

Indian External Affairs Minister's Visit to Israel: Going Beyond the Bilateral

P R Kumaraswamy

Summary

India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's visit to Israel in October 2021 signals a strategic shift in India's Middle East policy. At one level, it signals the continuing Indo-Israeli bonhomie and persistent domestic media interest in bilateral relations. By not visiting Ramallah or making any statement on the Palestinian question, Jaishankar has enhanced the dehyphenated India's policy towards Israel and Palestine. The emerging mini-Quad, comprising Israel, the United Arab Emirates, the United States and India, during the visit, is a significant development and signals India integrating Israel in its Middle East policy. This should also enhance India's economic-centric engagements with the region.

Introduction

Foreign ministers' visits rarely receive media attention, let alone commented upon and most often, they do not make it to mainstream media. However, this was not the case for India's External Affairs Minister (EAM) S Jaishankar's visit to Israel from 17 to 21 October 2021. The five-day visit and his hectic diplomatic schedule invoked considerable attention, comments and even editorials.

Jaishankar was the fourth Indian EAM to visit Israel since relations were established in January 1992, the earlier ones being Jaswant Singh (June 2000), S M Krishna (January 2012) and Sushma Swaraj (January 2016). This was Jaishankar's third visit in four years and his first as EAM. He accompanied Prime Minister Narendra Modi in July 2017 as Foreign Secretary. This is also the first political visit to Israel since Modi was re-elected in May 2019 and the first since a new Israeli government assumed office after the 12-year tenure of Benjamin Netanyahu.

Besides meeting his host and Alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid, Jaishankar also met Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, parliament speaker Yariv Levin and Knesset Defence and Foreign Committee head Ram Ben-Barak. He also made a courtesy call on President Isaac Herzog. The notable absentee from Jaishankar's interlocutors was former Prime Minister and leader of opposition Netanyahu. Besides engaging with Israeli academics and Indian students, he also met Jews who emigrated from India and recollected the contributions of Jews to India's cultural mosaic. Following the precedent set by Modi in 2017, Jaishankar visited two memorials for Indian soldiers killed during World War I, and he also met the Indian Air Force contingent taking part in the multinational Blue Flag exercise in Israel.¹ During his meeting

¹ David Cenciotti, "Everything You Need To Know About 'Blue Flag 2021, The Largest And Most Advanced Air Exercise Ever Held in Israel", *The Aviationist* (blog), 19 October 2021, <https://theaviationist.com/2021/10/19/blue-flag-2021-kicks-off/>.

with Bennett, he conveyed Modi's invitation to visit India. When it materialises, Bennett would be the third Israeli prime minister to visit India after Ariel Sharon (September 2003) and Netanyahu (January 2018).

The most important talking point of the visit was Jaishankar taking part in the virtual Quad meeting on 18 October 2021 that comprised United States' (US) Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the foreign ministers of Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and India. Seasoned observers see this as the mini-Quad or Middle Eastern Quad devoted to non-military issues like "trade, energy, environment and focus on promoting public goods."² According to Lapid, "Synergy is what we are going to create, starting from this meeting... Synergy is what will help us work together on infrastructure, digital infrastructure, transportation, ports, trains and maritime security."³ Some Israeli commentators have flagged several other potential candidates for the forum, including Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, France and Greece.⁴ When this happens, the group would have to look for a formal name, a la *Abu Dhabi Dialogue* or *Emirati Conclave*.

India joining this Quad signals a strategic shift in its Middle East policy. Since independence, its policy towards the region has been bilateral with certain overarching principles such as anti-colonialism, opposition to military alliances, sympathy for pan-Arabism led by Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser and countering Pakistan. These goals manifested in its four-decade policy of 'recognition-without relations' vis-à-vis Israel. The post-1967 resurgent Islamic conservatism and oil crisis of 1973 only exposed the limitations of this policy and the near absent Indian diplomatic leverage vis-à-vis the Arab-Islamic world. While the end of the Cold War enabled Indo-Israeli normalisation, New Delhi could not evolve a comprehensive Middle East policy with Israel as a key player. Regional turbulence, Israel's isolation in the region and unimaginative foreign policy establishment resulted in India not capitalising on the opportunities provided by Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's normalisation with Israel. Even scholars tended to focus on the non-existing mediatory role⁵ than integrating Israel within the Middle Eastern basket. Hence, the new Quad is a break from the past, and by integrating Israel in its regional policy, India is signalling its new approach to the Middle East.

