



PERSPECTIVES

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Decentralization: The Key to Indo-Israeli Ties

by Prof. P.R. Kumaraswamy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: By making the most of India's federal structure, Israel has established a strong presence in various states in India and thereby moved bilateral relations from elite political discourse to the economic needs of India's rural population.

Perhaps the best term with which to describe the contours of the 25 years of Indo-Israeli relations is "decentralization." In acknowledgement of the political compulsions within which the Central Government in New Delhi operates, Israel has focused its attention instead on state capitals – a strategy that has paid rich dividends and boosted popular support for bilateral relations.

In July 1993, Agriculture Minister Balram Jakhar became the first Indian minister to visit Israel, and many more have followed. However, high-level political contacts have been minimal. Over 25 years, Israel has hosted three foreign ministers and two home ministers from India, and two Israeli presidents, two Israeli foreign ministers, and one Israeli defense minister have visited India. The most important political moment in relations between the two nations came in September 2003, when India hosted Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. (Not surprisingly, most of these visits took place when the Hindu nationalist BJP was in power.)

Despite the normalization of relations in January 1992, more than four decades after India's recognition of Israel, India remained cautious. Political engagement was slow. India was still politically weak and economically vulnerable, and was dependent upon international capital to pursue economic reform. While it recognized the politico-diplomatic weaknesses of the post-Kuwait PLO, India

was unable to find an alternative to its traditional support for the Palestinian cause as a means of pushing its interests in the Middle East.

When Manmohan Singh headed the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance in 2004-14, the situation was somewhat different but ended in the same result. Under pressure from left-wing parties, the government was extremely coy in its dealings with Israel, and political contacts were limited. The prime minister's special envoy to the Middle East, for example, visited or met with all the key players in the Second Lebanon War but skipped Israel. As a junior minister in the Foreign Office, E. Ahamed traveled the entire Middle East, including Ramallah, but carefully avoided Israel. At times, ministers holding minor portfolios were even reluctant to attend national day celebrations organized by the Israeli embassy in New Delhi. Hence, bilateral relations with Israel were often described as the proverbial "mistress syndrome."

Narendra Modi's electoral victory in May 2014 turned the tide, and Indian leaders are now open to meeting Israeli leaders and officials.

Over the two decades prior to Modi's ascent, the prolonged political chilliness in New Delhi drove the Israeli embassy in India to look for greener pastures elsewhere. This is where India's federal political system came to Israel's rescue. India's political diversity and scores of socioeconomic problems offered Israel a unique opportunity to be imaginative and innovative – and in the process, to broaden both its reach and its influence in India.

The Israeli consulate, which has been operating in Mumbai since the early 1950s, had considerable contacts with the Indian political leadership, but mostly with the opposition parties. Normalization forced it to more actively engage with state-level leaders of the Congress party, which has dominated the Indian political scene since the freedom struggle. Though the BJP was supportive of Israel even before normalization, Israel was keen to cultivate Congress leaders in the state capitals.

The first chief minister (head of Indian provinces) to visit Israel was then Congress leader Sharad Pawar of Maharashtra, of which Mumbai is the capital. Pawar almost became prime minister before the mantle fell to P. V. Narasimha Rao. Pawar visited Israel in May 1993, days after Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres made his first trip to India. Since then, Pawar has traveled to Israel many times, mostly as leader of Maharashtra and once as Union Agricultural Minister.

Pawar was followed by Chimanbhai Patel, Congress Chief Minister of Gujarat, the home state of PM Modi. In June 1994, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat of Rajasthan became the first chief minister from an opposition-ruled state to visit Israel. Since then, visits and contacts between the Indian States and Israel have

become an all-party affair, with leaders from a host of national and regional parties actively engaging with Israel. Even communists who vehemently oppose Israel on the national level do not hesitate to engage with it on the provincial level. Veteran communist leader Jyoti Basu, Chief Minister of West Bengal, visited Israel in the summer of 2000; a few months earlier, another delegation from the state came to solicit Israeli investment.

The Indian federal arrangement also has a functional aspect that serves Israel well: its non-political agenda. The Union government has been saddled with political issues such as the Middle East peace process, the political rights of the Palestinians, and balancing Israel with India's engagement with the Arab world. The priority of state government, however, irrespective of the party in power, is economic development, which is the key to poverty mitigation. Notwithstanding their ideological blinkers, the states are less concerned about the vagaries of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and periodic upsurges of violence than about economic benefits accruing from closer ties with Israel.

Israel has capitalized on the unique Indian arrangement and expanded its footprint in areas such as agriculture, horticulture, floriculture, water management, public health, combating desertification, waste recycling, and more. It has brought Indian farmers to Agritech exhibitions and established model farms and training centers in different parts of India. Scores of agreements have been signed between Israeli ministries and Indian companies and state governments. The penetration of Israel into the federal system means it requires minimal political support from New Delhi. This state-centric approach also fits well with the Modi government's developmental agenda.

The skills and human resources available to western countries often far outweigh Israel's, and a number of those countries had a diplomatic presence in India long before Israel. For a variety of reasons, they have not been able to achieve the reach Israel has achieved over 25 years.

Above all, the state-centric approach in India has brought diplomatic dividends to Israel. Indo-Israeli relations have moved beyond the corridors of power, seminar circuits, and elite discussions in urban centers. They now extend to rural India. The relationship is no longer mere grist for academic discussion or ideological debate, but has a practical value in terms of improving the quality of life of ordinary Indians.

Decentralization has transformed the focus of Indo-Israeli bilateral relations. They are no longer about the political exclusion of Israel, but about the achievement of tangible economic gains for rural India.

Professor P. R. Kumaraswamy teaches contemporary Middle East at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and is the author of India's Israel Policy (Columbia University Press, 2010).

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