had signed with Israel amounted to \$2 billion. He replied, “India has been signing contracts with Israel for defense equipment. It is not in the interest of national security to give further details”.²⁶

In August 2007, Sitaram Yechury of the Communist Party of India–Marxist (CPI-M) asked the UPA’s A.K. Antony whether the government was purchasing a “range of missiles” from Israel. He responded that “divulging details...would not be in the interest of national security”.²⁷

In March 2013, when the BJP’s Chandan Mitra inquired in the Rajya Sabha whether India and Israel were jointly developing an Indian version of the Israeli short-range anti-missile system Iron Dome, Antony insisted that “information cannot be divulged in the interest of national security”.²⁸ While non-disclosure on critical issues of national security is inevitable, it contributes to the opacity surrounding the India-Israel defense relationship.

Drivers

One driver behind India’s defense cooperation with Israel is the difficulty India has had in developing its own niche technologies like UAVs, AWACS and AMD systems. It took until August 2012 for an indigenous AWACS mounted on the smaller Embraer aircraft sourced from Brazil (unlike the Israeli systems, which are mounted on the Russian IL-76

heavy-lift aircraft) to be received at Bengaluru. India only went for the Israeli Barak-I AMD after the failure of the Trishul system that was being developed by DRDO. For its part, Israel has demonstrated the necessary political will to supply niche equipment like AWACS to India. In 2000, Israel was compelled by American pressure to deny similar equipment to China, despite the countries’ having signed a contract in 1998.

Another driver propelling India-Israel defense cooperation has been a lack of viable alternatives. In 2000, then Defense Minister Fernandes told the Rajya Sabha that Russian A-50 AWACS did not meet Indian specifications during demonstrations conducted by the IAF.²⁹ A further incentive toward India-Israel cooperation is the relative price advantage of Israeli equipment. In May 2007, Antony stated that Elta was the “lowest bidder” in response to a request-for-proposal (RfP) for medium-power radars for the IAF.³⁰

Israel’s own army has made use of niche equipment for many years: in October 2011, the IDF marked the fortieth anniversary of operational use of UAVs. This long experience, coupled with the consistently strong investment in R&D by Israel’s defense industry, continue to appeal to India as it supplies its critical defense needs. That is not to say that the Israelis are dictating terms. In June 2015, the parties engaged in hard bargaining over the operationalizing of the Spike ATGM deal.³¹

Robust Institutional Engagement

Apart from the purchase of critical equipment and participation in joint R&D projects, there are robust institutional interactions between the two armed forces. The national security apparatuses brainstorm together on internal security, non-proliferation and other issues. Since 2001, as many as eight defense chiefs from each side have visited one another’s countries for consultations and to enhance mutual understanding. Then Chief of Army Staff General Bikram Singh was the latest to visit Israel in March 2014, while Chief of the Israeli Navy Vice Admiral Ram Rothberg visited India in August 2015. In a statement on the occasion of Admiral Rothberg’s visit, the Ministry of Defense hoped that India and Israel would “reap strategic benefits” by taking advantage of the Modi government’s ‘Make-In-India’ program.³²

Service-to-service staff talks are a regular feature of these interactions, and port visits by IN warships are an integral part of defense diplomacy. INS Mumbai and INS Brahmaputra visited Haifa in June 2006. Those two warships, along with INS Betwa and INS Shakthi, were part of 'Op Sukoon', an operation under the command of Rear Admiral Anup Singh that successfully evacuated nearly 1,500 Indian and South Asian citizens from Beirut on June 21-23, 2006, just ahead of the Israel-Lebanon War.³³ Two Indian naval training ships, INS Sujata and INS Shardul, visited Haifa in September 2007.

The IN conducted 'passage exercises' (PASSEX) with the Israeli Navy in 2009-10.³⁴ INS Mumbai, INS Trishul, INS Gomati and INS Aditya paid a goodwill visit to Haifa Port in July-August 2012, commanded by Rear Admiral A.R. Karve, Flag Officer Commanding Western Fleet. On August 19, 2015, the front line frigate of the Indian Navy, the INS Trikand, made a port call at Haifa and stayed for a four-day visit. As the MOD noted, "bonds developed through such events strengthen the established mechanisms of maritime cooperation between the two countries while pursuing common goals of safe and secure seas".³⁵

The first meeting of the India-Israel Joint Working Group (JWG) on Defense Cooperation was held in Tel Aviv in September 2002. The Annual Report of the MOD for 2014-15 indicates that the eleventh round of the JWG was held in June 2014 in Tel Aviv, after a gap of two years. The two countries also participate in a Sub-Working Group (SWG) on Defense Procurement, Production and Development (DPPD, which held its eighth meeting in May 2013. In addition, there is a JWG on Counterterrorism (CT), as well as ongoing dialogues on non-proliferation issues. The fourteenth round of Foreign Office (FO) consultations took place in July 2015 in Tel Aviv.

Strategic Engagement: The Other Side of the Coin

*Limited High-Level Political Engagement*³⁶

No Indian Defense Minister has ever visited Israel. This is somewhat jarring, given the two countries' robust defense cooperation. Nor has any Indian National Security Advisor (NSA) taken an official trip to Israel

since the September 1999 visit of NSA Brajesh Misra. (Misra visited Israel again in 2006, though in his private capacity to deliver a lecture at Tel Aviv University). Shiv Shankar Menon, former Indian Ambassador of India to Israel from 1995-98, never visited Israel in his later positions as Foreign Secretary (2006-09) and NSA (January 2010-May 2014). When Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna visited Israel in January 2012 on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the states, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman publicly expressed his hope that high-level political visits from India would be more frequent.

Israeli NSAs have been more regular visitors to India. There have been at least seven such visits, involving six Israeli NSAs, since 2001. Yaakov Amidror visited in March 2012 following a bomb attack on the car carrying the wife of the Israeli Defense Attaché that had occurred in New Delhi the previous month. In October 2014, Joseph Cohen, the current chief of Mossad, had wide-ranging discussions with Indian leadership, including Interior Minister Rajnath Singh and Indian NSA Ajit Doval.

While the lack of high-level engagement has not negatively affected the bilateral relationship, it does suggest that the Indian political leadership considers its policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians to preclude such engagement. This reasoning notwithstanding, India's policy regarding high-level visits to Israel appears to be the norm rather than the exception when viewed in a broader regional context. Indian leaders have made very few high-level political visits anywhere in the Middle East. To be sure, India does not have a similar defense relationship with most of the other countries of the region. Still, its massive energy imports do inject a strategic dimension into its regional interactions.

Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh's 2010 visit to Saudi Arabia—India's biggest energy source—was after a gap of 28 years. The 2006 visit of the Saudi King to India, during which he was accorded the honor of being the Chief Guest at the Republic Day parade, took place fifty years after the previous visit of a Saudi King. Then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, as well as Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan, visited India in November 2008, 25 years after the last visit by dignitaries from either country. (Following Mubarak's ouster, Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi visited India in March 2013.)

'Low-Key' Counterterrorism (CT) Cooperation?

While Indian policymakers have identified CT cooperation as one of the main thrusts of bilateral engagement (Defense Minister Sharad Pawar stated this position as long ago as February 1992), this aspect of the relationship does not seem to have taken off, judging by the relatively limited meetings of the JWG on CT. The JWG on CT, which was established in 2002, has met eight times since then, with the latest meeting taking place in February 2013 in New Delhi. One of the first visits to Israel by a senior Indian security official following the establishment of diplomatic relations was the 1995 visit of Ashok Tandon, head of the elite counterterrorism unit the National Security Guard (NSG). An Israeli delegation led by then NSA Uzi Dayan was conducting a strategic dialogue with their Indian counterparts, discussing CT measures among other issues, on September 11, 2001—the day Al Qaeda attacked New York.

Why is India-Israel CT cooperation on the back burner? One possible explanation is the difference of opinion among Israeli and Indian analysts regarding the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. Israeli analysts state that the two countries face similar threats in the form of “radical offshoots of Islam in the greater Middle East”.³⁷ Indian analysts state conversely that “the fight against Islamic fundamentalism, often mentioned as a possible common adversary, does not seem an attractive and sensible option” and that “both countries have been careful not to present themselves in alliance against militant Islam”.³⁸

Former MEA official Rajendra Abhyankar points out that India and Israel differ “both on the philosophy behind counterterrorism and respective threat perceptions”.³⁹ He notes that India faces “Islamic threats from Pakistan” while Israel’s “concentric circle of threats” includes Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas. Abhyankar, who headed the Indian delegation to one of the JWGs on CT with Israeli officials while in service, does note the exchange of “practical experiences” between the two countries on border security, suicide terrorism, aviation security, terror financing, information security, and cyber warfare.⁴⁰

Another explanation that has been suggested for the lack of emphasis on CT cooperation is the “nature of domestic political sensitivity within India”, which constrained India-Israel cooperation in the CT sphere in the aftermath of the November 2008 Mumbai attacks.⁴¹ This theory does not seem to coincide, however, with the overall thrust of bilateral relations, which have gradually detached from the Indian political establishment’s perceived need to take into account the sentiments of India’s Muslim population with regard to Israel.

The INC had greater leeway in establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992, given that the “prominent Muslim leaders of North India... endorsed the Janata Dal led by V.P. Singh” in the general elections that had brought the INC-led government to power.⁴² Kumaraswamy notes as well that “domestic Muslim opinion has shown signs of accommodation on Israel”.⁴³ A further mitigating factor is Israel’s outreach and public diplomacy activity, which has showcased the Israeli way of life and viewpoint for Indian audiences and tempered the negativity associated with Israeli policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians.⁴⁴

Strategic Engagement: Other Strong Facets

This section looks at the other significant areas of bilateral engagement, which include trade, agriculture cooperation, tourism, and high-technology cooperation.

Trade

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in January 1992, the relationship has grown exponentially. Bilateral trade, which was about \$200 million in 1992, exceeded \$6 billion in 2011-12. It stood at about \$5.7 billion in 2014-15.⁴⁵ Significantly, the top three imports from Israel during 2008-15 (natural/cultured diamonds, electrical machinery and fertilizers) accounted for 74 percent of total imports (USD 11,739.12 million out of USD 15,861.18 million). The top two exports from India—mineral fuels and natural/cultured diamonds (after polishing)—over the same period accounted for over 72 percent of total exports (USD 15,363.01 million out of USD 21,163.94 million).