Is Quad Anti-China?

Since the online meeting of the mini-Quad, a section of the Indian elite has been flagging the China card and viewing the new initiative as an anti-China plot orchestrated by US

² C Raja Mohan, "India and the New 'Quad' in West Asia", *The Indian Express*, 19 October 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-and-the-new-quad-in-west-asia-7578842/>.

³ Lahav Harkov, "Israel, US, UAE, India Agree to Launch Joint Economic Forum", *The Jerusalem Post*, 19 October 2021, https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/yair-lapid-speaks-with-blinken-uae-and-indian-foreign-ministers-682422?utm_source=jpost.app.apple&utm_medium=share.

⁴ Seth J Frantzman, "The Israel-UAE-India-US Partnership Is a Quiet Revolution - Analysis", *The Jerusalem Post*, 19 October 2021, https://www.jpost.com/international/the-israel-uae-india-us-partnership-is-a-quiet-revolution-analysis-682452?utm_source=jpost.app.apple&utm_medium=share.

⁵ Sumit Ganguly and Nicolas Blarel, "An Indian Return to the Gaza Strip? New Delhi Has Unique Legitimacy to Mediate the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict", *The Times of India*, May 20, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/an-indian-return-to-the-gaza-strip-new-delhi-has-unique-legitimacy-to-mediate-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict/>.

President Joe Biden’s administration.⁶ Some even criticised it saying, while “the original Quad has a clear aim with a sounding constituting principle” (read anti-China)... the second Quad lacks such clarity.”⁷ Talmiz Ahmed, who served in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, was candid, “The US’ only concern is now containment of China. This grouping [mini-Quad] is aimed at that.”⁸ An editorial in the *Times of India* observed that the mini-Quad “ties India into another alliance with the US, which is imperative to counter China’s belligerence.”⁹ Cautioning India against getting “sucked into many conflicts” in the Middle East, *The Hindu* editorial observed that “The US is clearly seeking to lessen its footprint here as part of its pivot to East Asia to tackle China’s rise, which is redrawing West Asia’s traditional equations.”¹⁰

Despite sufficient warnings in the immediate aftermath of the Indo-Israeli relations,¹¹ China did not figure prominently in the Indo-Israeli discussions. Even when Israel expressed its concerns over New Delhi’s relations with Iran, the Indian elite ignored the Sino-Israeli military dimension. By the time they made occasional noises in the 2000s, Israel had ceased military ties with Beijing due to persistent American pressure.¹² Rand Corporation has recently published two reports expressing American concerns vis-à-vis growing Chinese investment in Israeli infrastructure and high technology industries.¹³ The UAE is also actively engaged with China in various activities, including the petrochemical industry, 5G network, port maintenance and Yuan currency trading. Interestingly, the Middle Eastern Quad led to some flagging Israel’s growing ties with China.¹⁴

Given the depth of their relations with China, neither Israel nor the UAE could afford to join any political grouping hostile to Beijing. Such a posture does not serve their interests,

⁶ “Is ‘New Quad’ Of India, US, UAE, Israel Aimed At Addressing The Dragon At The Table?”, *News18*, 20 October 2021, <https://www.news18.com/news/explainers/explained-is-new-quad-of-india-us-uae-israel-aimed-at-addressing-the-dragon-at-the-table-4344041.html>.

⁷ Rudroneel Ghosh, “Second Quad: Nomenclature and Posture Matter, India Shouldn’t Be Sleepwalking into the Platform”, *The Times of India*, 21 October 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/talkingturkey/second-quad-nomenclature-and-posture-matter-india-shouldnt-be-sleepwalking-into-the-platform/>.

⁸ Nayanima Basu, “India-Israel-US-UAE Grouping ‘Not against China’, Can’t Rule out Trade Deal, Israeli Envoy Says,” *The Print*, 20 October 2021, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-israel-us-uae-grouping-not-against-china-cant-rule-out-trade-deal-israeli-envoy-says/753811/>.

⁹ “Second Quad? Exciting Opportunities Await India in Middle East, but Not without Risks”, *The Times of India*, 18 October 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-editorials/second-quad-exciting-opportunities-await-india-in-middle-east-but-not-without-risks/>.

¹⁰ “The Other Quad: On Virtual Meet of Foreign Ministers of India, US, Israel and UAE,” *The Hindu*, 20 October 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/the-other-quad-on-virtual-meet-of-foreign-ministers-of-india-us-israel-and-uae/article37079666.ece>.

