



# India-Israel Relations: An Emerging Strategic Partnership?

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The Friends of Israel Initiative (FOII) is a global organization devoted to fighting the delegitimization of the State of Israel and to support its right to live in peace within safe and defensible borders. FOII believes that Israel is an integral and vital part of the West, a dynamic, vibrant and prosperous democracy, and as such Israel deserves to be fully accepted as a normal Western nation, and treated with fairness as any other democracy in the world. FOII was founded in 2010 as a group of global leaders, former Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers and Defense Ministers, and eminent personalities from diverse fields. In order to further its message, FOII members engage their peers in direct and frank dialogues, invite relevant people to field trips to Israel, call on expert groups to prepare reports and policy papers, disseminate analysis affecting the future of Israel, and publish opinion editorials in pertinent media outlets, among other activities.

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## Foreword

The Friends of Israel Initiative (FOII), brought to life in 2010 by former Prime Minister of Spain Jose Maria Aznar and consisting of a board of distinguished statesmen and thought leaders, always had at its core a dual mission: First, we fight to demand a fair debate about Israel. At its simplest our call is not just to recognise that Israel is an essential part of the West, but to caution that if we let it fall in the face of the slanders it faces, our own nations will fare no better. Today, sadly, it is all too discernable that this argument was a prescient one. However, if the first mission is an immediate one – asserting a fair debate – the second important mission FOII fulfills is as a crucial forum for debate on the longer-term outlook – to understand the new realities of a rapidly changing world, and how our Western alliance with Israel fits into this difficult picture.

In this spirit I am pleased to introduce our latest policy paper initiative – the Strategic Outlook Series. This new occasional series is aimed at investigating a set of interrelated challenges: What happened in the Middle East over the last decade, what does it mean for the region, what does it mean for the West, what does it mean for Israel – and above all what are the implications for the interrelationship between all these?

The fourth in the series is an attempt to understand these new realities through the lens of new alliances: Israel has sought to establish relationships with emerging players on the global stage, and in this context India presents a crucial potential partner.

2017 saw the deepest manifestation yet of this emerging strategic partnership, which would appear a natural fit, given it is based on the emergent geo-political and economic interests of both countries. The paper examines the roots and rationale of this new partnership, remaining limitations, and the geo-strategic context, in the context of an Israel that is firmly anchored in the West but seeks deeper alliances with the West's partners in other regions for mutual benefit.



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## Introduction

The two-day visit in July 2017, by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Israel has attracted attention to one of the most interesting and significant developments in the strategic picture of the Middle East and South Asia: namely, the flourishing relationship between Israel and the Republic of India. The connection to India has acquired increasing importance in Israel in recent years. It is the flagship of a broader Israeli attempt to broaden the portfolio of Israel's strategic relationships.

The alliance with the United States of America remains the indispensable lynchpin of Israel's international connections. But the growing importance of South and East Asian countries in the global economy, the decline in levels of support for Israel in western Europe, and the clear commonalities of interest and to some degree outlook between the Jewish state and the emergent powers in Asia all combine to make the continent a crucial arena for Israeli diplomatic, strategic and commercial activity.

The relationship with India has special features marking it off from other Israeli partnerships in Asia. These relate to some notable similarities in the history and political trajectory of the two countries, common security concerns and compatible economic needs.

Can compatibility really be asserted between a massive, settled, and ancient sub-continent of 1.3 billion people in the heart of South Asia and a tiny, re-established Jewish state of 8.4 million on the western edge of the same continent? The answer is yes, but the picture that emerges from close observation is inevitably a complex one, revealing both great advancements and scope for further progress, and also built in limitations likely to prevent progress in certain key areas.

This article will seek to provide an introduction into the key facets of this developing relationship.

## Origins and history

The beginnings of relations between the State of Israel and the Republic of India were inauspicious. Full diplomatic relations between India and Israel were established only in 1992. India voted against the partition plan of Resolution 181 in 1947, and declined to subsequently establish diplomatic relations. An attempt by then foreign minister Moshe Sharett to reach out in a letter dated May 20, 1948, was rebuffed. India also voted against Israel's application for membership of the United Nations in May 1949, only recognizing Israel de facto two years after its establishment and after 60 other UN member states had recognized it.

