



PERSPECTIVES

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Modi's Visit – The View from Jerusalem

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The visit by the Indian PM Narendra Modi caused many Jerusalemites, like me, a lot of traffic delays. In retrospect, it was definitely a price worth paying. Modi showed remarkable courage by coming to Israel without balancing it with a visit to the Palestinian Authority. His departure from the political correct symmetry pleased the Israelis and signaled that India has decided to act on its national interests. Israelis hope Modi's pragmatic approach will be emulated by other senior dignitaries coming to Israel.

Indian PM Narendra Modi arrived last week, making him the first-ever head of India's government to visit the Jewish state. Israel went out of its way to extend a warm welcome, underscoring the strong personal chemistry between Modi and Israel's PM Binyamin Netanyahu. Israel's handling of the visit was much appreciated by Indians. "Israel is a real friend and I have really felt that feeling of kinship. I feel absolutely at home here," Modi said during a meeting with President Reuven Rivlin in Jerusalem. He said the very warm reception was "a mark of respect to the entire Indian nation comprising 1.25 billion people."

Modi's visit reflects the success of the reorientation of Israel's foreign policy. In recognition that there is a shift in the distribution of power in the international system, and that the Asia-Pacific region is gradually becoming the center of gravity for international interactions, Israel has paid greater attention to Asia – particularly India, a rising global power. India responded positively for its own reasons, and is now the most important market for Israel's defense exports.

Israel's export policy is flexible, meeting Indian demands for technological transfer and offsets. The India-Israel Joint Statement hailed the defense cooperation, noting that India and Israel agreed that "future developments in

this sphere should focus on joint development of defense products, including transfer of technology from Israel, with a special emphasis on the 'Make in India' initiative."

Beyond the billions of dollars in defense deals, India and Israel share a common strategic agenda. Indeed, the first paragraph of the India-Israel Joint Statement declares that the friendship between the two states has been raised to "a strategic partnership." Modi explained, "Israel and India live in complex geographies ... We are aware of strategic threats to regional peace and stability ... Prime Minister Netanyahu and I agreed to do much more together to protect our strategic interests."

In the statement, the prime ministers reiterated their strong commitment to combating global terror, stating that "there can be no justification of acts of terror on any grounds whatsoever." The working groups of the two states on Homeland and Public Security were encouraged to implement the agreements in an efficient and effective manner. Cybersecurity was also recognized as an important area for enhanced cooperation.

Interestingly, Modi's visit coincided with a rise in Sino-Indian tensions in the Sikkim border area, underscoring India's threat perceptions and military needs. Israel is concerned, on a different scale, about Chinese behavior that challenges its main ally, the US.

While national security issues, including defense contracts, are an important facet of the bilateral relations, it is only one component. The Joint Statement mentions myriad items of mutual interest in the civilian sphere. The two PMs presented a series of agreements between India and Israel for cooperation in the fields of space, water management, agriculture, science, and technology. In addition, the two countries decided to create a \$40 million innovation fund to allow Indian and Israeli enterprise to develop innovative technologies and products with commercial applications.

The Modi visit was extremely well covered by the Indian and the international media. It was a great opportunity for Israel to be seen not through the prism of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but as a technological superpower able to attract the attention of rising global powers such as India. Modi's warmth towards Israel was of great public relations benefit to Israel and also a welcome promotion of Israeli products.

The many Indian journalists who accompanied Modi were also an important tool through which to present Israel as an attractive tourist destination. Netanyahu expressed his wish to see many more Indians coming for vacation to the Jewish State.

Netanyahu touted Israel's growing ties with the second-most populous country in the world. This visit serves him well in refuting accusations from the opposition that his foreign policy leads to Israel's international isolation. He can convincingly argue that Israel has become a preferred partner in the international community because it has many things to offer in the defense and civilian spheres.

Netanyahu has accepted an invitation from his Indian counterpart to visit Delhi. The visit was already in the works, and Indian officials say it will likely take place towards the end of 2017. This will be an opportunity to check progress, identify blocks hindering the implementation of the agreements, and further solidify the ties between the two countries.

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