

## Israel and India celebrating "silver jubilee"<sup>1</sup>

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The year 2017 marks the silver jubilee (Twenty five years) of diplomatic relationship between India and Israel. On January 29, 1992, foreign ministers from Israel and India signed an agreement establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. Since India normalized relations with Israel in 1992, the partnership has developed steadily and the relationship now enjoys "high visibility".

There are many similarities in the modern history of the countries and common interests but formal relations could not be cemented up until 1992 and the relationship was "held under the carpet." The explanations for this have ranged from Indian domestic political sensitivities to its relations with the Arab and Muslim countries. India and Israel share the same values and are facing similar problems:

- Both India and Israel gained their independence from the United Kingdom in 1947 and the declaration of independence was followed by war with the neighbors. Since then for two decades both countries fought wars against hostile neighbors (India with China 1962 and Pakistan 1965 and 1971) and Israel (1956, 1967, and 1973).
- Both countries are fighting terrorism and insurgency.
- Both countries are beacons of democracy and freedom in a precarious regional environment.

India formally recognized Israel on September 17, 1950. Soon thereafter, the Jewish Agency established an immigration office in Mumbai . This was later converted into a trade office and subsequently into a consulate. The consulate has facilitated the voluntary immigration of thousands of Indian Jews to Israel. Embassies were opened in 1992 when full diplomatic relations were established.

India's ties with Israel have been strengthened as a result of Strategic concerns and security threats and economic interests there has been a steady strengthening of India's relationship with Israel ever since the two established full diplomatic relations in 1992.

An Indian "rapprochement" with Israel, however, traces its origins to India's previous BJP-led government, which was in power from 1999 to 2004. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's landmark visit to Delhi in 2003 appeared to represent a sharp turn in New Delhi, but that momentum was short lived. Afterward, India's Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government maintained close ties with Israel as an important defense partner but kept the relations in low public profile.

Prime Minister Modi government has successfully managed to nurture and deepen its ties with Israel. When Prime Minister Netanyahu met with Prime Minister Modi on the sidelines of the opening of the U.N. General Assembly in New in September 2014, Netanyahu said that the "sky is

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the limit” for the relationship between the two countries. Since then, there have been a number of high-level visits and interactions including Israel Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon’s visit to India in February 2015, the first ever such visit by an Israel Defense Minister.

Indian President Pranab Mukherjee’s visit to Israel in 2015 – the first by an Indian president – signaled a discernible shift in the relations between India and Israel .

Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj visited Israel in January 2016. The foreign minister’s visit was part of the ongoing Indian effort not just to broaden and deepen India’s relationship with Israel.

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin made a six-day visit to India in November 2016. Rivlin was the first Israeli president to visit India in nearly 20 years. The last Israeli president to visit India was Ezer Weizman, in January 1997. It was publicly acknowledged that its primary purpose was to pave the way for Modi to visit Israel in 2017, in what will be the first-ever visit by an Indian Prime Minister to that country.

### **The defense and security relations**

The countries have a close defense, homeland security, and intelligence relationship. Shared concerns about terrorism and India’s desire to diversify its defense suppliers, get access to better technology, and co-develop and co-produce equipment, have proven to be key drivers.

From the Israeli point of view strategic and commercial interests including Israel’s quest for additional markets made India a close partner and India has become Israeli defense companies’ largest customer.

The security relations are the most important for both countries and between 2005 and 2014, military equipment deliveries from Israel were the third highest after Russia and the United States and India is the largest buyer of Israeli defense equipment. Israeli weapons sales to India amount to more than \$1 billion annually and include missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles and weapons systems.

Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) announced on April 6, 2017, that the company has been awarded contracts in India totaling almost \$2.0 billion. In a mega-contract worth over \$1.6 billion, considered to be the largest defense contract in Israel’s Defense Industries’ history, IAI will provide an advanced MRSAM air & missile defense systems to the Indian Army. The company will also supply additional LRSAM air & missile defense systems for the Indian aircraft carrier.

MRSAM is an advanced air and missile defense system that provides protection against a variety of aerial threats. In its existing version, MRSAM is operational with the Indian Air Force, Indian Navy and Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The system includes an advanced phased-array radar, command and control, mobile launchers and missiles with advanced RF seekers. MRSAM was developed jointly for the Indian Army by IAI and India’s Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO) in collaboration with Rafael and IAI/ELTA, and worked with various Indian companies including BEL, L&T, BDL and other private vendors.

The Indian Navy launched a new, Israeli-developed Integrated Under Water Harbor Defense and Surveillance System (IUHDSS). The system will enhance the security of above and below-water vehicles operated by the Indian Navy in the Mumbai Naval Harbor.

