

India's Strategic Embrace of Israel Amidst the Gaza War

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Introduction

There has been a transformational change in Indian foreign policy since the induction of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in 2014, resulting in closer ties with Israel. The BJP leader Prime Minister Narendra Modi has embraced Israel openly, contrary to his predecessors. Relations between the two have flourished, despite the Gaza War, with a shared commitment to enhance bilateral ties. India launched its 'Make in India' policy under the then newly elected Prime Minister Modi in September 2014. The policy is an attempt to ramp up manufacturing by promoting domestic and multinational companies to manufacture in India. The defence sector is a critical component of this policy. Since Modi came to office, Israel's defence exports to India have averaged 42%. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), India's defence exports to Israel have increased by a staggering 175% from 2014-2019.¹ A decade later, as a result of this policy, the recent bombing of the United Nations (UN) shelter at the Nuseirat refugee camp in Gaza was done by a missile launched by Israel, amid its tangled parts, its label read 'Made in India'.²

India: From Pro-Palestine to Pro-Israel

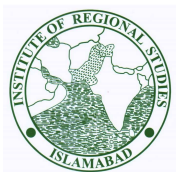
India's foreign policy towards Israel and Palestine has seen a transition from a pro-Palestine to a de-hyphenation of relations and now there seems to be a preference for Israel over Palestine. Despite Israel's war crimes and genocide, New Delhi's relations with Tel Aviv have remained steadfast. However, the relations were not as cordial as they are today.

India was the first non-Arab state to recognise the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and one of the last non-Muslim states to

recognise Israel.³ India acquiesced to Israel's sovereignty in 1950, two years after its statehood, and one of the few states to vote against the UN partition plan. India recognised the PLO in 1974 and was one of the first states to recognise the Palestinian state in 1988. The pro-Palestine leaning was influenced by the founders of India, namely Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, marked by an anti-imperial struggle against the British empire. Gandhi had famously stated in 1938, "Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense as that England belongs to the English and France to the French."⁴ Nehru too, despite pronouncing his sympathies for the persecuted Jews, blamed them for opposing the Palestinians and siding with the imperialists.⁵ India saw itself as a leader of the Global South, and Palestinian resistance resonated with India's struggle for nationhood.

India's leaning towards the Soviet Union resulted in alignment with the Arab world and limited diplomatic relations with Israel which was supported by the western bloc. However, after the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the United States as a global power, India veered its course. The balance of ties shifted in the 1990s when India established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992. Although official relations were established in the early 1990s, both states had clandestine relations before 1992. Israel had supplied weapons to India in the Sino-Indian war of 1962, and in the Indo-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971.⁶ Intelligence cooperation between the two started back in 1970s after the establishment of India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) in 1968 to counter the rising threat of China-Pakistan-North Korea axis. After establishing official relations with Israel, cooperation between the two states surged. Ezer Weizman became the first president of Israel to

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visit India in 1997, followed by visits from Indian ministers Jaswant Singh and Lal Krishna Advani to Tel Aviv in 2000.⁷ Israel's first Prime Ministerial visit came as early as 2003 with Ariel Sharon's visit, but there was hesitation on part of India to reciprocate. Modi ultimately broke the deadlock in 2017, overcoming the hesitations of history.

Multi-Dimensional Partnership

India is Israel's second largest trading partner in Asia, after China and seventh largest globally.⁸ The bilateral merchandise trade between the India and Israel in fiscal year 2022-23 reached \$10.77 billion (excluding defence).⁹ The trade relations were diversified after establishing formal diplomatic relations with Israel. Modi's visit to Israel in 2017 prompted the signing of seven Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) on cooperation in innovation, technology, water, agriculture, and space and science. During Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit in 2018, nine agreements were signed related to cyber security, oil and gas, solar energy, air transport, medicines and film production. The bilateral trade is dominated by diamonds, petroleum products and chemicals. Recently, there has been growing cooperation in areas like high-tech products, electronic machinery and communication systems.¹⁰

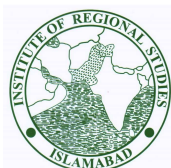
Israel has been among the top three defence suppliers of India in the last five years, accounting for 13% of India's imports during 2016-2020.¹¹ The defence relations are reciprocal as India is the largest exporter of weapons to Israel. India's exports have increased amid the genocide. According to former Israeli ambassador to India Daniel Camron, India is 'returning the favour' of the Kargil war.¹² Israel helped India when the international community sanctioned it for its nuclear tests. The aid in Kargil established a defence partnership, and India found a reliable partner in Israel. Moderate and progressive forces within India have criticised and opposed India's decision to continue exports to a state that has slaughtered innocent civilians, largely women and children. In a letter to the defence minister, Rajnath Singh, the

group of prominent citizens that include former supreme court and high court judges, activists, economists and authors, including Booker Prize winning writer Arundhati Roy, condemned Israel and called for an immediate cessation of all collaborations that involve defence deliveries to Israel.¹³ India's defence exports make it facilitator of a state violating international law and complicit in acts of genocide.