The development of relations was impeded at this point and in subsequent decades by a number of factors, which have since largely ceased to apply:

Firstly, in the Cold War, Israel and India were aligned with opposing forces. Israel was firmly in the camp of the United States and the west. India was a stalwart of the 'Non-Aligned' movement, seeking to avoid open affiliation with either camp. Pakistan, meanwhile, India's main rival, was identified with the pro-US side. India relied on the USSR as its defense patron throughout this period.

Secondly, India's large Muslim population inclined it towards a more pro-Arab stance. This population was instinctively sympathetic to the Arab case. Indian governments felt the need to do all that was possible to successfully integrate this large minority.

Thirdly, the political culture of the ruling Indian Congress Party – secular, socialist and one of the pioneers of what might be called the 'third worldist' account of the period of European decolonization – inclined it towards sympathy for the Palestinian cause and its depiction of Israel as both a sectarian state and a remnant of European colonialism.

The end of the Cold War brought a new situation into being, and the subsequent years have made the factors listed above less relevant.

The disappearance of the Soviet arms patron made it necessary for India to seek provision in this vital field elsewhere. Israel immediately emerged as a relevant address in this regard.

The birth of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process meant that domestic Muslim opposition to the establishment of ties became more muted.

Lastly, the emergence in the course of the 1990s of a serious contender for power in opposition to the Congress Party reduced the hegemonic appeal of the third-worldist ideology with its accompanying deeply unflattering view of Israel.

Hindu nationalism, the rival force that arose to challenge Congress, held a starkly different perspective on Israel and its conflict with its Arab neighbours. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which rose to power for the first time in 1998, ending 50 years of uninterrupted Congress rule, saw direct commonalities and parallels between India's experience and that of Israel. It saw both as representing ancient civilizations emerging from struggle against British colonialism and subsequently defending themselves against aggression emerging from the Islamic world.

Thus, a new convergence of interest and historical perspective emerged in the post Cold War period, paving the way for the subsequent dramatic upturn in relations between the two countries.

The results were swift. In 1992, full diplomatic relations were established. A pivotal subsequent episode was the Kargill War of May 1999, which took place a year after the ascendance to government of the BJP.

In that year, Pakistani forces entered the Kargill-Dras region in the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir. India's shortcomings in the field of defense were rapidly exposed. While conventional wars between India and Pakistan had taken place in the past, this was a different type of conflict. The Indian armed forces needed to rapidly adapt to fighting a low intensity war against an opponent possessing nuclear arms.

Israel possessed vast experience of direct relevance in the relevant fields of border control, low intensity operations and counter-terrorism, and Jerusalem immediately began to provide assistance (sometimes against the direct wishes of the west). According to some accounts, precision drones and laser guided missiles for the Indian Air Force's Mirage 2000H fighters were provided by Israel, alongside supplies of much needed mortar ammunition.

This episode was a pivotal moment in the developing relationship, cementing in Indian minds the perception of Israel as a useful friend, prepared to act in real time at a moment of need .

## The growing partnership

Since the Kargill war, the volume and depth of relations between Israel and India has steadily increased. Today, India is the single largest buyer of Israeli military equipment, and Israel is the second largest supplier of military equipment to India, after Russia.

This commitment is not purely material in nature. The threats that India continues to face from Islamist terror groups operating from across the border in Pakistan are directly analogous to those that Israel faces on both its southern and northern borders.

The volume of the arms trade between Israel and India reached \$600 million in 2016. Among the ‘highlights’ of this relationship are a 2007 deal for \$2.5 billion between India and Israel Aerospace Industries, in which IAI were contracted to develop an anti-aircraft system for India. This was the largest single defense contract in Israel’s history at that time. A number of very significant contracts have followed – including the purchase of Heron TP drones from IAI in 2015, and the purchase of two Phalcon Airborne Early Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) from Israel in 2016.

The Israeli ability to respond quickly and effectively, without undue concern for formalities, as noted above, was of particular relevance in the Kargill war. It proved helpful again when India was struck by a major terror attack in Mumbai in 2008. At that time, Israel despatched a team of paramedics to the city, and offered help with investigations and to send a special forces team to Mumbai. While the later offer was not taken up by New Delhi, the episode served to further solidify the sense of common threats and common determination to resist them shared by Israel and India.

In March, 2011, it was announced in another major deal that India would purchase 8356 Israeli Spike anti-tank missiles, 321 launchers, 15 training simulators and peripheral equipment, for \$1 billion, from Israel’s Rafael Advanced Defense Systems.

In addition to the purchase of military hardware, the practice of intelligence sharing between Indian and Israeli services forms, according to many reports, an important element of the relationship between the two states.

