



PERSPECTIVES

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Eyes Forward: Modi's Visit to Israel

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Ever since Indian PM Narendra Modi's ascent to power in May 2014, the possibility has been discussed that he might visit Israel. Three years later, on the 25th anniversary of the establishment of formal relations between the countries, Modi made the historic visit and received a warm welcome. The visit signifies an active Indian foreign policy that stands against the old order as well as a political victory for Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, both on the geopolitical level and on the domestic front.

From the 1920s until the establishment of official bilateral relations in 1992, Indian-Israeli ties were dictated by the views of Indian Muslims and moves by Pakistan. Despite Israel's military support for India during its wars, and the lack of support India received from both Arab and Muslim states, the Congress Party continued to keep its distance from the Jewish State. New Delhi was long preoccupied with the building of the nation, the flow of external aid, and the constant threat posed by its Western neighbor. Relations with Israel remained unfulfilled.

But the opposition party BJP (the Indian People's Party) held a different view. It perceived India's enemy not as the "colonial" West, of which Israel is a (supposed) offshoot, but as radical Islam and terrorism. Against that backdrop, the BJP saw Israel as a natural ally.

Public relations remained at a low level even after the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, but Modi's rise to power signaled a significant change. There has been a tightening of relations on many levels: economic, in the form of mega-deals; political, in the form of frequent meetings of senior officials; and cultural, in the form of a change in public rhetoric towards Israel on social media. There have also been attempts by India to redress the persistent imbalance against Israel in UN votes.

Modi replaced the idealism of previous Indian governments with an economic pragmatism that is the cornerstone of his foreign policy. His policy is by no means entirely devoid of the ideological and institutional ideas of the Hindutva, but they are more relevant to internal politics than to foreign policy, which is focused mainly on economic development and the strengthening of India's status as a global player.

Modi arrived in Israel surrounded by CEOs and senior businessmen. During his three-day visit, he achieved his primary goals by signing a series of agreements that will assist his country's continued economic growth, as well as ensure continued cooperation in the fields of security and civilian affairs. Indian agriculture and water quality were also addressed. The main agreement signed during the visit was for a \$40 million innovation fund that aims to encourage cooperation between Israeli and Indian companies.

The historic visit was profitable for both leaders. It is no coincidence that Netanyahu accompanied Modi closely. He instructed his team to treat the Indian prime minister with no less respect and attention than US President Donald Trump received on his recent visit. Though the Israeli media did not cover official portions of Modi's visit on live broadcast, coverage was available on the social networks of the prime minister and his ministers.

The main message of the visit for opponents of the Israeli administration, both at home and abroad, was that Israel's political isolation is not absolute. Jerusalem is able to pursue a foreign policy even without any signs of progress in the peace process. For Modi, the visit was seen as a gesture to freedom fighter and right-wing leader Vinayak Savarkar, who famously hailed the creation of Israel as a "joyous" moment." Modi strengthened his position in his party, and the economic agreements he signed in Israel give a tailwind to his election slogan "Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas" – a collective effort for the economic development of all.

India's changing place in the New World obligates it to detach itself from its old foreign policy rhetoric. Its traditional support for the Palestinian issue is gradually becoming more of a romantic notion about the struggle for national liberation than a matter for practical action, which partially explains Modi's decision not to visit Ramallah during his visit to Israel.

But the skipping of Ramallah should be seen in a broader context. A month before Modi's visit to Israel, Mahmoud Abbas was invited to make an official visit to Delhi. India's support for the Palestinian Authority has not diminished from the US\$17.9 million aid package that was announced during the Indian president's visit to Ramallah in 2015. The skipping of Ramallah should not be over-interpreted.

Modi adjusts his foreign policy to meet Indian interests. His visits to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, like his visit to Israel, were the product of his assessment of India's fundamental interests.

Modi is carefully navigating his way between different target countries. In his estimation, the Palestinian issue was not an essential part of his visit to Israel. Neither his nor Netanyahu's speeches mentioned Palestine except in a joint declaration wherein they reaffirmed their support for an early negotiated solution based on mutual recognition and security arrangements. Nor was there any mention of Iran. The Iranian ambassador to India recently said Tehran will not dictate to New Delhi with whom it should be friends, and India should not allow its friends to dictate its relations with Iran.

It is worth noting that the Israeli Foreign Ministry agreed to repeated requests from Modi's entourage that an event be held for the Indian diaspora rather than a banquet at the Israeli Knesset. During an hour-long speech, Modi said he was going to amend OCI (Overseas Citizen of India) legislation to include the Indian-Israeli community despite their compulsory military service in Israel. The OCI is part of a government policy that attempts to bridge the gap between the prohibition against dual nationality and the desire to attract investment from citizens living abroad.

Netanyahu's decision to take part in the event added another dimension to relations, as Israeli governments have traditionally ignored the matter of the Indian diaspora in Israel despite New Delhi's attempts over the past ten years to address it.

Modi's visit raised expectations about the two countries' future relationship. It is hoped that at long last, India will stand with Israel in international forums. In return, Jerusalem will use its friendship with Washington to push reform of the UN Security Council, on which New Delhi is trying to gain a permanent seat.

The two states are focused on promoting their economies and protecting their vital interests. Neither has any desire to apologize for anything. Relations naturally reflect geopolitical changes and will continue to do so, but there is no doubt that both leaders are working hard to deepen the relationship.

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