The relationship goes beyond military hardware. After the illegal annexation of Jammu and Kashmir, a senior Indian diplomat in US suggested replicating the 'Israeli model', referring to the colonial settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem.¹⁴ There were talks during Modi's visit, first for any Indian Prime Minister to Israel, in 2017 to expand cyber security cooperation, resulting in an agreement in 2020. A New York Times investigation alleged that this meeting also involved procurement of the Israeli spyware 'Pegasus' that was used to hack into the sensitive information of 300 Indians, including journalists, activists, political opponents and anyone critical of the Modi regime.¹⁵

Logic Underlying the Embrace

The Congress working committee (CWC) has slammed the BJP for its unequivocal support for Israel's war in Gaza and passed a resolution expressing the party's "long-standing support for the rights of Palestinian people."¹⁶ BJP on the other hand criticised Congress for standing with Hamas. Furthermore, the BJP blamed Congress' foreign policy being hostage to a minority vote bank politics.¹⁷ Post 1992 governments lacked majority and were unable to openly embrace Israel. The Congress led coalitions were adamant to support Palestine because of the nostalgia of non-alignment. A dramatic shift occurred after the reins of power shifted from a weak coalition to a majority BJP government. A majority government in 2014 allowed Modi to make radical overtures in its relations with Israel. The love affair between BJP and Israel or the Likud party surged after Modi's ascent to power. The relationship is not solely based on pragmatism but an ideological alliance between two



ethno-nationalist and right-wing parties. Both believe in establishing domestic structures that would transform the democratic polities into 'ethnocracies'. The founder of the Hindutva ideology, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, echoed these propositions in the 1920s stating that "if the Zionists' dreams are ever realised – if Palestine becomes a Jewish state – it will gladden us almost as much as our Jewish friends."¹⁸

Naor Gilon, Israel's ambassador to India stated after the 7 October 2024 Hamas attack that "I could have another Israeli Army with Indian volunteers."¹⁹ India and Israel both face the menace of terrorism, and in the aftermath of 9/11 their apprehensions were validated. Both share tangible threats from non-state actors in the neighbourhood. The 2008 Mumbai attacks were a turning point for counterterrorism collaboration between the two states. Ten gunmen launched coordinated attacks on five places in Mumbai. Among the targeted places was Nariman House, where six Israeli citizens, including Rabbi Gavriel Holtzberg and his wife Rivika, were murdered.²⁰ The attacks led to a growing commitment for security, technological and intelligence cooperation to mitigate threats of terrorism.

Apart from domestic politics and regional security, the structural changes in the international system have also triggered a strategic embrace between the two states. India's broader coalition in the 'US Indo-Pacific Strategy' has made partnership with Israel inevitable. Israel already enjoys an all-

weather strategic partnership with the west, especially the US which would bend over backwards to protect Israel even if it means the breakdown of international law and ethnic cleansing of a people. India thus found an inevitable partner in Israel. Alignment with Israel is part of the Indian conception of the 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' that encompasses formation of a broader coalition of like-minded democracies, challenging the regional and global hegemonic ambitions of China.

Conclusion

The October 7 attack puts India in a quagmire because of India's 'balancing act'²¹ in the region. India's multifaceted interests, both with Israel and Arab states are jeopardised because of October 7. Its multifaceted engagement is demonstrated by its active participation in the I2U2 and acquisition of the Chabahar port.²² However, India is likely to continue its support for Israel. The deepening ties are driven by ideological and pragmatic considerations and regional and structural changes in the international system. The support for Israel is reflected in its substantial increase of defence exports, intelligence cooperation, and trade and technological collaborations. While domestic and international critics challenge India's facilitation of a genocide that has resulted in mass murder of 39,400 people,²³ Modi 3.0 will continue to prioritise strategic and economic benefits over diplomatic costs.

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