India-Israel Bilateral Trade 2008-15 (in USD Million)

Year	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
Exports (by India)	1,458.55	1,968.59	2,919.78	4,040.52	3,739.71	3,746.94	3,289.85
Imports (from Israel)	2,090.41	1,885.06	2,253.51	2,635.34	2,356.66	2,311.58	2,328.04
Total Trade	3,548.96	3,853.65	5,173.29	6,675.86	6,096.37	6,058.52	5,617.89

Source: Government of India, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Export-Import Data Bank, at www.commerce.nic.in

While this does point to the dominance of a limited number of products in the trade basket, the countries are negotiating a free trade agreement (FTA) to further propel bilateral trade. India's Commerce Minister Nirmala Sitharaman told the Rajya Sabha in May 2015 that eight rounds of negotiations were held between January 2010 and November 2013, and that India was "aiming to achieve a mutually beneficial FTA with Israel".⁴⁶

Israeli ministers and officials have been upbeat about the prospects of an FTA. Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz, after meeting then Indian Finance Minister (and now President) Pranab Mukherjee in Washington in October 2010, stated that Israel "cannot rely just on the markets in the US and Europe. We need new markets".⁴⁷ Addressing a trade gathering in Israel a month later, Steinitz noted that "the giant Indian market is full of endless opportunities for Israeli companies".⁴⁸ On a visit to India in December 2011, the first visit by an Israeli Finance Minister in fifteen years, Steinitz expressed his hope that bilateral trade would "double or treble" within six to seven years after the signing of an FTA.⁴⁹

Agriculture Cooperation

Cooperation in the agricultural sector has emerged as a dominant element in the India-Israel relationship. A vast majority of the Indian population depends on agriculture for their livelihood—a sector plagued by inefficiencies in terms of both equipment and practices. Israeli agricultural expertise thus adds a crucial dimension to the bilateral partnership.

India and Israel signed a MoU for cooperation in the agriculture sector in 1993. A 'Work Plan' relating to agricultural cooperation was signed in 2006, envisaging cooperation in "energy efficient greenhouses, recycling of waste water for irrigation, post-harvest management for horticulture and dairy products, dairy development through genetic improvement, extension services, training and visiting facilities in respective countries".⁵⁰

An 'Action Plan' followed in 2008 under which 'Centers of Excellence' (CoE) with Israeli technical support were opened in the states of Haryana, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Punjab, Bihar, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The latest Israeli technologies for increasing productivity of horticulture crops, including subtropical fruits, are showcased at these centers.

The latest CoE for vegetables was opened in Gujarat (the home state of Prime Minister Narendra Modi) in August 2015. Carmon indicated at the Gujarat event that the next phase in the partnership would see the building of additional centers as well as new areas of cooperation.⁵¹ The third phase, covering aspects of cooperation through 2018, was launched in September 2015. As of December 2015, 15 CoE were functioning in nine states of India, and nine more are to be made operational soon. The Department of Horticulture in the Indian Ministry of Agriculture and the Israeli Agency for Development and Cooperation (MASHAV) are spearheading this cooperation. Notably, Israeli Ambassador to India Daniel Carmon was heading MASHAV prior to his appointment.

Tourism

Robust tourist linkages are another significant aspect of the bilateral relationship. Officials and ministers from both Israel and India have indicated that tourist visits help to build mutual affinity and better understanding of one another's culture and way of life. Israeli tourists represent a large proportion of foreign tourist arrivals into India from the Middle East. In 2014, for instance, the 49,312 Israeli tourists who visited India made up about 12 percent of total tourist arrivals from the region. In 2012, that figure stood at 16 percent, with 47,649 Israelis having visited the country.⁵² India, in turn, is one of the biggest source countries of tourists from Asia into Israel. In 2014, 34,900 Indians visited Israel, and Israel hopes to attract more than triple that number by 2017.⁵³

High-Technology Cooperation

A further arena in which Israel and India continue to cooperate is high technology. Israeli company Tower Jazz, for example, is working with India's Jaiprakash and Associates Ltd. and American company IBM to set up Semiconductor Wafer Fabrication (FAB) facilities in Uttar Pradesh. Permission to go ahead with the project was granted in March 2014. Another FAB facility is being built as a joint venture involving French/Italian and Malaysian companies with an Indian partner.

In January 2015, the Modi government, while reconstituting a committee of experts to help advise the government regarding these projects, noted that the FAB project

“is a critical pillar required to promote Electronics System Design and Manufacturing in India which will stimulate the flow of capital and technology, create employment opportunities, help higher value addition in the electronic products manufactured in India, reduce dependence on imports, and lead to innovation”.⁵⁴

Another area of cooperation that could show growth is water management and recycling. Israel is among four countries (the others are Japan, China and the Netherlands) with which the Indian Ministry of Urban Development has technical cooperation agreements in the area of waste water management. Cooperation parameters envisage pilot studies and the possibility of establishing “commercial demonstration centers” in the fields of waste water and sewerage management.⁵⁵

The Modi government has big plans for urban renewal. It has launched national programs like ‘Swacch Bharat’ (‘Clean India’), and has expressed its intention to clean up ‘sacred’ rivers like the Ganga (which flows by Varanasi, PM Modi’s parliamentary constituency). The National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG), the agency responsible for carrying out these plans, intends to place waste water treatment facilities in more than 100 towns through which the Ganga flows, as well as others.⁵⁶ The Indian Chief Ministers have been regular visitors to Israeli networking events like the Water Technology and Environment Control (WATEC) exhibitions.

INDIA-PALESTINE: THE WEIGHT OF HISTORY

Diplomatic Support

India and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) have maintained a constant stream of high-level visits. PNA President Mahmoud Abbas has been a frequent guest in India: he visited in May 2005, October 2008, February 2010 and September 2012. The 2008 and 2012 visits were state visits.

India has a long history of support for the Palestinian cause. India was the first non-Arab state to recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1975. It granted full diplomatic recognition to the PLO in 1980 and recognized the State of Palestine in the aftermath of its proclamation by the Palestine National Council in 1988. In 1996, a Representative Office of the Indian Foreign Ministry was opened in Gaza. It was shifted to Ramallah in 2003.

Then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, in an interview with Saudi journalists prior to his departure to Riyadh in February 2010, termed India’s support for the Palestinians “an article of faith for us. Our solidarity with the people of Palestine predates our independence”.⁵⁷ Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj, at a meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Committee on Palestine (a forum established at the 1983 NAM Summit in New Delhi) that took place on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2014, stated that India’s “commitment to the Palestinian cause has been a core feature of its foreign policy”.⁵⁸

India at the UN

India’s support for the Palestinian cause is most evident at the UN, where it regularly votes in favor of resolutions urging the creation of a Palestinian state, criticizing Israeli settlement activities, and supporting the work of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East. India supported Palestine’s application for full membership status at the UN in September 2011. In November 2012, India co-sponsored and voted in favor of Resolution 67/19, which changed Palestine’s status to ‘Non-Member Observer’ (from the ‘Observer Entity’

status accorded to the Palestine Liberation Organisation in 1974). One hundred thirty-eight countries voted in favor of this resolution, with nine against and forty-one abstentions. Of the UN Security Council permanent members, China, France and Russia voted in favor, the US voted against, and the United Kingdom abstained.

India's then Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador Hardeep Puri, called the vote a "milestone" and stated that the "situation in the occupied Palestinian territories had been deteriorating due to settlement activities that threatened the very premise of a two-state solution".⁵⁹ Earlier, on November 30, 2011, Puri identified Israeli settlement activities as "the biggest stumbling block to direct negotiations".⁶⁰

In an interview with Asian Age in January 2013, then Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid stated that Israel did not want India to vote for the November 2012 resolution

"...but we did. We've found the right sort of balance between our legitimate concerns about Palestine and our growing relationship with Israel. It's important that we keep in mind popular perceptions in the country that, historically, have been strongly in favor of Palestine".⁶¹

Analysts like former Special Envoy for the Middle East Peace Process Ambassador Chinmaya Gharekhan note the "moderation" in Indian positions vis-à-vis the Israel-Palestine conflict and attribute this to the robust strategic linkages that India developed with Israel in the aftermath of the Kargil War.⁶² Gharekhan adds that India no longer sponsors "statements in favor of Palestine", although it continues to support them.

India's behavior at the UNGA does not, however, readily suggest moderation towards Israel. India has co-sponsored resolutions critical of Israeli policies at the UNGA, even after the Modi government came to power. The first Palestine-related resolution that India co-sponsored at the UNGA (along with Afghanistan, Cyprus and Pakistan) was on November 4, 1976, on "Palestinian Refugees in the Gaza Strip".⁶³

India first began co-sponsoring the resolution "Right of the Palestinian People for Self-Determination" in 1998 and has continued to do so

under different political dispensations. The 2015 resolution called for an end to the "Israeli occupation that began in 1967" and cited the July 2004 opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which stated that the construction of a wall by Israel, "along with measures previously taken, severely impedes the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination".⁶⁴ While the Modi government did not desist from co-sponsoring the 2014 resolution, it chose not to co-sponsor the 2015 resolution (though it extended support to it).⁶⁵ During those two years, India lent its support to many other resolutions at the UNGA related to Palestinian causes as well.

Israel views these resolutions as "outdated" and "outrageous", and holds that they represent "anti-Israeli incitement and the defamation and delegitimization of Israel".⁶⁶ In November 2014, Israeli Foreign Ministry official Israel-Nitzan Tikochinski expressed his unhappiness that the UN spends over \$6 million annually on the UN Division for Palestinian Rights, the United Nations Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, and the Department of Public Information's special information program on the question of Palestine. He questioned the role of those committees and programs, as well as the achievements of the 2014 International Year of Solidarity with the Palestinian People that had been declared by the UN the previous year. He charged that the solidarity so expressed was "with the culture of hatred and incitement... [and] with unilateral actions instead of direct negotiations".⁶⁷

Economic Support and Developmental Assistance

Until mid-2008, India had given the PNA \$27 million in the form of grants towards development, humanitarian relief, and other projects.⁶⁸ India currently contributes an annual \$1 million (increased from \$20,000 prior to 2009) to the UNRWA. From 2011 onwards, at India's specific request, this money is being used to provide supplementary food assistance to 76,000 students attending UNRWA schools for fifty school days. India announced budgetary support of \$10 million to the PNA in 2008, 2010 and 2012 (during the visits of President Abbas). As for developmental assistance, \$5 million was pledged at the Paris Donor Conference in December 2007; \$10 million during the October 2008 visit of Abbas; and

\$4 million at the Cairo International Conference on Gaza Reconstruction in October 2014 (transferred in January 2015).⁶⁹ Five million dollars were provided as budgetary assistance in October 2015.⁷⁰

The Palestine Embassy Chancery and Residence buildings in New Delhi were constructed by the Government of India as a gift to the State of Palestine. Eighty slots were offered to Palestinian nationals for training courses under the Indian Technical and Economic program (ITEC) in 2015 (out of 8,360 civilian training slots for 161 partner countries).⁷¹ The Jawaharlal Nehru Secondary School for Girls in Asera Al-Shamalyeh was inaugurated during the visit of Anil Wadhwa, Secretary (East) to Palestine, on July 8-9, 2015.

