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Narendra Modi's Visit to Ramallah

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: During Indian PM Narendra Modi's visit to Israel in July 2017, India finally ended its long practice that dignitaries who visit Israel must also travel to the Palestinian-controlled territories. On February 10, 2018, he conducted a landmark visit to Ramallah, the first such visit by an Indian PM – and did not visit Israel. This “de-hyphenation” of Israel-Palestine reflects Modi's pragmatic and sensible approach to relations with the two entities.

Last Saturday, Narendra Modi achieved the distinction of becoming the first Indian PM to visit the Palestinian *de facto* West Bank capital, Ramallah. During his discussions with top Palestinian leaders during the visit, Modi called Yasser Arafat a “friend of the Indian people.”

The relationship between India and the Palestinians stems from a deep-rooted ideological association dating back to New Delhi's vote against the UN partition resolution. However, the speed with which the Modi government has been working to boost India's ties with Israel has given rise to fears that it might abandon its historical support for the Palestinian cause.

The visit to Ramallah was a part of the Modi government's policy of de-hyphenating New Delhi's relations with Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA). De-hyphenation of “Israel-Palestine” is a politically shrewd strategy: rather than treating the two entities as one unit, the Modi government has decided to pursue independent relationships with each, thereby giving India greater maneuvering space to maintain the image of continuing to provide moral support for the Palestinian cause while simultaneously engaging in a military and strategic partnership with the Jewish state. That is why Modi did

not go to Israel during this landmark visit. Last year, he became the first Indian PM to visit Israel on a standalone visit – but chose not to travel to Ramallah.

When Modi became PM in 2014, he began to implement this smart policy. However, as time progressed, India's pro-Israel voting pattern in some global governing bodies and growing personal chemistry between Modi and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu came to be interpreted as a scaling back of India's historical ties with the Palestinians. During Modi's visit to Jerusalem last July, his decision not to balance it with a trip to Ramallah was viewed in the Arab world as an abandonment of India's consistent moral support for the cause of Palestinian self-determination. Modi's visit to Ramallah can thus be seen as an attempt to silence critics of his government's "pro-Israel" policy. (It is generally believed that Modi's policy of de-hyphenation actually benefits Israel.)

India has come a long way in forming a strategic partnership with Israel. Before and after India's independence, prominent nationalist figures viewed Jewish aspirations for a national home in Palestine through an anti-imperialist prism. It was felt that the Zionists were relying on imperialist powers to establish a theocratic state at the expense of the Palestinians. This perception led India to vote at the UN against the creation of Israel. Following the lead given by two Muslim-majority countries, Turkey and Iran, the Indian government reluctantly recognized Israel in 1950. However, for the next four decades, New Delhi's policy towards Israel was marked by Nehruvian utopianism and the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM).

The end of the Cold War helped reduce not only the stature of NAM in international affairs but also the ideological hostility towards Israel. This was also the time when India was opening up its economy to the world. Thus, former Indian PM Narasimha Rao established full diplomatic relations with Israel in January 1992.

While BJP-led governments have been more open and vocal about adopting a pro-Israel approach, Congress-led governments have tried to strike a balance. When the Congress-led UPA government came to power in 2004, New Delhi returned to being secretive about India's strategic ties with Israel. But when Modi became PM in 2014, he overcame this reticence and brought Indo-Israeli ties into full view. Under his stewardship, bilateral relations have been flourishing, as reflected in the close cooperation between India and Israel in economic, scientific, agricultural, political, and military domains.

Former Indian PM Indira Gandhi had a close relationship with Yasser Arafat. Besides being the first non-Arab country to recognize Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the sole representative of the Palestinian

people, India was one of the first countries to recognize the Palestinian state in 1988, championing a “sovereign, independent, united” Palestine with its capital in East Jerusalem.

On his visit to the Palestinian territories in October 2015, then Indian President Pranab Mukherjee said, “India’s solidarity with the Palestinian people and its principled support [for] the Palestinian cause is rooted in our own freedom struggle.” When PA President Mahmoud Abbas visited India last May, Modi reassured him of India’s “unwavering” support for the Palestinian cause. In late December 2017, India upheld its support for the Palestinian cause by favoring a UN resolution condemning American recognition of Jerusalem as Israeli capital. Before this vote, many seasoned observers cautioned New Delhi that voting in favor of the PA would cause embarrassment to Netanyahu, who has been prioritizing Israel’s ties with India. But the Modi government went ahead with the vote, as it knew India-Israel relations would not be affected by this decision.

In fact, Netanyahu received a red carpet welcome during his India visit in January 2018. The Israelis well know that they can easily afford to ignore diplomatic opposition at the UN. Netanyahu’s trip also saw the renaming of Teen Murti Haifa Chowk in New Delhi to pay homage to the Indian soldiers who lost their lives a century ago in the Battle of Haifa during the last months of the Sinai and Palestine Campaign of World War I.

As is often erroneously believed, India’s support for the PA has not been wholly dictated by considerations of domestic politics; i.e., its perceived reluctance to alienate its considerable Muslim minority. New Delhi’s Palestinian policy has also been a critical component of India’s energy diplomacy with oil-rich Gulf countries and India’s Kashmir dispute with Pakistan, as well as for ensuring the safety of the Indian diaspora in the Gulf countries.

The Modi government’s assertive counter-terrorism policy towards Pakistan has seen New Delhi seek strong Arab support for the Indian case. Recently, after the Palestinian ambassador to Pakistan attended a Jerusalem-related rally organized by the Difa-e-Pakistan Council in Karachi, along with the 26/11 Mumbai terror attack mastermind and global terrorist Hafiz Saeed, India registered a strong protest with the PA. Ramallah was forced to recall the ambassador.

During his discussions with Modi, Abbas acknowledged that India has always supported peace in Palestine. For his part, Modi “reassured President Abbas that India is committed to upholding the interests of the Palestinian people. India hopes for an early realization of a sovereign, independent state of Palestine.” But

significantly, Modi did not mention a “united” Palestine. He also omitted any mention of East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. When Abbas visited New Delhi in May last year, Modi used different language: he said, “We hope to see the realization of a sovereign, independent, united and viable Palestine.”

While “sovereign and independent” Palestine remains India’s position, the notion of a “united” Palestine has been held hostage to internal differences within the Palestinian leadership. By dropping any mention of a “united” Palestine, Modi seems to have responded to the facts on the ground. This change will be favorably noticed in Jerusalem.

To sum up, Modi’s Ramallah visit reveals India’s pragmatic approach towards Israel and the Palestinians. Modi now deals with them separately, thereby discarding the remnants of India’s commitment to utopian notions of pan-Arabism and anti-imperialism, which no longer shape the politics of the Middle East. While emphasizing “de-hyphenation” and the consequent scaling up of ties with Israel, the Modi government is also keen to dispel the perception that India has dumped the Palestinian cause.

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