

INDIA-ISRAEL RELATIONS: LESSONS IN SMART DIPLOMACY

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ABSTRACT

The historic first visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in July 2017 takes India-Israel ties to the next level. It is a clear departure from India's long held policy towards the Jewish state. As India and Israel openly embrace each other new opportunities of cooperation are created in fields other than defense sector. This bonhomie between the two can go a long way in taking forward their domestic and international agendas. The paper makes an attempt to examine how the two nations were able to bring a turnaround in their ties and what are the key takeaways are from this major diplomatic milestone.

KEY WORDS: India, Israel, Diplomacy, Foreign Policy, Middle East.

INTRODUCTION

Few visits by a foreign dignitary carry as much symbolism as the one which Prime Minister Modi undertook to Israel this July. It was an apt depiction of the changing national and international milieu. As the tectonics of the old world order show signs of strain and old allies drift apart, new friendships are being forged. The political and diplomatic acumen shown by both Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Modi in grasping the realpolitik realities of today and planning the visit accordingly is commendable. The significance of this visit goes much beyond the agreements signed. It lies in the willingness of the two countries to openly embrace a relationship that has served them well in the past and holds immense potential for the future.

The historic first visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in July 2017 takes India-Israel ties to the next level. It is a clear departure from India's long held policy towards the Jewish state. As India and Israel openly embrace each other new opportunities of cooperation are created in fields other than defense sector. This bonhomie between the two can go a long way in taking forward their domestic and international agendas. The paper makes an attempt to examine how the two nations were able to bring a turnaround in their ties and what are the key takeaways are from this major diplomatic milestone.

Prime Minister Modi's admiration for Israel is no secret. For BJP led NDA govern there are many parallels to be drawn between a state that is the sole spiritual homeland of a religious community and ever

since its creation found itself amidst hostile neighbors. The way the state of Israel has not only survived against all odds but has actually thrived presents a model which the current leadership seems keen to emulate. But the bonhomie and mutual admiration on display today have charted a long course to reach this stage. It is an outcome of an Israeli policy of maximizing its number of friends to minimize its vulnerabilities on the world stage. A key feature of this policy has been willingness to sacrifice reciprocity from the other states in the short term for recognition and mutual cooperation in the long term.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

During the years of freedom struggle the Congress party had opposed the creation of a separated Jewish state in an area inhabited by Palestinian Arabs. It viewed it as an extension of the same divide and rule policy of the British that it vehemently opposed in the Indian subcontinent. The emotional solidarity and religious sentiments of the Muslim leaders within the Congress would have exercised their fair share of influence in making Congress side with the Palestinian cause. Instead of partitioning the land on religious lines India under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru favored a federation of Arabs and Jews (Srivastava 1970). But India's opposition could do little to defer the creation of the state of Israel that finally came into being on 14 May 1948. By this time India had itself gained independence and Prime Minister Nehru knew that recognition of Israel could not be deferred for too long. India recognized the state of Israel in 1950 but owing to India's geo-political, domestic, ideological and electoral compulsions Israel

had to wait another 42 years before full diplomatic ties could be established between the two nations.

India was not alone in its dilemma over the Arab-Israel conundrum. Many other nations were trying to figure out the place of this new state in their political calculations. With not many wanting to risk the hostility of the bigger and more resource rich Arab states Israel found itself at the height of isolation during the early 1950s. All this started to change during the 1956 Suez Crisis which led to the creation of French-Israel alliance. The rise of Nasserism, intensification of Cold War and radicalization of Arab politics were among the other key factors that ended Israel's isolation and drew it closer to U.S lead western alliance (Rabinovich and Reinhartz 2008).

Having faced one crisis after another the state of Israel fully appreciates the need and value of having influential friends. This realization has manifested itself in the foreign policy decisions taken by them over the decades. An elucidating example of this is their decision to supply India with much needed arms and ammunitions during the 1962 war despite their absence from India's diplomatic priorities (Indian Express, July 5, 2017). The Israeli willingness to go the extra-mile to win goodwill and friendship of other nations was not limited to India alone. The first prime minister and the founding father of Singapore Mr. Lee Kuan Yew in his memoir acknowledges the much needed contribution of Israel in training and establishing Singapore's armed forces after its separation from Malaysia. An exercise that had to be carried out covertly, without public knowledge, for fears of jeopardizing Singapore's domestic and geo-political concerns (Yew 2000). Today Singapore Armed Force has proved its mettle as a credible force capable of defending the prosperity of this booming city state, which stands as a testimony to Israel's competence and reliability as an ally.