Among other ongoing capacity-building activities being undertaken by India are the Jawaharlal Nehru Secondary Boys School in Abu Dees, the establishment of the India-Palestine Center for Excellence in ICT, the Digital Learning & Innovation Center at Al Quds University (with a satellite center in Ramallah), and the supply of technical and vocational education training (TVET) equipment and services to seven vocational training centers in the PNA.

India also supplies vehicles and medicines to the PNA. In September 2004, for instance, then Deputy Foreign Minister E. Ahmed personally handed over medicines worth two crores (about \$500,000) and fourteen vehicles to the PNA.⁷² In May 2006, medical aid worth \$2 million was announced under a humanitarian assistance program. In November 2011, a sports complex was inaugurated in partnership with IBSA. The IBSA Fund (created in December 2007 at the Paris Donors' Conference, with an initial contribution of \$3 million for three years) pledged \$1 million to reconstruct a medical facility in Gaza destroyed during the July-August 2014 conflict. Other IBSA projects include the rehabilitation of Al-Quds hospital in Gaza and the construction of a 'Center for People with Special Needs' in Nablus.

GAZA CONFLICTS: INDIAN RESPONSES

Violent exchanges between Israel and its antagonists in the Gaza Strip always attract wide international attention and elicit international activism of both the governmental and non-governmental variety. India has a strategic linkage with Israel that is significant to the point of dependency; but at the same time, it has a long history of supporting the Palestinian cause. Indian responses to Israel-Gaza clashes—by governments in power, by political party representatives, and by civil society—therefore serve as a unique case study into how such conflicts are viewed abroad.

Even before Israel's disengagement in 2005 and Hamas's electoral success in January 2006, India's MEA had been criticizing Israeli military activities in the Gaza Strip that had led to civilian casualties. On May 20, 2004, for instance, the MEA "condemned" the destruction of homes and the "indiscriminate use of force" in the Rafah refugee camp by the IDF.⁷³ In response to rocket attacks that killed two children in Sderot, Israel launched a military offensive in the Gaza Strip targeting Palestinian refugee camps in September-October 2004 that led to the deaths of over 130 Palestinians. The Deputy Foreign Minister E. Ahmed "condemned" the "disproportionate and unwarranted use of force", expressed "deep concern" at the loss of "innocent civilian lives" and urged a return to the path of negotiations.⁷⁴

After Israel's disengagement from Gaza in August-September 2005, the cycle of violence increased substantially. In early June 2006, the IDF killed a senior Hamas official in a targeted killing by firing missiles from an Apache helicopter. This led to increased rocket attacks, which in turn fuelled Israeli artillery fire and air strikes. When nine members of a Palestinian family were killed on a Gaza beach on June 9, 2006, India criticized the "unprovoked act and the killing of innocent civilians".⁷⁵

In late June 2006, Israel launched a military offensive in the Gaza Strip in response to the kidnapping of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit. The operation lasted till August, resulting in the deaths of seven Israelis (including five soldiers) and over 400 Palestinians, including over 250 'militants'.⁷⁶ The MEA "condemned" the Shalit kidnapping, which it noted had "provoked the threat of massive retaliatory measures by Israel".⁷⁷

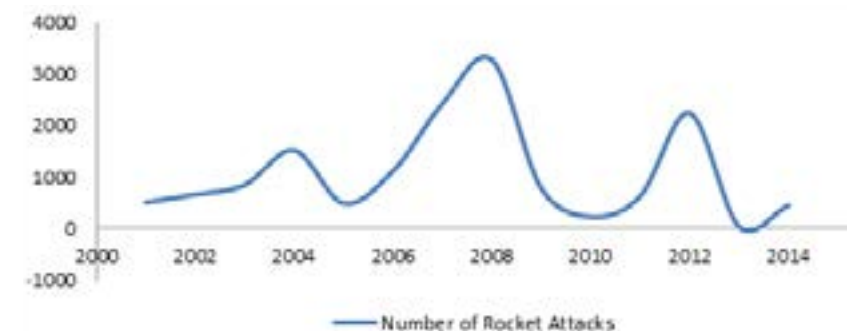
Hamas came to power in January 25, 2006, when it won 74 of 134 seats in the Palestinian parliament. At the time, India welcomed the result, expressing the hope that the “new Government representing the will of the Palestinian people will continue to pursue the path of peaceful negotiations”.⁷⁸ Subsequent events of course belied such hopes.

In February 2008, Israel launched an air and ground offensive that led to the deaths of over 100 Palestinians. On March 1, the government of India expressed “dismay” over the continuing violence and criticized the “disproportionate use of retaliatory force, [which] has led to avoidable civilian casualties, including the deaths of innocent children. This is unacceptable”.⁷⁹ On March 7, 2008, while condemning the deaths of eight Israelis in a terrorist attack at Merkaz Harav Yeshiva, the MEA added that “the current cycle of violence, including disproportionate retaliation by Israel...will have to cease if the suffering of the peoples of the region is to end”.⁸⁰

On April 18, 2008, the MEA stated that India ‘was saddened at the upsurge of violence in Gaza...which has led to the loss of many Palestinian and Israeli lives’.⁸¹ On November 17, 2008, India expressed concern at the Gaza blockade that had been in force since January of that year, asserting that there could be “no justification for the denial of essential supplies...to the civilian population of the Gaza Strip numbering over a million persons”.⁸²

‘Operation Cast Lead’

The IDF contended that this operation was launched “after exhausting non-military moves and diplomatic overtures to hinder Hamas’ rocket attacks”.⁸³ As shown in the graph below, 2008 witnessed the highest number of rockets ever launched from the Gaza Strip. During 2007-08, over 1,200 Israelis were injured in rocket attacks; 25 were killed.⁸⁴



Source: Data taken from ‘Rocket attacks on Israel from the Gaza Strip’, <https://www.idfblog.com/facts-figures/rocket-attacks-toward-israel/>

More than 1,200 Palestinians were killed in the fighting, which lasted from December 26, 2008 through January 18, 2009. On December 27, 2008, the MEA urged “an immediate end to the use of force against Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip that has resulted in large numbers of casualties”. However, it prefaced the statement by noting that India was “aware of the immediate cross-border provocations resulting from rocket attacks particularly against targets in southern Israel”.⁸⁵ Then Israeli Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) Eli Belotsercovsky, as revealed in a Wikileaks cable in the aftermath of that MEA statement, informed the Political Officer of the US Embassy that they were “not very much depressed” and that it was “reassuring” that the MEA acknowledged the “cross-border provocations”.⁸⁶

Still, two days after the initial statement, the MEA termed the “disproportionate use of force” by Israel “unwarranted and condemnable” and urged “utmost restraint”. It further expressed the apprehension that the “peace process may well get derailed irreversibly by Israel’s attack in the Gaza Strip”.⁸⁷ On January 2, 2009, in response to a flash appeal by UNRWA, India extended assistance of \$1 million. In another strong statement on January 4, India “condemned the ongoing incursion into Gaza by Israeli ground and other forces...The suffering of civilians in the region must end”.⁸⁸

On January 9, 2009, India termed the plight of the people of Gaza “heart-rending”. While not specifically mentioning Israel, the MEA termed as “strange” the lack of “sorrow or concern about the plight

of the million and half Gazan civilians living in a permanent state of fright”.⁸⁹ Explaining India’s stance vis-à-vis the conflict in response to a query in the Lok Sabha on February 18, 2009, Deputy Foreign Minister E. Ahmed reminded the MPs about the MEA’s statements condemning Israeli actions and stated that India had “consistently supported the peaceful resolution of the conflict in West Asia resulting in a sovereign, independent, viable and united State of Palestine living within secure and recognized borders, side by side and at peace with Israel”.⁹⁰

India later endorsed the report of the fact-finding mission headed by South African jurist Richard Goldstone at the UN in October 2009. Israel’s Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon opined that India should have acted with “more discretion” as the Goldstone report “denies democracies the right of self-defense”.⁹¹ The report found fault with both the Israeli government and Palestinian militant groups for undertaking actions during the Gaza war that amounted to “crimes against humanity”.⁹²

Later, at the special session of the UNGA in November 2009, the leader of the Indian delegation, B.K. Hariprasad, MP, stated, “We have reservations in making unqualified endorsement of the various recommendations as well as some of the procedures adopted by the Goldstone report...” His statement goes on to urge the concerned parties to “take firm action against those responsible for violation of international humanitarian law and human rights”.⁹³

Mr. Goldstone later wrote an op-ed in The Washington Post acknowledging ongoing Israeli investigations into events that resulted in the deaths of Palestinian civilians, while bemoaning the fact that Hamas “have not conducted any investigations into the launching of rocket and mortar attacks against Israel”.⁹⁴ Israel reacted strongly to his statements, with PM Netanyahu asserting that “Israel did not intentionally harm civilians...”⁹⁵. An editorial in The Hindu called the Israeli reaction “intemperate” and asserted that Goldstone’s retractions “do not alter the core fact that ... more than 1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis were killed—and that half the number of Palestinians and three of the Israelis were civilians”.⁹⁶

In the aftermath of ‘Cast Lead’, as noted earlier, India went to on to support Palestinian efforts to seek full membership at the UNGA

in 2011 and 2012, and hosted Abbas in 2010 and 2012. India-Israel strategic engagement, meanwhile, not only continued but grew. The first of the Phalcon AWACS was delivered in May 2009, four months after the conflict, and the two countries signed the \$1 billion MRSAM deal in 2009.

