



# PERSPECTIVES

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## The Israeli-Sri Lankan Relationship

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Following Indian premier Narendra Singh Modi's historic visit to Israel in 2017, bilateral relations between India and Israel were elevated into a strategic partnership. But this was not Israel's first successful diplomatic venture in South Asia. India's tiny neighbor, Sri Lanka, had a strategic alliance with Israel long before India developed one. During the Cold War era, Sri Lanka was viewed as an Israeli success story in the region.

[Jewish relations](#) with Sri Lanka have a long history that dates all the way back to the biblical epoch: the Sri Lankan city of Galle is said to be the city of Tarshish, to which King Solomon sent merchant ships. Beyond the biblical legacy, the Jewish presence in the island nation thrived under British rule, as many European Jews held prominent positions in the colonial administration. In the early stage of British rule, then Chief Justice of Sri Lanka [Sir Alexander Johnston](#) proposed the establishment of a Jewish settlement on the island, an idea that was not taken up by the colonial office in London. Both Israel and Sri Lanka became independent states in 1948.

At Israel's inception, it faced diplomatic hostility from the Arab world, and many post-colonial countries—including India—refused to recognize it as an independent state. But Sri Lanka's first PM, D.S. Senanayake, initiated the island nation's cooperation with Israel, despite the disapproval of many Asian and African states. During the Senanayake era, the Sri Lankan Navy purchased its first gunship from Israel, the Gajabahu 1. In addition, Israeli technical advisors assisted in the digging of [tube wells in the dry zone](#) of northern Sri Lanka.

But this early period of Israeli-Sri Lankan comity was reversed by the nationalist rhetoric of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, who came to power in 1956. Driven by anti-Western sentiment, Bandaranaike allied with the Arabs against Israel. He defended Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser's decision to nationalize the Suez Canal as an inevitable move for the sovereignty of Egypt.

Israeli-Sri Lankan relations deteriorated further during the administration of Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, whose foreign policy was based on the principles of the non-aligned movement. The Arab states denounced Israel, and Mrs. Bandaranaike followed suit. In the 1970s, she took a keen interest in establishing relations with the PLO, notwithstanding the PLO's relations with Tamil separatist organizations. Several PLO representatives visited Sri Lanka to urge the government to terminate diplomatic ties with Israel.

The Israeli ambassador in Colombo, [Yitzhak Navon](#), condemned Sri Lanka's hobnobbing with Arab terrorist organizations that were plotting to exterminate the State of Israel. Yet two months after Navon made this statement, in a clear indication of the PLO's success at delegitimizing Israel outside the Middle East, Bandaranaike severed diplomatic ties with Israel on the grounds that it had purportedly violated UN Security Council Resolution 242. Her decision was highly praised by Arab leaders as a bold act made on behalf of the cause of Palestinian "liberation."

Ties between Israel and Sri Lanka were restored under Sri Lanka's first executive president, Junius Richard Jayewardene, when the country began to suffer from terrorism committed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1977. Cabinet minister Lalith Athulathmudali, who had worked as a law lecturer at Hebrew University in Jerusalem; as well as Jayewardene's son, Ravi Jayewardene, were determined that Sri Lanka should turn to Israel for assistance in combating LTTE. President Jayewardene turned desperately to Israel after the West refused to sell the country weapons. Security ties soon led to the establishment of diplomatic relations, and in April 1984 an Israeli mission was opened in Colombo for the second time.

A vivid account by Victor Ostrovky and Claire Hoy in their bestselling work *By Way of Deception: A Devastating Insider's Portrait of the Mossad* describes how the Sri Lankan government was aided by the Mossad in the early 1980s. The book reveals that it was a Mossad operative, Amy Yar, who advised Jayewardene's government to accelerate the country's ambitious Mahaweli development project as a quick remedy for the energy crisis and, more importantly, as the best strategy to settle Sinhalese farmers in the island's dry zones. Two Israeli academics provided a broad analysis of the project that crucially helped the Sri Lankan government convince the World Bank to invest \$250 million. A large portion of the Mahaweli contract was given to Israeli construction company Solel Bonah and Israeli architect [Ulrik Plesner](#), who planned six new towns for the Mahaweli settlements.

The revived Israeli presence in Sri Lanka in the early 1980s and the opening of the Israeli embassy in Colombo in 1984 alarmed the country's Muslim ethnic minority, who spread a conspiracy theory about Jews in Sri Lanka. Muslim organizations in Sri Lanka portrayed Israel as a ruthlessly violent state, in keeping with the image of Israel advanced by the PLO.

President Jayewardene's successor, Ranasinghe Premadasa, reversed course once again regarding Israel. He confounded the West by [voting against](#) UN General Assembly Resolution 46/86 in 1991, which was adopted to revoke Resolution 3379—the notorious resolution that called Zionism a form of racism. The following year, Premadasa terminated diplomatic relations with Israel. The delegitimizing of Israel and thwarting of Israel-Sri Lanka relations were the result of astute image manipulation by the PLO and its supporters in the local Muslim community.

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