Defense matters, however, do not form the totality or indeed the greater part of the relationship between India and Israel. The aspects of complementary interests and common outlook apply in a number of significant additional fields, including agriculture, science and technology, and imports/exports.

In 2008, Israel and India signed an Agriculture Cooperation Agreement. The agreement established the Indo-Israel Agricultural Project. Israel is a world leader in producing high crop productivity in arid climates and the project is intended to allow Indian agriculture to benefit from Israeli expertise in this regard. The project establishes centers of excellence in India, focusing in crop growing, horticulture and seed production. A project in the same year was established to introduce crops native to the eastern Mediterranean area to India.

In the field of science and technology, cooperation in this field was among the first areas of joint Israeli-Indian activity following the establishment of diplomatic relations. As early as 1993, an agreement was signed for direct cooperation in this field. Information technology and bio-technology are the main areas of common interest in this regard.

In the area of bilateral trade, the volume of trade between India and Israel has grown from \$200 million in 1992 when diplomatic relations began to \$4.52 billion in 2014. A free trade agreement between the two countries is currently under negotiation.

## Limitations on India-Israel relations

The key current limitation on the development of the strategic relationship between Israel and India is the sharply differing view taken in New Delhi and Jerusalem regarding the nature of Iranian ambitions.

For Israel, Iran and its allies represent a major strategic threat. Iran is openly committed to Israel's destruction and provides major direct assistance to organizations engaged in violence against Israelis – such as the Lebanese Hizballah and the Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad groups.

While the threat is not considered existential – at least for as long as Iran does not obtain the nuclear option it seeks – the challenge from Teheran is considered in Jerusalem to be the main threat Israel faces. Because of the greater strength of Iran when compared to the non-state networks of Salafi Islam, Israel places more stress on this challenge than on that represented by Sunni Islamist terrorism.

India, by contrast, feels no threat from Iran, and maintains profitable relations with Teheran in a variety of important areas. These include development of Iranian gas fields. India has invested heavily in the development of the Iranian Farzad B offshore gas field. It is also a major importer of Iranian crude oil. Iran is the second largest supplier of crude oil to India.

But while this relationship probably precludes an alignment of Israeli and Indian positions regarding Iran, New Delhi does not agree with Iran on a variety of important files. India is a notable opponent of the Iranian nuclear program, and India supports the presence of western forces in Afghanistan. Also, China is Iran's largest trading and investment partner, while Beijing is a central strategic rival to India.

Thus, while the relationship with Iran will remain a difference between Jerusalem and New Delhi, it does not threaten the further development of the relationship in other areas. There is no likelihood, that is, of India choosing to jeopardise its relations with Israel out of preference for a connection to Teheran which, while of long standing, falls far short of an alliance or partnership.

An additional limitation remains the Indian position regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unless and until there is at least a semblance of diplomatic progress, Indian sympathy for the Palestinians will continue to be a notable feature, Modi's decision not to visit Ramallah in his 2017 trip to Israel notwithstanding. However, the current Indian government appears willing to 'de-hyphenate' the issue, ie maintaining a position sympathetic

to the Palestinians while not permitting this to prevent the development of closer relations with Israel in other spheres. The fact that the Palestinian cause has in recent years lost some of its central importance in the rhetoric of Arab states facilitates this process, as does the fact that few Indian Muslims vote for Modi's BJP, which consequently has less reason to pay heed to their sentiments in this regard.

## Conclusion: parallel paths?

It is noteworthy that Modi and Netanyahu represent political trends of broadly comparable nature. Just as Israel in its first years was dominated by the secularist and social democratic Mapai (forerunner of today's Labour Party), so India was ruled for the first 50 years of independence by the secular, left of center Congress Party.

Netanyahu and Modi emerged from movements (Revisionist Zionism and the RSS, respectively) that opposed these earlier trends, movements with a more comfortable relationship to religious tradition, a more straightforwardly hawkish approach to enemies and a pro-western and pro-business orientation. From this point of view, the July 2017 visit represented the latest stage in a natural partnership with its roots in the political history of their respective movements, and the emergent geo-political and economic interests of both countries. While limitations remain in all three spheres (not least the fact that both countries are democracies and Congress as well as parts of the old Indian establishment remain far less positive towards Israel), it is clear that 2017 marked the year when the long developing strategic partnership between India and Israel emerged as an established fact.