‘Operation Pillar of Defense’

The IDF launched this eight-day operation, which began on November 14, 2012, “in response to incessant rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip”.⁹⁷ The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) charged that over 800 rockets had been launched from Gaza into Israel between January and November 2012, including over 100 rockets ten days prior to the operation. The operation began with the targeted killing of the head of Hamas’s military wing in the Gaza Strip. Over 1,500 targets were struck by the IDF.

One hundred seventy-four Palestinians and six Israelis were killed. Palestinian armed groups launched nearly 1,500 rockets, targeting not only southern targets but also Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), in her investigation into the conflict, charged the IDF with failure “to respect the principles of distinction, proportionality and precautions, as required by international humanitarian law”, while Palestinian armed groups were charged with launching projectiles from “densely populated areas, in contravention of customary international humanitarian law”.⁹⁸

On November 18, 2012, halfway through the conflict, India expressed “deep concern at the steep escalation of violence”, urged “both sides to exercise maximum restraint” and called for direct talks between the Israelis and Palestinians for a “comprehensive resolution of the Palestinian situation”.⁹⁹ Some analysts have noted that this statement marks a break from past Indian reactions in that the word “condemn” is not used, as it was in earlier statements, to criticize the actions of the either side.¹⁰⁰ They attribute this to the enhanced strategic engagement between India and Israel as well as to the Arab Spring, “which took away some of the focus from the Palestinian struggle, and it also caused a big rift between the Arab countries and Iran-backed groups like Hamas and Hezbollah”.¹⁰¹

This reading holds true, however, only insofar as the specific reactions of the MEA are concerned. This is because just four days after the above statement, India, along with Brazil and South Africa (IBSA), expressed their “*strongest condemnation* [emphasis added] of the ongoing violence between Israel and Palestine”, urged the parties to “exercise maximum restraint” and reiterated the “urgent need to lift the blockade on Gaza which continues to worsen the already dire socio-economic and humanitarian situation in Gaza”.¹⁰²

Israel’s strong military responses in the Gaza Strip elicited favorable reactions from members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the parent organization of the BJP. One of its prominent members, Ram Madhav, who has since become a BJP General Secretary (a top organizational post in the political party), writing in a blog post published at the end of Israel’s 2012 campaign, charged that:

“India is driven by an instinct of compromise. We may pay lip sympathy to Gaza by asking Israel not to use disproportionate force; but one has to be on the other side of the Gaza border to understand what it means to be a target of Hamas terrorism. ... Excessive force argument doesn’t have any merit in a war; and Israel is in a perpetual war.”¹⁰³

During a speech at Chandigarh on November 24, 2012, Madhav criticized the government’s advice to Israel regarding ‘disproportionate force’:

“‘Don’t use disproportionate force’, our Government advised Israel. What does ‘disproportionate force’ mean? Should we first mutually agree upon the weapons that each one of us would use and then start the war? Does it happen that way? When the Chinese attacked us in 1962, did they use ‘proportionate power’?”¹⁰⁴

The MEA had, as noted earlier, called on November 18, 2012 for “maximum restraint” and urged both sides to de-escalate the situation and “to stop the violence immediately”.¹⁰⁵ In its reaction to ‘Operation Cast Lead’, the 2008-09 military conflict, the MEA termed as “unwarranted and condemnable” the “use of disproportionate force...indiscriminate force”. As will be shown in later sections, the views espoused by Madhav—notable for the

degree to which they were overtly favorable to Israel—did not translate into official policy pronouncements when the BJP-led government had to deal with ‘Operation Protective Edge’ in 2014.

Within three months of the end of the November 2012 campaign, UPA Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid reiterated the “meaningful” relationship with Israel.¹⁰⁶ Concomitantly, in both bilateral and multilateral settings, India continued to urge an end to Israeli settlement activities.¹⁰⁷ The fifth BRICS Summit on March 27, 2013 termed Israeli settlement activities “a violation of international law and harmful to the peace process”.¹⁰⁸ India supported the resumption of direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians in July 2013.

The August 2013 ‘IBSA Statement on the Middle East Peace Process’ asserted that the resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict was “a prerequisite for building a sustainable and lasting peace in the Middle East region”.¹⁰⁹ Israel does not subscribe to this proposition, instead placing the blame for the deep disquiet in Arab lands on domestic factors specific to those countries, including the nature of their leadership, their lack of freedoms and opportunities, their treatment of minorities, and other issues. Israel insists that the Israel-Palestine issue is of peripheral and opportunistic interest to these countries.

Similar sentiments as those expressed by IBSA were espoused by the foreign ministers of Russia, India and China (RIC) at their twelfth trilateral meeting on November 12, 2013. At the UNGA in September 2013, PM Dr. Manmohan Singh reiterated India’s commitment to “the Palestinian quest for full membership of the UN”.¹¹⁰ On the sidelines of the same UNGA session, Foreign Minister Khurshid met with his Palestinian counterpart.¹¹¹ No meeting took place with the Israeli Foreign Minister.

Domestically, meanwhile, Indian policymakers continued to remind MPs critical of the India-Israel relationship about the importance of the relationship to India. Deputy Foreign Minister E. Ahmed told Rajya Sabha MP Mohammed Adeb in December 2013 that India “has cordial and diversified relations with Israel which are mutually beneficial. ... Notwithstanding growing ties with Israel, there has been no change in the traditional policy of strong support to the Arab and the Palestinian

cause”.¹¹² Adeb was inquiring about the “implications on the global situation” of growing India-Israel ties. In August 2013, Minister Ahmed had assured Adeb, who had asked for what can only be described as a rather strange clarification as to whether or not Israel had “advised” the Indian government to “ignore Indian Muslims’ concerns” in its interactions with it, that this was not the case.¹¹³

‘Operation Protective Edge’

The IDF notes that from January through July 2014, over 450 rockets were fired into Israel and that consequently “millions of Israelis were living in fear”. While definitely a major factor disturbing Israel’s sense of security, this tally does not compare with corresponding figures for 2007 or 2008, when Israel was at the receiving end of thousands of rockets.

During the escalation in the summer of 2014, however, nearly 4,600 rockets were fired into Israel. Eight hundred projectiles deemed a threat to Israeli population centers were intercepted by the Iron Dome anti-missile defense (AMD) system, with a more than 90 percent success rate. Over 3,800 of the rockets fired did land in Israel during the conflict, however, killing seven civilians and wounding 126.¹¹⁴

Israel states that as a result of the rocket barrages during ‘Operation Protective Edge’, more than 10,000 Israelis had to be evacuated from their homes. Despite the relative success of the Iron Dome system, therefore, Israel contends that “more than half a million Israelis [had] less than sixty seconds to find shelter after a rocket [was] launched from Gaza into Israel”.¹¹⁵ The economic impact of the July-August 2014 military operation has been pegged at over 3.5 billion Israeli Shekels (nearly \$1 billion).¹¹⁶

The IDF further draws attention to the increasing sophistication of Palestinian rockets as well as their enhanced range, which brings a larger proportion of the Israeli population within their reach. The IDF currently lists Hamas’s rocket inventory as including the M-302, with a range of 160 kms; the M-75, with a range of 75 kms; the Grad rocket, with a range below 50 kms; and Qassam projectiles, with a range below 20 kms. For its part, the IDF targeted nearly 1,500 sites in the Gaza Strip. Over 2,300 Palestinians were killed while 72 Israelis lost their lives.

On July 10, the MEA Spokesperson, responding to a media query on the latest military escalation between Israel and the Palestinians, stated:

“India is deeply concerned at the steep escalation of violence between Israel and Palestine, particularly, heavy air strikes in Gaza, resulting in tragic loss of civilian lives and heavy damage to property. At the same time, *India is alarmed at the cross-border provocations* [emphasis added] resulting from rocket attacks against targets in parts of Israel. India calls upon both sides to exercise maximum restraint”.¹¹⁷

The above statement was the only official reaction from the MEA as regards ‘Protective Edge’. During ‘Pillar of Defense’, it also issued a single statement. During ‘Cast Lead’, India’s Foreign Ministry issued five statements. The unprecedented demand for a debate in the Indian Parliament—not expressed during either ‘Cast Lead’ or ‘Pillar of Defense’—brought the issue of Israeli military responses to provocations across its borders to the center stage of the Indian political system. The following paragraphs capture the main arguments and the essence of the debates as well as the BJP government’s response.

The Lok Sabha Debate, July 15, 2014

On July 15, members of parliament (MPs) belonging to opposition parties expressed outrage at the ongoing conflict and asked the government to spell out its stand on the issue. Mehbooba Mufti, of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP, based in India’s only Muslim-majority province Jammu and Kashmir, with 3 MPs in the 545-member Lok Sabha), urged the House to “condemn” the Israeli attack. She stated that the “attack was only from one side as all the casualties are on the side of Gaza”. She added that Kashmiri schoolchildren “were on the streets” and that it was a “critical issue for everybody”.¹¹⁸

Dr. Shashi Tharoor (INC, second-largest party with 44 MPs), a former Deputy Foreign Minister under the UPA government and a former UN Under Secretary General, supported Ms. Mufti’s demand and stated that “when a tragedy is unfolding, we feel that it is appropriate that the Lok Sabha should express the concerns of the Indian people”. He began his statement by pointing out that “India

and the Congress Party have consistently stood for peace and justice in the area of Palestine".¹¹⁹

Former Deputy Foreign Minister of the UPA coalition E. Ahmed of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML, Kerala, 2 MPs, who visited Ramallah four times from 2004-13) stated that "innocent people were being butchered" and that "what is going on is a flagrant violation of human rights". He further added that "India should condemn the alleged atrocities and the war crime being committed by the Israeli forces in Gaza. It is the holy month of Ramadan. In spite of that Israelis are waging unjust and despicable war against innocent people of Palestine". Ahmed concluded by asserting that India "cannot just sleep over such an international issue".¹²⁰

Saugata Roy of the Trinamool Congress (TMC, West Bengal, fourth-largest party with 34 MPs) asserted that "the Zionists in Israel have been trying to finish the Palestinian people. Without provocation, in the latest incident, the Israelis started raining missiles on Gaza Strip killing men, women and children". Roy stated that "we do not deny the right of Israel to exist but we feel the Palestinian people must be given justice". He urged the government "to bring a Resolution condemning the Israeli aggression and the genocide being carried out by the Israeli troops in Gaza".¹²¹

