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India's New Crush on Israel

P R Kumaraswamy

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Perhaps the best way to describe India's position vis-à-vis Israel is "enigmatic." For centuries India was unfamiliar with and hence did not suffer from anti-Semitism that has been common to many European lands, past and present. While there were trade and commercial links at least during the Second Temple period, the Jewish arrival on the Indian shores is normally traced to the first century after the Roman conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent Jewish diaspora.

Though not monotheistic Hinduism, the dominant faith of Indians has one interesting similarity with Judaism. Both are non-proselyting faiths and, unlike Christianity and Islam, they are not driven by the missionary zeal to convert the other into their folds. Despite the caste structure, theologically Hinduism is assimilationist by nature, and hence Jews never felt alienated or marginalized in India.

The favourable and accommodative Indian environment, however, contributed to two trends that did not help Zionism in later years. Socio-theological assimilation meant that Jewish particularity was sucked into Hinduism and the Jewish presence in India has always been minuscule. At the turn of the 19th century, there were about 10,000 Jews in India, and the number rose to about 30,000 between the two World Wars. This was primarily due to Jews fleeing Europe after the ascendance of Hitler and taking refuge in different parts of the world, including India. A few of the refugees married Indian leaders and figures and settled down in the country. As per the latest census, there are just over 4,000 Jews in a country of 1.2 billion people.

The meagre Jewish presence and the absence of anti-Semitism meant that India was not critical for the Zionist leadership. It was neither a politically influential country for the realization of the Jewish national home nor was it a crisis area from where the beleaguered Jewish community had

to be rescued. Hence, indifference became the attitude of the Zionist leadership in Mandate Palestine. It is, therefore, not surprising that none of the leading lights of Zionism, including Chaim Weizmann, David Ben-Gurion, or Moshe Sharett had even contacted or communicated with the Indian nationalists until India and Israel became independent.

Britain being the power both in Palestine and India complicated the matter. Until the eve of WWII, the social Zionists were heavily dependent upon the Mandate authorities for the implementation of the Balfour Declaration that pledged British support for the realization of a Jewish national home in Palestine. Around the same time, the Indian nationalists were fighting the British for freedom and liberation from the colonial yoke. The Zionist leadership was caught between the two; they needed British support to realize a Jewish homeland but were also looking for support from other countries and leaders who were emerging in the new world order after decolonization. Thus, while seeking support from the Indian nationalists, the Zionists were unable to reciprocate and support the latter's anti-British struggle.

A dilemma of a different nature confronted the Indian nationalist and its post-independent leadership. The prolonged sympathy for and accommodation toward the Jews did not transform into a better understanding of the Jewish longing for a homeland. By and large, the Indian elite was unfamiliar with the centuries of suffering and subjugation faced by Jews in different parts of the world.

This unfamiliarity with Jewish history was compounded by another factor, India's sizable Muslim population. Islam arrived in India shortly after the death of Prophet Mohammed in 632 CE, and during British rule India had the largest Muslim population in the world. The Congress Party, which was spearheading the freedom struggle, was fighting for an inclusive India that also represented its Muslim population.

The Balfour Declaration of 1917 incidentally coincided with the Congress Party joining hands with the Muslim population over the future of the caliphate. Since the mid-16th century, the Ottoman sultan was also the caliph, or the head of the Sunni Muslims. It was during this phase, known as the Khilafat struggle, that Indian nationalists understood and hence formulated their policy toward Jewish nationalist aspirations. Rather than viewing it through Jewish history and suffering, they understood Jewish nationalism through the venue, namely Palestine. This was compounded by the British war efforts against the Ottoman Empire. For Indian nationalists, Palestine has been under the Islamic rule for centuries; hence, non-Muslims, especially the Jews, cannot claim any sovereign jurisdiction.

This position was gradually fine-tuned at the end of WWI, and the abolition of the caliphate by the new Turkish Republic. Indian nationalists placed Palestine within the larger anti-colonial and

anti-imperial worldview. In practical terms, this was a disaster for Zionism. For the Indian nationalists, the Arabs of Palestine were fighting the British while the Zionists were “collaborating” with them.