The latest security deals included the purchase of Spike anti-tank missiles. The Spike missile was developed in Israel for land-to-land missile strikes against enemy tanks. It is considered a "fire-and-forget" munition. The Indian Army will secure 321 Spike launchers and 8,356 anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM) from Rafael for \$1 billion total. Delivery could take up to 60 months, or five years, to send all the equipment. In October, 2014, India spent \$525 million on 8,000 Spike anti-tank missiles along with 300 launchers.

Israel has been known to be a very reliable partner and Israel has crucially come through for India at times “when India needed them the most.” Israel has supplied arms to India during the 1971 war and during the Kargil crisis in 1999.

### **Economic ties**

From \$200 million in 1992 (comprising primarily trade in diamonds), bilateral merchandise reached \$5.19 billion in 2011. It has stagnated around \$4.5 billion since then (excluding defense).

Though trade in diamonds constitutes close to 50% of bilateral trade, trade has diversified into several sectors such as pharmaceuticals, agriculture, IT and telecom, and homeland security in recent years.

Major exports from India to Israel include precious stones and metals, chemical products, textiles and textile articles, plants and vegetable products, and mineral products. Major imports by India from Israel include precious stones and metals, chemicals (mainly potash) and mineral products, base metals and machinery and transport equipment.

In recent years economic ties have grown including cooperation in the agricultural sector, water management and research and development. In 2006, Israeli and Indian ministers of agriculture signed a long-term cooperation and training deal, which has since been supervised by field experts from Mashav, an international development program of Israel's Foreign Ministry. In 2008, the two nations started a \$50 million shared agriculture fund, focusing on dairy, farming technology and micro-irrigation. In 2011, India and Israel signed an agreement to foster cooperation on urban water systems, which came after more than a decade of joint research, development and shared investment in the countries' respective water technologies.

In May 2013, Israel announced that it will help India diversify and raise its fruit and vegetable crops by offering the country advanced technology and know-how. Israel will help set up 28 centers of excellence across India focused on specific fruit and vegetable crops.

The two countries are negotiating a free trade agreement, and have been trying to encourage greater investments from the other. The success of Indian and Israeli information technology companies has particularly led to interest in collaboration in that sector.

The governments have also been trying to increase people-to-people interaction through educational exchanges and tourism, with some success. Israeli tourism officials have highlighted the increase in arrivals from India with 40,000 Indian nationals vacationing in Israel in 2015. Tourist arrivals to India from Israel have doubled over the last 15 years, including thousands of Israelis visiting after their compulsory military service.

The two governments are seeking to facilitate greater economic ties, as well as science and technology collaboration. Bilateral trade is blooming and is slated to increase further in the coming years.

### **Space technology**

Both countries have collaborated in space research and technology in the past. In November 2002, the head of Israel's space research program, and the head of the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), signed an agreement on space cooperation between the two countries. In 2008, ISRO launched Israeli reconnaissance satellite TechSAR aboard its satellite-launching PSLV.

Israel's science, technology and space minister Offir Akunis had a four-day visit to India in December 2016, to step up R&D collaborative projects in applied sciences and technology, including space partnerships in the fields of earth observation, communication and rocket propulsion.

More recently, India's space agency has announced on February 15, 2017, the successful launch of a record-breaking 104 nano satellites into orbit, all onboard a single rocket.

The Indian Space Research Organization (Isro) said the milestone launch, from the Sriharikota space center in the country's south, overtook the 2014 Russian record of 37 satellites in a single launch. On board was an Israeli new nanosatellite, the first for Israeli academia, that will conduct scientific missions for Ben Gurion University of the Negev.

### **The Palestinian case**

Keeping India's wider strategic interests in perspective, successive Indian governments since the early 1990s have walked a nuanced line between expressing genuine concern for the Palestinian cause and expanding the country's commercial and defense ties with Israel. The deepening and more open relationship with Israel, however, hasn't been accompanied by a change in the Indian government's policy toward Palestine. The Modi government has asserted that India's policy with regard to the Palestinian issue has not undergone any fundamental change. What the Modi government seems to be doing is trying to keep the relationships on parallel tracks and make both relationships more direct and visible, less linked to the other, while also making it clear that neither will enjoy a veto on India's relations with the other.

### **Summary**

There is no doubt that, since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rise to power in 2014, India and Israel have been deepening their ties in defense, counterterrorism, science and technology, agriculture, space exploration, and several other areas. Prime Minister Modi can be credited with elevating the strategic dimension of the India-Israel partnership by bringing their relationship out from "under the carpet." Modi's close ties with Israel can be traced to the period when he was the chief minister of Gujarat. Israel emerged as a key player in helping Gujarat achieve impressive economic growth under Modi.

Bolstering economic ties and boosting defense cooperation is on the agenda for both India and Israel. Such synergy between the two countries is sure to propel bilateral ties to greater heights. The visit of prime minister Modi in Israel in 2017 will be a significant milestone in the bilateral relations of the countries and will reaffirm the robust bond the two nations share.