M. Thambi Durai of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK, Tamil Nadu, third-largest party with 37 MPs), who is also Deputy Speaker of the House, charged that the "killing of innocent Palestinian people by Israeli Army is condemnable. We request the government ... to bring forward a resolution".¹²² P. Karunakaran of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M; 9 MPs) insisted that "governments may change, but the foreign policy of the country cannot change with the wishes and desire of any Government or any party. ...Even without our request, the Government has to come forward and condemn this".¹²³

Asaduddin Owaisi of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul-Muslimeen (AIMIM, Hyderabad, single MP) urged the government to send a delegation to the Gaza Strip and to "stop diplomatic relations with Israel and extend humanitarian aid to poor Palestinians".¹²⁴ Mulayam Singh Yadav of the Samajwadi Party (SP, which considers the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh a key

component of its vote bank) reminded the House that it was the policy from the time of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru that India "does not keep quiet" whenever there is injustice anywhere in the world.¹²⁵

Speaking for the government (282 MPs), Union Minister for Urban Development and Parliamentary Affairs Venkaiah Naidu reminded the House that India has "a stated policy with regard to our approach towards Palestine and also towards Israel. So, any move by the Government of India at this stage will have implications on our foreign policy". Naidu stated that "as far as Government is concerned, we don't propose to move any Resolution. ...I would convey the views of the Members to the Minister of External Affairs". Naidu further added that "domestic politics should not affect our international relations".¹²⁶

The Rajya Sabha Debate, July 21, 2014

The Short Duration (SD) Discussion on "The unprecedented spurt in violence in Gaza and West Bank area of Palestine causing death of scores of civilians" was originally listed on the agenda of the House on July 16, after the notice requesting such a discussion was given by the Leader of the Opposition Ghulam Nabi Azad (INC) on July 15. However, Foreign Minister Swaraj wrote to the Rajya Sabha Chairman, Vice-President Hamid Ansari, on July 16 asking him not to allow the discussion, citing procedural inconsistencies and pointing out that the subject "refers discourteously to a friendly foreign country".¹²⁷ Ansari rejected Swaraj's request, insisting that he "did not find any infirmities in the notices given by the Leader of the Opposition and others".

Therefore, on July 17, the opposition demanded suspension of the Question Hour (the first hour of the sitting session of the Lok Sabha, during which Members can raise any issue) to focus specifically on the Gaza conflict. Ansari insisted that the concurrence of the government was needed for a new date to take up the discussion, while Sitaram Yechury of the CPI(M) pointed out that the subject was circulated as part of the 'Revised List of Business' which "cannot come to be circulated unless there is prior agreement of the Government".¹²⁸

Former Deputy Foreign Minister as well as Commerce Minister in the UPA government Anand Sharma (INC) charged that while the government was trying to avoid a discussion, the BRICS Fortaleza Declaration devoted “half a page” to the conflict.¹²⁹ Azad also asserted that after PM Modi had signed the BRICS Declaration, “which speaks so much about Israel and Palestine[,] ... there should not be any reservation” on the part of the government to discuss the subject.¹³⁰

However, the BRICS Declaration of July 15, issued a week after the conflict started, does not even mention the ongoing conflict but merely reiterates long-held positions. These include calling upon both sides to resume negotiations, registering opposition to Israeli settlement policies, welcoming intra-Palestinian unity efforts, and requesting the international community to continue to support the work of the UNRWA.¹³¹ (Among the countries of BRICS, it should be noted, Brazil recalled its Ambassador to protest Israel’s actions, and on July 17, South Africa summoned the Israeli Envoy to register a strong protest over the escalation of violence.)¹³²

On July 21, the discussion in the Lok Sabha finally took place. Of the twenty MPs who took part, three belonged to the ruling BJP (including the Foreign Minister); two were from the INC. The remaining fifteen MPs were largely from regional and communist parties. Leader of the Opposition Ghulam Nabi Azad began his speech by ruining the fact that the discussion did not take place until then despite the subject’s having been listed since July 15. Stating that the “fate of the Gaza Strip” was in the balance, he gave a historical overview of the “foundations of the conflict”. He wondered where India stood on the conflict and stated that the government should have been the first to raise its voice, even before the opposition did.

Giving statistics of the death and destruction in the Gaza Strip, Azad stated that there could be “no comparison between the situation on the Palestinian side and that on the Israeli side”. He reminded the government that former BJP PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee “fully supported the Palestinian cause” and wanted to know whether “there is any change in the foreign policy of this government”. Azad pointed out that India’s self-interest lay with the broader region, given the presence of over 7 million diaspora Indians in the Middle East and the region accounting for 70 percent of

the country’s total oil imports. He urged the House to adopt a resolution condemning the “Israeli attacks” and demanding that the “massacre” of Palestinians stop. Notably, however, he added that “defiant rocket attacks by Hamas on Israeli territory should also come to an end”.¹³³

Anil Madhav Dave of the BJP wondered whether the Gaza conflict was the only dispute on the world stage. He listed the Sinai Insurgency, Sudan conflicts, Syria, Northern Kosovo, Northern Mali, Central African Republic conflicts, Russia and Ukraine among other ongoing conflicts, and urged the House to discuss events in totality.¹³⁴ Ahmed Hasan of the TMC (West Bengal) termed the conflict a “new Holocaust” and pointed out that instability in the region was not good for India, as millions of Indians live in the Middle East.¹³⁵ Sharad Yadav of the JD(U) (Bihar) compared Israel’s offensive to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, and charged that Israel was “trampling upon a six square kilometer land”. Yadav also pointed out that India has a large population of people professing the same faith (as those in Gaza).¹³⁶

A. Maitreyan of the AIADMK, based in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, condemned the violence but reminded the members that not a single condolence resolution was passed by the House on the sufferings of Sri Lankan Tamils.¹³⁷ Ram Gopal Yadav of the SP (Uttar Pradesh) pointed out that India’s national interest was linked to this issue and charged Israel with attacking the Palestinians with weapons supplied by the US. He urged the House to condemn the Israeli action, as it did the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.¹³⁸ Sitaram Yechury of the CPI(M) charged that a “genocide” was taking place in Gaza and urged the House to pass a resolution as well as “immediately suspend all military purchases from Israel”. He stated that India was “paying Israel the profits which they are using to do this genocide in the Gaza Strip” as India was Israel’s biggest customer for defense purchases.¹³⁹

Majid Memon of the NCP (Maharashtra) charged that the government was “becoming culpable” with its silence and urged the House to “express its anguish at Israel’s conduct”.¹⁴⁰ D. Raja of the Communist Party of India (CPI) began his speech by stating that “we, the Communists, always stand up against genocide”. He charged Israel with “demonizing”

Hamas, which had the “popular support” of the Palestinians. Terming the conflict as between “an occupier and the occupied”, he urged India to side with the Palestinians. Like his compatriot Yechury, Raja also called for the suspension of arms purchases from Israel.¹⁴¹

Former Deputy Foreign Minister Anand Sharma of the INC drew attention to the “indiscriminate and disproportionate” use of force by Israel and stated that the Congress had asked for a discussion because the government “had not reacted properly”.¹⁴² Chandan Mitra of the BJP, while asserting that “India can and shall never support any human rights violations anywhere in the world”, nevertheless added that “both the countries engaged in the conflict in Gaza are friendly towards India...a particular tilt this way or that way could impact our overall foreign policy, economic stability...” Mitra pointed out that Israel was accorded diplomatic status by an INC government in 1992, and that “India’s relations with Israel have been strengthened, just as India has traditionally supported the Palestinian cause”. Further, he advised the House not to “get too emotional with one issue” as “this is not the first time that this kind of a conflict has taken place”.¹⁴³

Sharad Yadav of the Janata Dal (United) JD(U) criticized Mitra for urging India “to treat each side equally while butchering was only taking place on one side”.¹⁴⁴ Mitra countered by stating that a ceasefire was important, and that the House should “not go into the merits, demerits, who is right, who is wrong at this point of time”.¹⁴⁵ Kanimozhi Karunanidhi of the DMK (Tamil Nadu), echoing the view of her regional political rival A. Maitreyan of the AIADMK, pointed out that the House “was silent” on the issue of the killing of civilians in Sri Lanka, although “it is very good that this House is coming together to pass a Resolution about this. Though Israel has a right to defend itself, this House must condemn the disproportionate attacks...” She added that when members from Tamil Nadu wanted to raise the issue of the killing of Tamils, “we could not say anything against Sri Lanka” as it was a “friendly neighbor”.¹⁴⁶

Tarun Vijay of the BJP pointed out that Jews came to India “after being persecuted everywhere” and that PM Nehru “gave refuge to the Tibetans and the Dalai Lama”. Reminding the members about the BRICS Declaration, which encouraged efforts at achieving Palestinian

unity, Vijay stated that the reason for the use of such language was the presence of two factions (Hamas and Fatah) in Palestinian domestic politics and questioned whether India could possibly support Hamas.¹⁴⁷ He further added that India “cannot be more Arab than the Arabs. We can only be more Indian than Indians”.¹⁴⁸ While asserting that Israel has a right to exist, he pointed out that Hamas had dropped twenty bombs on a UNRWA school. Reacting to the demand made by the Communist members that India should suspend arms trade with Israel, Vijay pointed out that India-Israel defense cooperation “increased two-fold in the past ten years” and expressed his appreciation to the INC for facilitating this achievement, as it was in India’s national interest.¹⁴⁹

K.C. Tyagi of the JD(U), while noting that “once upon a time, praise of Israel was seen as a crime”, stated that the delay in allowing the discussion to take place had resulted in a lot of wrongheaded notions. He disagreed with Minister Naidu’s July 15 assertion that domestic politics should not affect foreign policy, claiming that foreign policy has domestic roots. Taking exception to the July 10 Foreign Ministry statement that noted India’s “alarm [at] the cross-border provocation”, Tyagi stated that such statements do not reflect India’s foreign policy and questioned how India can equate Israel with the Palestinians. He also took exception to the sentiments expressed by some members that similar resolutions condemning other countries had not been passed, noting that Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait had been condemned by the House.¹⁵⁰

Mohammed Adeeb (Independent from Uttar Pradesh) inquired why the government had hesitated to discuss the issue given India’s historical support for the Palestinian cause. Equating Israel’s occupation of Palestine with Pakistan’s occupation of Kashmir, he charged that Israel’s Ambassador (presumably referring to Daniel Carmon)—who he claimed had visited BJP Headquarters on “the day the Parliament wanted to discuss the issue” (July 15)—was influencing India’s policy.¹⁵¹ This charge appears specious, as the Embassy of Israel in New Delhi has no record of any Israeli Embassy official visiting the BJP office on that day. The record indicates that it was on July 31 that Carmon presented his credentials to the President of India.