¹¹ P R Kumaraswamy, “Israel-China Military Relations: India’s Red Lines,” *Strategic Analysis* 18, no. 6 (September 1995): 781–92.

¹² P R Kumaraswamy, “The Sino-Israeli Marriage: Washington, the Third ‘Other,’” *China Report* 42, no. 4 (2006): 393–403, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000944550604200404>.

¹³ Shira Efron et al., *The Evolving Israel-China Relationship* (RAND Corporation, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2641>; and Shira Efron, Karen Schwindt, and Emily Haskel, *Chinese Investment in Israeli Technology and Infrastructure: Security Implications for Israel and the United States* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR3176>.

¹⁴ Navdeep Suri, “Did the US-UAE-Israel Trilateral Dialogue Foreshadow a New Quad with India?”, Observer Research Foundation India, 19 October 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/did-the-us-uae-israel-trilateral-dialogue-foreshadow-a-new-quad-with-india/>.

especially when they see China as a partner for economic growth and political ascendance. Moreover, a cooperative approach would be more successful in mitigating their concerns over the Sino-Iranian partnership than any unfriendly, let alone hostile, posture. Moreover, both countries are aware of the political, economic, military and strategic arsenal that China could muster should the latter decide to 'punish' countries for any hostile actions. Hence, neither Israel nor the UAE have the luxury of joining or projecting the Middle Eastern Quad as anti-China.¹⁵

Absence of the Palestinian Question

The otherwise extensive visit of Jaishankar had one notable exception: the Palestinian question. It figured neither in the Quad meeting nor during his bilateral engagements. Even a customary reference to a two-state solution was conspicuous by its absence. Some Indian observers were quick to notice and comment on this.¹⁶ One even posed the following question to a senior Israeli diplomat in New Delhi: "Now [the] UAE by its own admission already plays a role in mediating talks between India and Pakistan. Do you see a role for India in the Middle East [Israel-Palestine] peace process?"¹⁷ Some would hope to include Palestine in the 'Quad' to make it more balanced and inclusive.

The absence of any reference to the Palestinian question during Jaishankar's visit reflects two closely linked trends. First, due to historical, ideological and narrow religious considerations, the Palestinian question still remains a staple diet for a section of the Indian elite. Second, the normalisation of Indo-Israeli relations and their upward trajectory had not diminished the domestic support for the Palestinian cause. At the same time, those who harp on the absence of any references to Palestine are unfamiliar with or gloss over the regional dynamics. Since the end of the Cold War, especially after the Kuwait crisis during which the Palestinian leadership sided with Saddam Hussein, the Palestinian question lost its importance in inter-Arab and intra-Arab politics. This shift partly enabled India to reverse its policy towards Israel.¹⁸ The Oslo process enabled several Arab-Islamic countries to re-examine their hostility towards Israel, even though the window of opportunity was too little for some. During the 1990s and 2000s, it was argued that while the Arab states were pro-western and 'pragmatic' on Israel, the Arab streets remained loyal to their commitments to the Palestinians. The reluctance of several Arab countries to normalise relations with Israel in the last two decades was primarily due to this regime-street dichotomy vis-à-vis Israel. However, with hindsight, it is obvious that the Arab Spring protests were fatal for the regional support for the Palestinian cause. At various levels, Arab regimes and masses were preoccupied with the survival of the Arab states, territorial integrity and survival, and these

¹⁵ Guy Burton, "No, the 'Middle East Quad' Is Not Anti-China", *The Diplomat*, 29 October 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/no-the-middle-east-quad-is-not-anti-china/>.

¹⁶ Suhasini Haidar, "India, Israel, UAE, U.S. Decide to Launch Quadrilateral Economic Forum", *The Hindu*, 19 October 2021, sec. National, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/jaishankar-takes-part-in-new-quadrilateral-with-israel-uae-and-us/article37064989.ece>.

¹⁷ Suhasini Haidar, "'India-Israel-UAE-U.S. Quad to Focus on Economic Cooperation' Says Israeli Envoy", *The Hindu*, 19 October 2021, sec. National, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-israel-uae-us-quad-to-focus-on-economic-cooperation-says-israeli-envoy/article37072323.ece>.

