



## PERSPECTIVES

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### Israel and India: Is the Sky the Limit?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Indian PM Narendra Modi's first visit to Israel is an affirmation of readiness, beyond mere symbolism, for an unprecedented expansion of collaboration between two democracies and two peoples. There is potential for such expansion on many levels: government-to-government, business-to-business, industry-to-industry, sector-to-sector, and people-to-people. Israel's technological expertise in critical domains, and India's good relations with the Gulf nations, including Iran, as well as with the G-77 group of nations (which often votes as a bloc at the UN), should augur well for new synergies that could prove beneficial for the region and for the Israel-Palestine conflict.

India and Israel were reborn around the same time, in comparably nasty neighborhoods. They both faced turmoil inside and outside their boundaries as their territories confronted partition on ethno-religious-nationalistic grounds. Yet each is a now a flourishing democracy.

For far too long, a variety of factors kept India from enjoying fruitful relations with Israel. These include India's dependence on Arab countries in and around the Gulf for oil and liquid gas imports and remittance-creating cheap labor exports; India's self-assigned "duties" to "the Palestinian cause" in the framework of its historical leadership role vis-à-vis "non-aligned" third-world "countries"; and its long alliance with the USSR, which brought with it a corresponding distance from all things associated with the US. It has taken 25 years for Indian-Israeli relations to reach fruition.

Indian PM Narendra Modi, very much a pragmatist, relied on Israel's agro/hydratechnology when he was Chief Minister of Gujarat. In his position as PM, he is now extending to the whole of India Israel's contributions to

Gujarat's development – and this time, he is going well beyond agro/hydro-industrial projects.

India and Israel can cooperate on government-to-government, business-to-business, and people-to-people levels. The first level of cooperation could encompass defense, deterrence, and anti-terror activity; the second, a wide array of commercial and industrial sectors that should include direct foreign investment, technology transfer, joint ventures, and large development projects for India's home and export markets. The third can include tourism, student exchanges, nonprofit ventures, and so on.

As China's longtime competitor for leadership of the non-aligned world, India would be wise to partner with Israel in assisting the many late-developing nations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to speed up their progress in fields ranging from agriculture, health, education, housing, and communication to national defense, peace, and prosperity through gainful occupation. In turn, UN voting patterns by members of the G-77 bloc could become less monolithic as members come to know their benefactors.

One remarkable development, among others, has been the late realization by overseas Indian communities in places like the US, Canada, and Australia that the Jewish minorities in those societies seem to have greater political clout than their numbers warrant. For too long, the three million Hindus living in the US, adding up to 1% of the total US population, had been deprived of a seat in the House or the Senate, whereas the six million American Jews – a mere 2% of the population – had not only several representatives on Capitol Hill, but many friends in high places as well.

Hindu communities in the US are now attempting to emulate US Jewry by developing intra-leadership networks across liberal professions in their communities, as well as by organizing lobbying campaigns. They have begun to build coalitions with local US Jewish communities over common causes such as fighting discrimination, racism, and terror; lobbying Congress on matters relevant to India; and India-Israel relations. These efforts are producing increasingly positive results.

One such victory was the attainment at long last of representation in Congress for the US Hindu community. Another was the reversal of the Clinton-era prohibition on Israel's transfer of Falcon/AWACS technology to India. The joint efforts of the two increasingly brotherly groups are expanding.

India's new pragmatism in foreign policy, since opening itself to much closer cooperation with the US, is such that its excellent strategic ties with Iran and Afghanistan need not create an insurmountable obstacle to its expansion of ties

with Israel, which has become one of its three major arms suppliers. After all, Israel is a longtime friend and ally of the US, with which India has begun entertaining overt links of alliance.

Modi's decision not to go to Ramallah on the occasion of his first visit to Israel should not feed speculation about some putative change in Delhi's equations at the expense of Palestinian interests. This decision is just another manifestation of India's pragmatic approach to its parallel relations with the two parties in conflict. Should the opportunity to intercede arise, India could even serve as a catalyst for boosting the Palestinian-Israeli peace process.

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