Hussein Dalwai of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) from Maharashtra asserted that nothing was to be gained from the relationship with Israel and that India's interests lay within the broader region.¹⁵² Baishnab Parida of Biju Janata Dal (BJD) from Orissa, while calling Israel and Palestine "two friends", went on to say that "[I]f one friend attacks another friend to kill him and if we stand as a mute spectator and let the two decide who will kill whom, then the stronger one will kill the weaker one".¹⁵³

Ramdas Athavale of the Republican Party of India (RPI) said there was no need to downgrade relations with Israel, but that India should raise its voice against Israel for doing injustice to the Palestinians.¹⁵⁴ Mohammad Shafi of the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (JKNC) charged that Israel was acting as an imperial country and that the issue was one of injustice and not solely a matter of Muslim concern.¹⁵⁵

In her reply to the discussion, Foreign Minister Swaraj asserted that the government would not take any decisions based on religion, and referred to the MEA statement of July 10 as well as the BRICS Declaration to dispute the charge that India had nothing to say about the conflict.¹⁵⁶ She countered Anand Sharma's inquiry as to whether PM Modi had discussed the issue with BRICS leaders by stating that the Joint Statement could only have been written after such discussion. (As noted above, however, the BRICS Declaration did not even mention the most recent escalation.) In response to questions about India's humanitarian aid, Swaraj pointed to the budgetary contributions and developmental assistance India had given the PNA. Asserting that there was to be no change in India's foreign policy during the conflict, she stated that "while supporting the Palestinian cause wholeheartedly, we want to continue our relations with Israel".

Swaraj pointed out that it was INC governments that had recognized Palestine (1988) and Israel (1992), adding that relations with Israel continued to grow after 1992 even under coalition governments. She was thus arguing that it was "national" policy, and not solely that of the BJP or the INC, that India should support the Palestinian cause wholeheartedly while improving relations with Israel. To the demand of members of the Left that the government suspend arms purchases from Israel, she inquired whether they had made the same demand during the previous instances of violence in 2008 and 2012 (presumably referring

to operations 'Cast Lead' and 'Pillar of Defense'). She pointedly noted that in 2008, when the Communists were supporting the UPA coalition, 1,400 Palestinians had been killed.¹⁵⁷

Yechury interjected to say that his advice in 2008 to stop defense cooperation with Israel had not been followed, and he urged the Minister to listen to his advice now.¹⁵⁸ A member of the Left party Tapan Kumar Sen added that the Communists had withdrawn support for the then UPA coalition as the Communists' recommendation to stop defense cooperation with Israel had not been heeded. Swaraj admonished him not to misstate facts, as they had in fact withdrawn support on account of their opposition to the Indo-US nuclear deal.¹⁵⁹ She added that the Israel-Palestine issue was very complicated, and made the point that peace would have been achieved in the latest escalation had Hamas not rejected the ceasefire offer mediated by Egypt. She concluded by stating that as per the relevant rules under which the government had agreed to an SD Discussion, "there shall be no formal Motion before the Council, nor voting".¹⁶⁰ After a bit of pandemonium, the entire opposition staged a walkout.

The debate in the Parliament ran along party lines, with the ruling MPs supporting the government's response and the opposition trying to corner the newly sworn-in government regarding a complex foreign policy issue. No other member who participated in the discussions called for the cutting off of diplomatic ties with Israel (as did Owaisi in the Lok Sabha) or the stopping of the defense relationship (as did Communist members Yechury and Raja in the Rajya Sabha).¹⁶¹

It is important to note that Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Azad, despite being severely critical of the Israeli actions, called for an end to the "defiant rocket attacks" from Gaza. The member's statements reflect the challenges faced by the government in responding to such crises. BJD member Parida, for instance, described the two antagonists equally as "friends" of India, while advising the government not to stand by as a "mute spectator". Intra-Palestinian divisions were not prominently highlighted by opposition MPs, although BJP MP Vijay was unable to ignore the fact that Hamas was in power in the Gaza Strip.

Though supportive of the demand for a resolution, representatives of regional parties like the AIDMK and the DMK reminded the House of the inconsistency of such a demand in the absence of similar demands on behalf of Tamils living in neighboring Sri Lanka. Ruling party MPs also highlighted the harsh reality of other conflict zones prevalent across the world.

'Operation Protective Edge': Civil Society Reactions

Israel's third military intervention in Gaza reverberated in Indian civil society more than on the previous occasions. A teenaged protester was shot to death by police near a village in Srinagar, the capital of India's Muslim-majority province, when the protests turned violent, with protesters pelting stones at security forces.¹⁶² Protests were reported in other places as well, including Hyderabad (the stronghold of the AIMIM) and at the Israeli Consulate in Mumbai. Protests were held at the Israeli Embassy in New Delhi by a reported 70-80 students of the country's premier educational institution, the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU).¹⁶³ In the aftermath of the conflict, at the end of August 2014, police had to arrest several anti-Israeli protesters in the city of Ahmedabad when they assembled without the necessary permits.¹⁶⁴

Demonstrations in support of Israel were also held, particularly in the city of Kolkata. "Nearly 20,000" people were reported to have attended a rally organized on August 16 by a Hindu community organization in memory of the Hindu victims of the 1946 Hindu-Muslim riots in the city. The organizers shouted pro-Israel slogans and supported Israel's right to defend itself against continuous rocket attacks.¹⁶⁵

While some analysts declared that supporting Israel's Gaza policy was akin to supporting "militarism and discrimination", others lauded the government for its "correct approach by refusing to be stampeded into foolish parliamentary resolutions that will do nothing to either help in resolving the crisis or in advancing India's interests".¹⁶⁶ Rajesh Rajagopalan termed the charges of genocide "ridiculous" given that Israel took actions during the conflict that were specifically intended to minimize civilian casualties.¹⁶⁷ Former Ambassador Ranjit Gupta noted that the "current hostilities in Gaza are essentially a war between Hamas

and Israel and not a war between Israel and Palestine", and that Hamas was politically isolated in the Arab world except for Qatar.¹⁶⁸ Gupta further pointed out that parliamentary resolutions on complex foreign policy issues "constrain governmental flexibility and options" and said the demand to stop military cooperation with Israel would amount to an "utterly devastating self-inflicted wound on ourselves".¹⁶⁹

'Operation Protective Edge' and the UNHRC

On July 23, 2014, India's Permanent Representative expressed "deep concern" at the UN Security Council Open Debate and affirmed that India's "continuing commitment to Palestine is rooted in our modern history..."¹⁷⁰ Similar sentiments were expressed at the twenty-first Special Session of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). India voted in favor of the July 23, 2014 UNHRC resolution establishing an International Commission of Inquiry to investigate violation of international humanitarian and human rights laws in the "occupied Gaza Strip". In its first operative paragraph, the resolution "*strongly condemns* [emphasis added] the failure of Israel, the occupying Power, to end its prolonged occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, in accordance with international law and relevant United Nations resolutions".¹⁷¹

The above shows once again that India did not desist from supporting resolutions that contain the word "condemn" in multilateral fora like the UNHRC, even though in its official pronouncements dating from November 2012, the word seems to have been replaced by "deep concern". Of the 47 members of the UNHRC, 29 voted in favor of the resolution and 17 abstained, while only the US opposed it. India also voted in support of UNHRC resolution S-9/1 of January 12, 2009 in the aftermath of 'Cast Lead', along with 33 other nations.¹⁷²

On July 1, 2015, however, India abstained at the UNHRC on a resolution that praised the report of the Commission of Inquiry (in favor of which India had voted a year earlier) for calling upon "parties concerned to cooperate fully with the preliminary examination of the International Criminal Court and with any subsequent investigation that may be opened".¹⁷³ Of the 47 members, 41 voted in favor of this resolution.

Explaining India's vote, Deputy Foreign Minister Gen. V.K. Singh (Retd.) stated that India's "abstention was on account of a direct action-oriented reference made in the resolution to the International Criminal Court, of which India is not a member".¹⁷⁴

Reports cited senior Israeli officials as observing that India's "ICC excuse was pretty weak" and that they considered the Modi government's position a "major change".¹⁷⁵ A Jerusalem Post editorial also viewed the ICC justification for abstention as "an attempt to minimize India's purported pivot toward Israel" and that such justifications were "motivated by a desire to avoid angering Muslims, including India's significant Muslim population".¹⁷⁶ This reasoning does not quite stand up to scrutiny.

The previous government's support for Palestinian-related resolutions at the UN or UNHRC is widely seen to have been an acknowledgement of the sentiments of India's Muslim population. As pointed out earlier, this linkage had become increasingly tenuous. Be that as it may, if the Modi government's justification for its abstention was for the same reason, then it is difficult to sustain the argument that there had been a substantial shift in India's position.

Informed analysts point out that "India still does not vote with Israel and the United States, and that both abstentions [in July 2015 as well as in June 2015, pertaining to an NGO with Hamas links] were related to Hamas (an Islamist terrorist organization). It remains to be seen whether a similar shift can be expected on other Palestinian issues".¹⁷⁷ Inbar notes significantly that the "contents of the bilateral relationship are more important than votes at the United Nations".¹⁷⁸

PARLIAMENT AND INDIA-ISRAEL TIES: AN ASSESSMENT

The unprecedented discussion in both the Lok Sabha (July 15) and the Rajya Sabha (July 21), as well as the intervening period of contention resulting in the government's agreeing to the discussion, was one of the very few instances when the Indian Parliament devoted a substantial amount of time to the Israel-Palestine issue. The only previous instance of a full-fledged discussion in the Lok Sabha on Indo-Israel ties was

on August 18, 2000—also a period during which the BJP-led NDA government was in power.¹⁷⁹ The discussion was in the aftermath of the path-breaking visits to Israel by Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and Interior Minister L.K. Advani to Israel in June and July 2000, respectively.