These instances that testify Israel's willingness to offer its assistance even in situations that could prove too tricky for traditional allies offer valuable insights into its approach towards cultivating foreign relations. Their experiences in the realm of diplomacy have turned them into masters of covert diplomacy which allows them to cultivate ties with eyes on future gains rather than immediate reciprocity or applause. This unconventional approach helps free their choice of friends from many traditional constraints. This helps explain Israel's keenness to assist not only to an established power like

India but also to a small and vulnerable Singapore of 1965.

INDIA – ISRAEL TIES IN THE PRESENT

The post cold war era witnessed increasing cooperation between India-Israel, especially in the field of military technology. The scope for cooperation between the two countries in civilian sphere remained grossly underutilized. It took an unconventional Prime Minister to free India of its many decades long conventional approach towards Israel. In his welcome speech at Ben Gurion airport, Prime Minister Netanyahu made a reference to this delayed recognition of bilateral cooperation when he said “we have been waiting for the last 70 years” for a visit by an Indian prime minister (Business Line, July 4, 2017). This speech was a preamble to the expectations of both the countries from joint cooperation. Referring to the potential of cooperation in the field of space Mr. Netanyahu made it clear that when it came to India-Israel relations even sky was not the limit as the two are well poised to take their cooperation to space exploration.

Today India has emerged as the largest arms importer of the world and Israel is our third largest supplier, supplying 7 percent of our needs (Economic Times, Feb 22, 2017). Defense cooperation between the two is a success story that they would like to repeat in non military domains as well. With this agenda in sight, a bilateral Technology Innovation Fund worth US\$ 40 million for enhancing research in industrial development has been set up by two nations (Ministry of External Affairs, 5 July 2017). In matters of civilian cooperation the focus was kept on those issues that balance the strengths and weaknesses of both countries. Out of the various MoUs signed and plans discussed 3 dealt with space exploration, where India has made immense progress lately and 3 MoUs pertain to cooperation in the field of agriculture and water management (Ministry of External Affairs, 5 July 2017). Aimed at transforming the nature of ties from that of customer-client nature to genuine partners and joint collaborators, these commitments if turned into reality can immensely benefit Prime Minister Modi's domestic agendas too. Israeli technical knowhow can prove game changers for his pet projects like smart cities and digital India. In the field of efficient water management Israel presents a model that claims to have increased agricultural productivity twelve fold, while keeping the total water consumption unchanged (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013). Such technological achievements resonate well with P.M

Modi's vision of yielding more crop per drop and can help tackle India's severe water woes in an efficient and sustainable manner.

Apart from defense and development the unfortunate events of 26/11 Mumbai terror attack of 2008 also unite the two countries. Both have been victims of terrorism. Nine years ago the terrorists, by attacking Nariman House, a Jewish centre in Mumbai tried to send a message to Israel as well as to the greater world community. By meeting Moshe Holtzberg, the survivor of that ghastly attack, both Prime Ministers have sent a message of reassurance to the Indian Jews and at the same time reminded the world that the perpetrators of the attack have not been brought to justice.

Diplomacy is an art of creating new avenues and opportunities without closing the old ones. Such an art requires subtlety, patience and astuteness. The way the first ever visit of an Indian prime minister to Israel was conducted, both the Prime Ministers have proved beyond doubt that they are well endowed with these virtues.

CONCLUSION

When the state of Israel came into being in 1948, its creation was marred with conflict and controversy. There was a genuine fear of its extermination or it turning into an international pariah. Seventy years later when the leader of world's largest democracy

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- embraced it under full glare of national and international media all those fears were laid to rest. Israel may not possess many natural resources but has been bestowed with many internal strengths, most crucial being the presence of a motivated, innovative and patriotic human resource. It has used these strengths to overcome its taboos in the international arena. It has turned skeptics into friends by making itself an important cog in their foreign or military policy or both. By making itself indispensable it has made many nations (including many Muslim majority states) to de-link its human rights controversies from the potential benefits of cooperation in other sectors. This has created many stakeholders in its continued existence and development which has helped it not just survive but thrive.
- Credit goes to the NDA government as well, which under Mr. Modi's leadership has proved that its vision of New India is not restricted to domestic arena alone but extends to foreign affairs as well. Known for his penchant for unconventional and bold solutions to traditional dilemmas of Indian politics the Prime Minister has yet again chosen to trot a path hitherto avoided by his predecessors. The beginning has been promising, the potential is immense and if exploited to the fullest could bring a life changing difference to the lives of millions of citizens of both nations.
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