Thus, there was strange Indian mix. Its prolonged friendliness toward Jews was accompanied by an unfamiliarity and even hostility toward Zionism.

In 1947, India became part of the 11-member United Nations Special Committee on Palestine. While a seven-member majority endorsed partition as the solution for Palestine, supported by Iran and the then-Yugoslavia, India proposed a federal solution. This was primarily the design of Jawaharlal Nehru, who became the head of the interim government in late 1946 and thus the first prime minister of independent India. According to this plan, there would be autonomous Arab and Jewish states within one federal Palestine.

The Arabs rejected the Indian plan because it gave “too much” to the Jewish immigrants who came to Palestine. The Jews also rejected it because it gave them merely civic and religious rights when they were demanding political rights and sovereignty. The Indian plan dissatisfied both parties—and rejecting the Indian plan was the only occasion that the Arabs and Jews agreed in 1947. Thus, the federal plan was consigned to the dustbins of history and was never discussed by the United Nations.

The partition plan, on the other hand, had the support of one of the two contending parties, the Jews, and was discussed, debated, and eventually approved by the U.N. General Assembly on Nov. 29, 1947. In line with its earlier position, India was one of the three non-Arab and non-Islamic countries (the others being Greece and Cuba) that voted against the partition plan. Even Yugoslavia, which supported the Indian federal plan, abstained during the vote. This was followed by the Indian decision to vote against Israel’s admission into the United Nations in May 1949, the only occasion India had voted against an application for U.N. membership.

For its part, on May 17, 1948—the second working day after its declaration of independence—Israel approached India for diplomatic recognition. A similar request was also received from the All Palestine Government headed by the grand mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, in October of that year. New Delhi, however, chose to ignore the latter but was re-examining its position on Israel. A few regional and international developments compelled India to recognize the futility of its position.

Since the 1930s, the Congress Party was competing with the Muslim League for a united and inclusive India and was vehemently opposed to the idea of religion being the basis for nationhood. This domestic argument was extended, albeit in a different and complex context, to

Jewish nationalism in Palestine. However, the partition of British India in August 1947 considerably weakened Nehru's position. Having accepted Pakistan, a state formed by religion-based nationalism, India could no longer oppose Israel on matters of principle. Furthermore, the grand mufti, whose cause India promoted, was gravitating toward Pakistan, and the same was true for some of the key members of the Arab League.

At a much larger level, India had no bilateral disputes or differences with Israel and in the initial years, Ben-Gurion's policy of non-identification in regard to the Cold War was not different from Nehru's nonalignment. Israel's recognition by all the major powers and its admission into the U.N. also altered Nehru's stand. He was also facing criticism within his own country over his conflicting positions toward the Jewish state and communist China's, whose admission into the international community he championed.

These domestic, regional, and international factors eventually resulted in India moving closer to Israel. In a message communicated to the Israeli foreign ministry on Sept. 17, 1950—incidentally, the day future Prime Minister Narendra Modi was born—India granted diplomatic recognition to the state of Israel.

Nehru was keen to follow this with diplomatic relations with resident missions in both the countries. Perturbed by delays in early 1952, Israel sent its director-general in the foreign ministry—its senior-most diplomat—Dr. Walter Eytan to New Delhi. During the weeklong visit, he met senior Indian officials and had a lunch meeting with Prime Minister Nehru at Teen Murti Bhavan, presently home to Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. During the meeting, Nehru promised a diplomatic mission in Israel and since he was also concurrently holding the foreign ministry asked his officials to prepare the budget for an Indian mission in Tel Aviv. Nehru promised Eytan that a formal cabinet decision would be taken after the elections to the first Lok Sabha, the lower house of India's parliament.

Nehru's promise was not to be realized until four decades later. According to Indian as well as international account, Nehru's senior cabinet colleague and former president of the Congress Party, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, was held responsible for this situation. He is believed to have cited two reasons for his opposition: the Kashmir issue and India's domestic-Muslim population. Azad feared Pakistan would exploit relations with Israel for propaganda purposes in the Arab and Islamic world that would harm India's diplomatic position when the Kashmir issue was being debated in the United Nations. Furthermore, he felt that, traumatized by the partition and the communal violence that followed, India's Muslim population would feel alienated by the normalization of relations with Israel. Indeed, the Congress-Muslim League rivalry during the British Raj was followed by Indo-Pakistani rivalry after 1947.