Nevertheless, since 1992, many questions relating to the India-Israel bilateral relationship and defense cooperation, as well as to India's Palestine policy, have been posed by MPs seeking information or clarification about government policy. On March 20, 2013, for instance, BJP member Chandan Mitra raised questions about the possibility of expanding India-Israel cooperation. As noted, Mitra wanted to know whether India's DRDO was cooperating with Israel to develop an Indian version of the Iron Dome missile defense system given the Army's lack of protection against short-range rockets or artillery fire.¹⁸⁰ BJP member Piyush Goel (currently India's Power Minister) inquired whether the government had responded to the offer of gas ventures inside Israel, to which Deputy Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas R.P.N. Singh replied that no such offer was on the table.¹⁸¹

MPs from Left parties like Owaisi (in Lok Sabha) or Adeeb (in Rajya Sabha), on the other hand, showed concern at the growing India-Israel ties. On April 21, 2010, Owaisi asked whether there had been a change in the government's Israel policy, as India was no longer "condemning" Israel for its settlement activities or for "suppression and violence in Gaza".¹⁸² While Owaisi was inquiring about a possible change in the Israel policy of a Congress-led government, the Congress-led opposition was asking similar questions of the BJP-led government in July 2014.

In March 2012, Adeeb asked the government whether a pan-Indian Muslim organization (All India Muslim Majlis-e-Mushawarat) had expressed concern over the growing India-Israel ties. Deputy Minister Ahmed answered that the government had seen a report attributed to the organization expressing concern.¹⁸³ In December 2012, Adeeb inquired about the impact on India's trade with the Middle East of growing India-Israel trade. Minister of Commerce and Industry Anand Sharma assured the member that "India's relations with Israel stand on their own and do not affect our historical and close ties with the countries in the Middle East".¹⁸⁴

Questions pertaining to corruption in defense deals between India and Israel have almost exclusively been raised by members belonging to Left parties. On November 24, 2010, for example, Brinda Karat inquired rather expansively whether the government was “aware that the multi-billion dollar defense deals with Israel have become a major source of corruption and kickbacks, corroding the integrity of Indian defense establishment”. Minister Antony informed her that “irregularities in respect of some Israeli defense companies have come to notice and appropriate restrictions have been placed on dealing with these companies”.¹⁸⁵

In August 2007, members of the Communist Party of India (CPI) D. Raja and Syed Azeez Pasha inquired about the joint venture with Israel for the production of missiles. For good measure, they asked “whether it is a fact that the general opinion in the country is against any military tie-ups with Israel which will annoy the Muslim countries who share friendly relations with India”. Minister Antony informed them that the LRSAM contract was entered into in January 2006 and that cooperation with Israel “does not come in the way of the warm and mutually beneficial cooperation that we share with friendly Muslim countries”.¹⁸⁶

While it is the prerogative of MPs to ask the government of the day about any issue and seek clarification, the correlation between the ideological orientation of the members seeking these answers and the general thrust of their questions is clearly evident. The only previous instance of Parliament (Lok Sabha) “condemning” Israel was on July 31, 2006, when a resolution was unanimously adopted criticizing “the large-scale and indiscriminate Israeli bombing of Lebanon”. The House conveyed “the deepest condolences, sympathy and support of the people of India to the people of Lebanon at this difficult time” and urged “all parties to the conflict to eschew violence”.¹⁸⁷

A few days earlier, on July 27, 2006, PM Dr. Singh had made a statement in Parliament informing the members that India “condemned in the strongest possible terms the excessive and disproportionate military retaliation by Israel”. He added that India had also “condemned” the “unjustified arrest and continued detention” of the “duly elected representatives of the Palestinian people”.¹⁸⁸

Air strikes targeting Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat were accorded a ‘Special Mention’ in a Rajya Sabha debate on December 10, 2001, again when the BJP-led NDA was in power. Congress member Eduardo Faleiro (the Deputy Foreign Minister who made the first official contact with Israel in September 1993 when he met with Foreign Minister Shimon Peres in New York) asked the government to urge Israel to “immediately halt the aggressive strikes”. He also proposed the constitution of an “international protection observer force” for Gaza and the West Bank. His views were endorsed by Manoj Bhattacharya of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP). Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh responded that “air strikes, particularly at President Arafat’s place, are unacceptable and condemnable. India stands unequivocally for the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people”. Singh further noted that he had been in touch with both Arafat and Foreign Minister Peres, both of whom “appreciated India’s position and...sought India’s intervention so that the resumption of the peace process could be facilitated”.¹⁸⁹

THE MODI GOVERNMENT AND THE MIDDLE EAST: ENHANCED FOCUS

After the Modi government came to power in June 2014, a concerted effort was made to correct the anomaly of India’s limited high-level political interactions with the Middle East. In August 2015, Prime Minister Modi went to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for the first such visit in 34 years.¹⁹⁰ The India-UAE relationship was elevated to a ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’, with agreements and common understandings on a range of issues ranging from economic matters to the security sphere. The sides agreed, for instance, to establish the UAE-India Infrastructure Investment Fund, with a target of \$75 billion. They also committed themselves to strengthening their existing defense relationship, including agreeing to cooperate in the manufacture of defense equipment in India.¹⁹¹

The existing institutional framework for defense cooperation includes the India-UAE Joint Security Committee, a forum at which are discussed all aspects of security cooperation. (The forum has met twice so far, in March

2013 and December 2014). Since March 2013, a permanent Defense Adviser (DA) has been posted at the Embassy in Abu Dhabi whose responsibility is to advance defense cooperation by coordinating visits of naval ships and military education exchanges, among other aspects.

In November 2015, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley visited the UAE to give a further push for the inflow of investment into India. Jaitley met the Managing Director of the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA)—the second-largest sovereign wealth fund in the world, valued at over \$800 billion—during his visit. India was seeking UAE investment into the newly created National Infrastructure Investment Fund.

There has been a steady stream of high-level visits to India from the UAE as well, capped by the February 2016 visit of the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and the Deputy Supreme Commander of UAE Armed Forces Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. While India-UAE bilateral trade was nearly \$60 billion in 2014-15, foreign direct investment (FDI) to India since 2000 from the UAE stood at over \$3.3 billion. The UAE accounts for over 35 percent of the 7 million Indians living in the region, who send in over \$15 billion in remittances.¹⁹² The Modi government's renewed stress on rejuvenating the Indian economy, coupled with the presence of the largest Indian diaspora in the region after Saudi Arabia, have given momentum to India-UAE bilateral ties.

Foreign Minister Swaraj visited Bahrain (September 2014), the UAE (November 2014), Turkey (January 2015), Oman (February 2015), Egypt (August 2015), and Israel, Palestine and Bahrain (January 2016). In comparison to the above visits, which occurred within a 20-month period after the NDA assumed office in June 2014, UPA Foreign Ministers Salman Khurshid and S.M. Krishna made a combined total of eight trips to the region during the entire second five-year term of the Congress-led coalition from 2009-14. The only Prime Ministerial visits by Dr. Manmohan Singh during that time period were to Riyadh in February 2010 and to Iran for the NAM Summit in August 2012. Within the first 17 months of his tenure, by contrast, Modi has already completed a highly successful bilateral visit to the UAE and a multilateral visit to Turkey (for the G20 Summit).

In the aftermath of Modi's visit to Antalya, Minister Swaraj made a bilateral visit to Ankara in January 2015. High-level visits by Turkish leaders to India included Finance Minister Mehmet Simsek in February 2015, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu in March 2015, and Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan in June 2015.

Various imperatives, both economic and political, have motivated increased interactions between India and Turkey. During Babacan's visit, for instance, Indian and Turkish business organizations signed a cooperation agreement. India also reached out to Turkey for help in locating 39 of its citizens who had been kidnapped in Iraq in June 2014.¹⁹³ Ahead of PM Modi's visit to Antalya in November 2015, Turkish Ambassador to India Burak Akcapar was asked whether the Indian Prime Minister's possible visit to Israel would affect Indian-Turkish ties. Akcapar noted that India and Turkey "have a very concrete agenda with India as a friendly country and...any third country does not figure in that".¹⁹⁴

Apart from the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, dignitaries from the region who have visited India since Modi came to power have included the Foreign Minister of Bahrain (February 2015), the Emir of Qatar (March 2015), the Iranian Foreign Minister (August 2015) and the UAE Foreign Minister (September 2015). As was the case with the UAE, security cooperation was a focus during the visit of the Qatari Emir. The parties agreed to cooperate more in the fight against terrorism and to share information on intelligence matters, and India agreed to provide training for Qatari security forces. The first meeting of the India-Bahrain 'High Joint Commission' was held during the visit of the Bahraini Foreign Minister in February 2015.

India and Iran are currently transforming their energy ties from a buyer-seller relationship to a genuine energy partnership, involving both upstream and downstream projects. India expects Iran to regain its share in oil imports, which had been reduced as a result of unilateral US and EU sanctions measures that have since been lifted. In 2009-10, Iran's share in India's oil imports was over 13 percent of the total (in terms of both quantity and value), but that figure had been reduced to about 6 percent by 2014-15.¹⁹⁵ (While supply was reduced from Iran, India secured supplies from Iraq, which has become the second-largest supplier

of crude after Saudi Arabia, as well as from African and Latin American markets.) India also expects to see further progress on two important connectivity projects relating to Iran: Chahbahar and the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

India's political-level interactions with both Israel and the PNA have also had a significant boost under the Modi government. Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu spoke to PM Modi following his electoral victory in May 2014, and met him on the sidelines of the UNGA in September 2014. The MEA Spokesperson replied in the negative when asked whether the leaders had discussed the Gaza conflict, given that the meeting was less than a month after 'Operation Protective Edge'. The Prime Minister's Office said in a statement that discussions centered on defense ties and cooperation in the fields of computer software, cyber security, water management and agriculture in arid areas.

Interior Minister Rajnath Singh visited Israel in November 2014 to advance homeland security cooperation—and notably elected not to make the customary visit to Ramallah that previous Indian cabinet ministers had undertaken. Three months later, Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon visited India. He paid a visit to the Israel Pavilion at the Aero India 2015 show at Bengaluru, and in New Delhi, he met with Indian leadership including PM Modi and Interior Minister Singh. Both sides reiterated their desire to carry forward their strategic cooperation as well as to kick-start cooperation in the arena of homeland security.¹⁹⁶

In March 2015, Modi met with Israeli President Reuven Rivlin in Singapore during a visit to attend the state funeral of Singapore's leader Lee Kwan Yew. Modi and Netanyahu spoke by telephone several times in 2015, including a call by Netanyahu to Modi to thank him for help rendered by Indian agencies to Israeli nationals after the April 2015 Kathmandu earthquake. In December 2014, Modi expressed his good wishes to the Jewish people on the holiday of Hanukkah by tweeting in Hebrew, and in March 2015, he tweeted Hebrew congratulations to Netanyahu on his electoral victory.

