

Three Decades of Indo-Israeli Relations

P R Kumaraswamy

Summary

Even 30 years after normalisation, India-Israel relations continue to garner academic and media attention in both countries. Though military-security ties are dominant, relations encompass a host of non-traditional issues such as agriculture, water management, tourism and culture. Moreover, the entry of both countries into the mini-Quad (along with the United States and the United Arab Emirates) could transform their relations into a larger regional economic growth.

It has been 30 years since India and Israel normalised relations. However, these ties continue to dominate academic and media attention in both states. With hindsight, one could argue that establishing relations with Israel in January 1992 was the most defining moment of India's post-Cold War foreign policy. Facing domestic political instability and severe economic crisis, Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao was confronted with a twin challenge of a disintegrating and disappearing Soviet Union and the emergence of a new United States (US)-dominated world order. Rao had to convey and convince the international community that India recognised the end of the Cold War and was ready to make necessary adjustments in its foreign policy. And he did so with one swift move. Reversing Jawaharlal Nehru's four-decades-old policy of recognition-without-relations towards Israel, Rao announced the establishment of diplomatic relations on 29 January 1992.

In the initial years, India was balancing its traditional support for the Palestinians with the newly-found relations with Israel, and by the mid-1990s, [military-security cooperation](#) became the principal driver of the bilateral relations. A resource crunch inhibited any grandiose partnership, and in the initial years, Israeli assisted in upgrading India's aging MiG fighters and supplying small arms. Gradually, military cooperation expanded to a host of other areas such as border management, avionics, missiles and anti-missiles, radars and surveillance. For a while, Israel even overtook Russia as a major supplier, but this slowed down due to the expanding Indo-US military partnership. Aware of its limitations, Israel carved out a niche in high-technology, specialised inventories and skills and counter-terrorism management. If Israel is a major supplier for India, the latter has emerged as the largest market for [Israel's arms exports](#).

In the early years, political engagements were limited as India was reluctant to host Israeli leaders, but in September 2003, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee rolled out a red-carpet for Ariel Sharon when several western Israeli allies were not ready to host the controversial Israeli leader. The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government, which returned to power in 2004, was under pressure from the Left parties for a '[course correction](#)' vis-à-vis Israel but this did not work. Interestingly, in January 2008, India launched [an Israeli spy satellite](#), underscoring technological convergence between the two. Contrary to earlier

apprehensions, domestic opposition to relations with Israel was largely confined to a section of left leaning but increasingly marginalised political elite. Despite uproar during Israeli-Palestinian violence, some Muslim leaders and elites have been visiting Israel.

However, to expand its reach beyond the capital, Israel began exploiting the [federal structure of India](#) and reached out to various state governments. Unlike the union government, states are primarily concerned with developmental issues and stayed out of controversies such as the Middle East peace process, political rights of the Palestinians or their statelessness. This 'decentralisation' of foreign relations enabled state governments ruled by Bharatiya Janata Party, Congress and other regional parties to cooperate with Israel on a host of economic and developmental issues.

Over time, the focus of the relations also moved away from hardcore security issues to developmental agendas such as agriculture, water management, recycling and infrastructure. Israel is establishing 29 [Centres of Excellence](#) in different parts of India to share its expertise in advanced and intense agricultural farming techniques. Earlier, Indian farmers used to travel to Israel for exposure and training. Interestingly, water and agriculture have emerged as the main focus of the Indo-Israeli [strategic partnership](#) during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel in 2017. Over time, opposition to normalisation has become weaker but is often resurrected during Israeli-Palestinian violence. Likewise, the ongoing controversy over the Pegasus spyware (incidentally sold by a private firm) has revived the [negative coverage of Israel](#) in the Indian media.

A tectonic shift in the relations occurred in 2014 when Modi took over as prime minister. Since then, political engagements between the two countries have expanded considerably and have included visits by presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers, a defence minister, home minister and scores of officials of the security establishment. Modi [de-hyphenated](#) India's Israel policy from the traditional Palestinian angle. In July 2017, he became the first Indian prime minister to visit Israel and the first Indian official to skip Ramallah, the headquarters of the Palestine National Authority.

In January 2018, Modi hosted Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with whom he had established a good personal rapport. Modi was quick to embrace political changes in Israel last June when Naftali Bennett assumed office. The latter is scheduled to visit India later this year as part of the [30th anniversary celebrations](#). Moreover, reflecting the diminishing importance of the Palestinian factor in inter-Arab relations, India has modified its traditional position of [East Jerusalem being the capital](#) of the future Palestinian state. In recent years, one would have noticed a subtle change in India's voting pattern in the United Nations and international forums when it [abstains](#) or [votes against](#) resolutions critical of Israel. The meagre trade ties, which hovers around US\$5 billion (\$\$6.73 billion), would get a boost when both countries [conclude the long-pending free trade agreement](#) this year. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted tourism between the two countries, they used the crisis to develop [cooperation in the health sector](#) and knowledge sharing.

The bilateral relations received a boost last October when India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar joined the foreign ministers of Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the US to launch [a Middle Eastern Quad](#) devoted to greater economic cooperation and partnership.

Though the future of this quadrennial arrangement is not clearly mapped out, it indicates India's willingness to move its relations with Israel from the bilateral to multilateral context.

.

Professor P R Kumaraswamy teaches contemporary Middle East in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. He can be contacted at kumaraswamy.pr@gmail.com. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.