Nehru was convinced of the argument and deferred normalization of relations. This became more pronounced during the Israeli offensive against Egypt in the Suez crisis. Nehru was infuriated by Ben-Gurion's collaboration with the colonial British, and the French and declared the time was not ripe for normalization. Since then, that idea has become the official Indian mantra regarding Israel. Gradually a host of reasons and explanations were added to the continued absence of diplomatic relations and the prevailing international climate toward Israel, especially after the October War of 1973 and the oil crisis resulted in India joining hands with the Arab and Islamic countries in the anti-Israeli chorus. This reached its nadir in November 1975, when India joined the Islamic countries in deriding Zionism as racism. Thus, during the later stages of the Cold War, it was apparent that any shift in Indian position would have been preceded by a systemic change in international politics.

At the same time, the absence of any bilateral differences meant that India was not averse to seeking Israeli help during national emergencies. Even Nehru was not averse to writing to Ben-Gurion and seeking Israeli help in the wake of the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962. This was emulated by his successors: During its wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, India sought and secured limited quantities of small arms and ammunition from Israel. It also consulted Israel when the external intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing, was formed in the late 1960s. Israeli successes in farming and absorption were admired by the Indian leaders even when political relations were remote.

The admiration for Israel amidst political compulsions has been the hallmark of India's Israel policy. The decision of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao in January 1992 to establish full-fledged diplomatic ties with Israel rectified this anomaly. Without abandoning its support for the political rights of the Palestinians, India began to forge closer ties with Israel in a host of fields. During the quarter of a century since normalization, there were a number of high-level political visits and contacts between the two.

The Indo-Israeli engagements were not confined to political relations but included economic, cultural, social, educational and, of late, subaltern fields such as agriculture, farming, irrigation, health, and social welfare. A cross-section of the Indian, as well as Israeli, public are enamoured by the other and find a host of interests and commonalities.

While military-security cooperation dominated the attention and interests of the strategic community and media commentary, bilateral relations are unique in the sense they attract the attention of a whole section of the population. Israel's relations with Egypt, for example, are in the interests of the politico-strategic community and common Egyptians are hostile or indifferent toward it. Similarly, a person on the street is apathetic toward Indo-Saudi relations.

While diplomatic relations were established when the Congress Party was in power, a bipartisan consensus has emerged over time. Both the mainstream parties, namely Congress and the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have been in the forefront of promoting closer ties with Israel. However, there is a subtle difference; the former has been edgy on Israel partly because of its electoral considerations concerning the domestic Muslim population, while the BJP has been more upfront while dealing with Israel. Hence, most of the political contacts between the two countries took place when the BJP was in power in New Delhi.

Seen in this wider context, the visit of Prime Minister Modi this past July is path-breaking and historic. Since coming to power, he has been communicating his friendship and admiration for Israel through a number of public statements on Israel and contacts with the Israeli leadership. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was the first international leader to congratulate Modi on his landslide victory in May 2014, and both leaders met in the September that year during the U.N.'s annual session. Since, they have been speaking, congratulating, and tweeting one another regularly.

There is an unmistakable personal chemistry between Modi and his Israeli counterpart. This manifested during Modi's Israel visit, when Netanyahu took the unusual step of receiving the Indian leader at Ben-Gurion International Airport and literally spending the next 48 hours with him, accompanying Modi to almost all his engagements in Israel. The body language of both leaders indicated that there was a greater understanding of the big picture, while the details are being worked out by both the officials.

While the United States continues to be a natural and important ally of the Jewish state, India is emerging as Israel's dependable friend or chaver. This is perhaps the most significant outcome of the three-day visit of Prime Minister Modi to Israel.

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Professor P R Kumaraswamy is Honorary Director of MEI@ND.

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