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## The Background to the First Ever Visit to Israel by an Indian Prime Minister

BY EFRAIM INBAR

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrives for a two-day visit to Israel this July. The first trip to Israel by an Indian prime minister reflects the significant expansion in relations between the two countries that has taken place since the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1992. Since Modi and the BJP came to power in May 2014, his administration has shed its predecessors' reservations about regular public discussions regarding India's ties with Israel. It is worthy of note that his trip to Israel is not "balanced" with a visit to the Palestinian Authority, indicating that India has freed its relations with Israel from its historic commitment to the Palestinian issue.

India and Israel display high levels of threat perception and share a common strategic agenda. Both have waged major conventional wars against their neighbors and experience low-intensity conflict and terror, as they are involved in protracted conflict characterized by complex ethnic and religious components not always well understood by outsiders. Both face weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the hands of their rivals.

The two nations share a common threat: the radical offshoots of Islam in the greater Middle East. Israel regards parts of the Arab world — Saudi Arabia in particular — as hubs for Islamic extremism, while India views Saudi-Pakistani relations with suspicion. Moreover, India fears the Pakistani nuclear arsenal falling into the hands of Islamic radicals. For Israel, Islamic radicals in the Arab world and in the Islamic Republic of Iran constitute a constant security challenge. This challenge has become more acute with Iran's nuclear potential. The more recent ISIS phenomenon has ramifications beyond the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, as its offshoots threaten the stability of Egypt and Jordan — Israel's neighbors — and are increasingly sources of concern in South and South-East Asia.

India has gradually overcome its inhibitions and engaged in security cooperation with Israel. In the wake of diplomatic normalization in 1992, then Indian Defense Minister Sharad Pawar admitted to having already been cooperating with Israel on counter-terrorism. This cooperation involves exchange of information on the finances, recruitment patterns, and training of terrorist groups, and is conducted away from the public eye. The November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks underscored the need for better counterterrorism preparations in India and elicited greater cooperation with Israeli agencies.

Arms supply and technology transfer have become important components in the bilateral relationship. Initially, Russian failure to deliver promised weapons at expected prices and/or schedules led India to turn to Israeli companies to upgrade some of its aging Soviet platforms, such as its Mig-21s, and its T-72 tank fleet.

Difficulties in the development of weapons systems at home have led to the purchase of Israeli products and to partnership in developing advanced military technology. New Delhi purchased Israeli advanced radar and communications equipment, and turned also to Israel for portable battlefield radars, hand-held thermals, night warfare vision equipment, and electronic fences to improve border monitoring. A long list of Israeli military items, such as ammunition, UAV parts, and even missiles (Spike anti-armor, the Python-4 air-to-air, naval Barak-8 surface-to-air) are being produced in India.

**Efraim Inbar, Founding Director of Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, explains that "The two nations share a common threat: the radical offshoots of Islam in the greater Middle East."**

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

The airborne Phalcon radar (mounted on the Russian IL-76 transport aircraft) Airborne Early Warning and Control Systems (AWACS), and the long range Green Pine radar are examples of high-end items. The sale of the Phalcon by Israel to India required American approval, which was finally secured in May 2003. India signed a contract for the purchase of two additional Phalcon/IL-76 AWACS valued at \$1 billion during the November 2016 visit of Israel's President Reuven Rivlin to India. Israel was the third-largest arms supplier to India in the three years ending March 2016.

In April this year, India signed a contract worth about \$2 billion to procure anti-tank missiles and air defense systems from the Israel Aerospace Industry (IAI). This was the largest order in Israel's history. One month later, the IAI secured another contract for \$630 million to supply Barak-8 missiles for the Indian Navy. Both deals involved technology transfer and production in India. These deals are part of PM Modi's \$250 billion plan to modernize the armed forces by 2025 amid tensions with neighbors China and Pakistan.

The Indian-Israeli nexus has various Indian Ocean implications particularly in response to China's growing presence. The Indian Ocean, where India is an important actor, has also become an area of growing interest for Israel because of its apprehensions about Iran and Pakistan.

**“New Delhi's links with Jerusalem have the potential to smooth over some of the difficulties in dealing with the United States.”**

While India, a major player in the international system, has improved relations with Washington, New Delhi's links with Jerusalem have the potential to smooth over some of the difficulties in dealing with the United States. Working with Israel fits into Modi's bigger pivot of deeper relations with the United States given the US-Israel friendship.

New Delhi believes that its normalization of relations with Israel in 1992 had a positive effect on the American disposition toward India. The often-exaggerated power of the Jewish lobby in America was appreciated in New Delhi. In the 1990s, the American Jewish organizations valued the importance of India for the United States and for Israel, as well as the potential advantages of nurturing good relations with the Indian community in America, whose congressional power is on the rise. Many members of the Indian lobby, the US-India Political Action Committee (USINPAC), which was formed in September 2002, expressed the desire to emulate American Jewish groups and showed interest in cooperation.

The Jewish and the Indian lobbies worked together to gain the Bush administration's approval for Israel to sell the Phalcon to India. Moreover, in July 2003 they were successful in adding an amendment (to the bill giving aid to Pakistan) that called on Islamabad to stop Islamic militants from crossing into India and to prevent the spread of WMD. In the fall of 2008, Jewish support was important in passing through the US Congress the U.S.-India nuclear deal that allowed India access to nuclear technology for civilian uses, despite its not being a party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Two strategic developments of the 21st century are likely to strengthen the strategic glue between India and Israel: the decline of the United States and the rise of China. In the Middle East, the Obama administration projected weakness and encouraged Iran's quest for hegemony. US weakness inevitably has ripple effects in other parts of the globe. Indeed, Asian states view the declining American role with concern. It is not clear whether the new American President Donald Trump will adopt a more assertive foreign policy than his predecessor or how he will confront China, as he displayed isolationist impulses during his election campaign.

India and Israel represent two old civilizations. The two share a British colonial past, and were the first to become independent (in 1947 and 1948 respectively) in the post-World War II decolonization wave. Both were born as the results of messy partitions and have maintained a democratic regime under adverse conditions ever since. Nevertheless, it took over four decades to establish a fruitful bilateral relationship.

For Israel, good relations with India reflect the awareness of the structural changes in the international system as the center of gravity moves to Asia and the Pacific Rim. India is an extremely important protagonist that requires Israel's utmost attention.

Efraim Inbar is professor emeritus of political studies at Bar-Ilan University and founding director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He is also a Shillman-Ginsburg fellow at the Middle East Forum, and can be contacted at [Efraim.inbar@biu.ac.il](mailto:Efraim.inbar@biu.ac.il).

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APB Series Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye  
APB Series Coordinator: Peter Valente

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