Foreign Minister Swaraj, speaking to reporters on the occasion of the Modi government's completion of one year in office on May 31, 2015,

indicated that Modi was planning to visit Israel, though "no dates have been fixed".¹⁹⁷ If the visit transpires, Modi will become the first Indian PM ever to visit Israel, finally reciprocating the September 2003 visit of PM Ariel Sharon.

President Pranab Mukherjee made a path-breaking visit to the PNA and Israel in October 2015. In his speech to the Knesset on October 14, he emphasized that

"India's consistent policy has been to build a strong, substantive and mutually beneficial relationship with Israel. We will continue to do so through high-level visits and exchanges so that India-Israel relations are accorded the utmost priority".¹⁹⁸

Minister Swaraj visited Israel and the PNA in January 2016, at which time the MEA reiterated that India's relationship with Israel constituted "part of its engagement with the broader West Asian region" and was "independent to its relations with any country in the region".¹⁹⁹ Swaraj met President Rivlin and had wide-ranging discussions with Prime Minister Netanyahu, Defense Minister Yaalon, and Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely, as well as Tzipi Livni, Chair of the India-Israel Parliamentary Friendship Group. Swaraj's previous visit to Israel was in 2008, in her capacity as the Indian Chair of this group.

During her visit to Ramallah, while she was inaugurating a Digital Learning and Innovation Center, Minister Swaraj reiterated the "three core dimensions" of India's policy towards Palestine. These were "solidarity with the Palestinian people; support to the Palestinian cause; and support to Palestine's nation-building and capacity-building efforts".²⁰⁰ Her statement was significant, in light of the fact that the Modi government had come under a barrage of accusations in July 2014 that it was abandoning India's decades-long policy towards the Palestinians. As it did in Parliament, the government, in its interactions with representatives of the broader region, has tried to reinforce its credentials as a continued supporter of the Palestinian cause. At the First India-League of Arab States Media Symposium on August 21, 2014, Minister Swaraj reiterated forcefully that there has been "no

change in India's policy of extending strong support to the Palestinian cause, while maintaining good relations with Israel".²⁰¹

Other instances of the Modi government engaging at the highest levels with Palestinian leadership include a meeting between President Mahmoud Abbas's Special Envoy Nabil Shaath and Minister Swaraj in November 2014. Shaath was in New Delhi attending the 125th anniversary of the birth of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, organized by the BJP's political rival, the INC. On the occasion of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People on November 21, 2014, PM Modi issued a statement reaffirming "India's support for the cause of Palestine..." and expressed the hope that "talks and negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis will resume soon".²⁰² The last Prime Ministerial statement on that occasion was made by Dr. Singh back in November 2007, and in 2013, a statement was given by Deputy Foreign Minister Ahmed. Foreign Minister Swaraj met with Palestinian PM Rami Hamdallah in April 2015 while attending the Asian-African Conference at Jakarta, Indonesia, which was commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the Bandung Conference. The first India-Palestine FO consultations were held in May 2015.

PM Modi met with President Abbas on the sidelines of the seventieth UNGA session on September 28, 2015, at which time the official spokesperson of the MEA tweeted that India was "bonding with Palestine". Another high-level meeting on the sidelines of the UNGA took place in September 2013, when Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid met with his Palestinian counterpart. As noted earlier, Abbas last came to India in September 2012, for his fourth visit since 2005. Modi's meeting with Abbas can be read as a further affirmation of the government's commitment to maintain continuity in India's Palestine policy. In his speech in Ramallah on October 12, 2015, President Mukherjee reiterated that "India's empathy with the Palestinian cause and its friendship with the people of Palestine have become an integral part of our foreign policy".²⁰³

Though PM Modi has visited 37 countries since he took office, only two of those visits (to the UAE and Turkey, respectively) were to the Middle East region. Modi is expected, however, to visit both Riyadh and Jerusalem

in 2016. In August 2015, during his meeting with Modi, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif reiterated Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's invitation, which had been extended to Modi at their meeting at Ufa in July 2015 during the SCO Summit. All three of these visits will be watched with keen interest, though the Iran visit may take place later than 2016.

India-Saudi relations hit a rough patch in 2015. A diplomatic row followed an incident in September 2015 involving the cruel treatment of his Nepalese maids by a Saudi diplomat posted in New Delhi. Another incident involved an injury meted out to an Indian maid working in Saudi Arabia, whose hand was allegedly 'chopped off' by her employer. In a tweet on October 9, 2015, Foreign Minister Swaraj called the injury the maid had suffered "unacceptable".

High-level interactions between India and Saudi Arabia did take place, even during this period of tension. In November 2014, on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Brisbane, Modi met with then Saudi Crown Prince (and now King) Salman Bin Abdul Aziz. During a phone call with King Abdul Aziz on March 30, 2015, Modi conveyed India's concerns regarding the 4,000 Indian citizens living in Yemen.²⁰⁴ In December 2015, the MEA announced that police officer Ahmed Javed would be the new Indian Ambassador to Riyadh, a post that had been vacant since April 2015.

India's interactions with the wider region under the Modi government have been focused on securing India's core interests, ranging from the safety and security of its citizens to the need for infrastructural investment in India by the countries of the region. The path to restoring India's energy relations with Iran was smoothed following implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on January 16, 2016. Despite the dilemmas associated with continued unrest in the region—particularly the tension compounded by the geopolitical rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh—India's 'Look West' policy, which encompasses relations with key Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar as well as with Iran, is set to gain momentum in the near future.

GOING FORWARD

The BJP has always advocated stronger ties between India and Israel, and its leaders have time and again (especially while in the opposition) expressed appreciation for the Israeli government's muscular anti-terrorism and national security policies. The Modi government came to office professing to take a more vigorous stance on national security issues. Among Modi's first acts after being sworn in as Prime Minister was to board the aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya (formerly the Admiral Gorshkov of the Russian Navy) on June 13, 2014 and dedicate it to the nation, thereby emphasizing the centrality of national security issues.

The government has further affirmed that India's defense procurement processes will be expedited to cater to the pressing modernization and upgrade requirements of the Indian armed forces. In its year-end review in December 2014, the MOD pointed out that the Defense Acquisition Council (DAC), the Ministry's top decision-making body, had set a 'scorching pace' by clearing procurement proposals worth nearly INR 150,000 crores (about \$24 billion, according to the average exchange rate at the time).²⁰⁵ The MoD signed eighteen contracts between May 2014 and February 2015, of which two were with Israeli firms (relating to Barak-I missiles and Spike ATGM). The quantum of procurement proposals approved in 2015 increased to INR 200,000 crores (about \$29 billion).²⁰⁶ Israeli equipment inducted during 2015 included medium power radars for air defense purposes, as well as SPICE 'smart' bombs (made by Rafael) for fighter aircraft for targeting fortified or underground command centers.

These dynamics, which span the ideological and strategic spectrum, have dovetailed into a greater political and defense engagement with Israel, which will be consummated by Modi's eventual visit. One arena of strategic engagement that could see growth is counter-terrorism (CT) cooperation, which appears to have been put on the front burner by both governments. India and Israel have the necessary institutional mechanisms in place to carry forward CT/HLS cooperation, including the February 2014 HLS agreement concluded at the tail end of the previous government's tenure. The first meeting of the India-Israel Joint Steering Committee on Homeland Security was held in Israel in September 2014.

As noted, Minister Rajnath Singh attended the HLS exhibition in Tel Aviv in November 2014. This was the first visit by an Indian Home Minister since L.K. Advani's visit in June 2000.

India will continue to seek niche Israeli expertise as part of its efforts to strengthen its HLS capabilities. The Minister of State for Home Kiren Rijiju informed the Rajya Sabha in August 2014 that securing technologies and equipment for security agencies was very much part of the India-Israel HLS agreement.²⁰⁷ India can benefit from the use of Israeli-made assault weapons, sniper rifles, and surveillance platforms like UAVs, as well as from Israeli training in the improvement of aviation security mechanisms. These and other aspects of bilateral collaboration can improve India's policy responses to incidents of terrorism.

For its part, Israel seems to be consciously focusing on expanding internal security/HLS cooperation. The Israeli Embassy has an official, the Deputy Defense Attaché for HLS Defense Cooperation, who is specifically tasked with these matters. The issue is also on the agenda of meetings Ambassador Daniel Carmon conducts with regional leaders. During his meeting with the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh in December 2014, for instance, Carmon discussed the possibility of internal security cooperation with the state. He also met with the police chiefs of the two Telugu-speaking states during his visit.²⁰⁸

During a public lecture at the United Services Institution of India (USI) on April 1, 2015, Carmon stated that four working groups had been constituted to advance CT cooperation, suggesting that institutional interaction in this area has been enhanced.²⁰⁹ In remarks he made on the seventh anniversary of the Mumbai attacks, Carmon reiterated that Israel "stands by the Indian people, government and security forces in their tireless efforts to fight and eliminate terror".²¹⁰

The most recent Israeli military action in the Gaza Strip, in July-August 2014, gave the opposition its first real opportunity following its electoral defeat to put the Modi government on the back foot on a sensitive foreign policy issue. Given that there was no demand for any parliamentary resolution critical of Israel in December 2008-January 2009 or in November

2012, the government was able to sidestep this particular demand.

While India's stance on a two-state solution remains unshaken, Israel's role as a critical partner in fulfilling India's strategic and developmental needs is now widely acknowledged across the political spectrum. During the Parliamentary debates, even members of Left parties demanded only a suspension of defense cooperation with Israel rather than a break in diplomatic relations. (As noted, this demand was made by Owaisi of the AIMIM, the single MP representing his party in Parliament).

A critical factor that can continue to shape an Indian response to future Israeli-Palestinian clashes is the lack of either intra-Palestinian or Arab-Palestinian solidarity.²¹¹ Former Indian Special Envoy to the Middle East Chinmaya Gharekhan notes that " Hamas' rocket and missile activism only brings more support for Israel", though he adds that the "latter's disproportionate response negates this advantage".²¹² As long as intra-Palestinian divisions continue to exist, and Israel continues to justify its use of a heavy hand to counter provocations from Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups, the next burst of violence will unfortunately remain just around the corner. The contours of an Indian response will continue to adhere to the same script as in the past, with all its attendant dilemmas—though accompanied by greater domestic political jostling, now that a BJP-led government is in power.

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