¹⁸ Md Muddassir Quamar and P R Kumaraswamy, "The Kuwait Crisis of 1990–1991: The Turning Point in India's Middle East Policy", *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 6, no. 1 (2019): 75–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798918812287>.

concerns pushed the Palestinian issue to the backburner. Countries that were at the forefront of the Palestinian cause, such as Iraq, Syria and to a lesser extent Egypt, are now struggling more for their political survival than for the Palestinian statelessness. Thus, while the support for the Palestinians is still visible, this is no longer the top priority. This regional shift enabled Modi to bring about some noticeable changes in India's regional policy. In May 2017, he dropped any references to East Jerusalem being the capital of the future Palestinian state¹⁹ and dehyphenated the policy by undertaking standalone visits to Israel (July 2017) and Palestine (February 2018). All the previous Foreign Ministers' visits to Israel also had Ramallah on their itinerary, but following Modi's footsteps, Jaishankar did not travel to Ramallah during his visit to Israel. Hence, rather than criticising Jaishankar for skipping Palestine, one should ponder: how was this possible?²⁰

Real Challenges

While the bilateral relations, including trade, political exchanges and defence cooperation, would continue, the emerging Middle Eastern Quad has increased the stakes of Jaishankar's visit. As highlighted by several observers, this was an outcome of the Abraham Accord that witnessed Gulf Arab states forging diplomatic ties with Israel even without resolving the Palestinian issue.²¹ The Quad has increased India's stakes and profile in the Middle East. Israel is no longer a bilateral issue but integral to its regional policy and this poses several challenges.

- Though UAE is less vocal, Israel has continued and even increased its rhetoric against Iran following the Quad meet. As some observers caution, India, which seeks closer ties with Tehran, would have to be careful in not making the Quad an anti-Iran platform.²² Such a course will diminish the gains. At the same time, greater Indian commitment to the Quad will enhance New Delhi's leverage vis-à-vis Tehran, especially over the latter's policy on Afghanistan and would compel Tehran to include India in its engagements with the Taliban regime. Until now, India lacked a compelling strategy to make its voices in Tehran heard, and the Quad could be a new instrument.
- The economic progress of Israel and the UAE rests on efficiency, professionalism, shorter project lead-time and setting realistic goals. None of them is India's forte,

¹⁹ P R Kumaraswamy, "Modi Redefines India's Palestine Policy", *IDSIA Issue Brief*, 18 May 2017, http://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/modi-redefines-india-palestine-policy_prkumaraswamy_180517.

²⁰ P R Kumaraswamy, "How Palestine Is Distinct and De-Linked from India's Israel Policy", *Hindustan Times*, 24 October 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/how-palestine-is-distinct-de-linked-from-india-s-israel-policy-101635078120412.html>.

²¹ C Raja Mohan, "Making a Case for Indo-Abrahamic Accord", *The Indian Express*, 3 August 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-middle-east-relations-israel-uae-abraham-accords-7435298/>; and Mohammad Soliman, "An Indo-Abrahamic Alliance on the Rise: How India, Israel, and the UAE Are Creating a New Transregional Order", Middle East Institute, 28 July 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/indo-abrahamic-alliance-rise-how-india-israel-and-uae-are-creating-new-transregional>.

²² Suhasini Haidar, "Worldview with Suhasini Haidar | A New Chapter in India-Iran Ties?", *The Hindu*, 6 August 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/worldview-with-suhasini-haidar-a-new-chapter-in-india-iran-ties/article35775560.ece>; and Ghosh, "Second Quad."

and on the contrary, if these were the criteria for membership, India should not be part of the Middle Eastern Quad. The foreign policy establishment is still imaginative and does not go beyond declarations, statements and speeches. The economic focus of mini-Quad would demand the external affairs ministry cooperate with other ministries and private players. The success of the Middle Eastern Quad will rest on the external affairs ministry playing second fiddle to economic ministries, an uphill task for career diplomats who dominate the foreign policy establishment even after their superannuation.

- Since Israel and the UAE are not used to working under open-ended timeframes, they would demand immediate or less waiting time for implementation. This, in turn, will compel India to set its house in order and walk the talk.

Jaishankar's visit highlights the Indo-Israeli bonhomie. India's willingness to integrate Israel through the Quad signals an upgrading of the bilateral relations and a more regional focus in India's larger Middle East policy.

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Professor P R Kumaraswamy teaches contemporary Middle East at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and has contributed to several publications, the latest being *India's Saudi Arabia Policy: Bridge to the Future*. In October 2009, he set up Middle East Institute, New Delhi, and serves as its Honorary Director. He can be contacted at kumaraswamy.pr@gmail.com. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.