



India-Israel Relations in the 21st Century: A Politico-strategic Study

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Abstract

This paper explores the historical and geopolitical evolution of India-Israel relations, tracing their journey from early ethno-cultural interactions to a robust diplomatic partnership. In the early 20th century and throughout a larger period of it, we witness significant divergences in foreign policies marked between India and Israel. Until 1950, India did not officially recognize Israel as a nation-state, and its support was primarily tilted towards Arab nations. However, we witness a change since 1992, where both these nations started developing friendly relations along with establishing strong diplomatic ties. Through focus on certain key areas such as defense, trade, agriculture, and water management, this chapter attempts to draw a concrete picture of this bilateral relationship. In doing so, the chapter also focuses on providing an overview of future aspects, highlighting New Delhi's act of balancing its relations with Arab states and Israel, in both domestic and international political dynamics. The paper deploys a mixed research methodology, which includes analysis of published interviews with leaders and policy analysis. The most notable events to be highlighted in this analysis includes exchange of visits between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Benjamin Netanyahu, collaborations in India's nuclear program, and advancements in defense and technology sectors. In its concluding argument, the paper evaluates potential benefits of high-technology cooperation and provides insights into the development of India's Middle Eastern political agenda.

Keywords: India-Israel Relations, Defense ties, Bilateral relations.

Introduction:

Both India and Israel are amongst the nations with most ancient ethnic and cultural identities in the world history. Historically too, both these nations have undergone similar adversities have suffered



similar adversities under the imperial powers. (Toledano, 2002) Both India and Israel have undergone repeated barbaric invasions, and long periods of foreign dominance and rule. They also had a similar pathway of unification as a nation from several fragmented rulers, guided by their visionary rulers. Adding to it, is the huge trauma of religious partitions, that both the nations have suffered, orchestrated by the colonial powers leading to some of the world's most tragic and inhumane mass migrations. On one hand, millions of Jews migrated to Israel, particularly from Europe, In India, millions of Hindus were displaced from Pakistan, leaving behind their ancestral lands and properties to settle in India (Gautam, 2020). Both these countries have a disturbed relation with their neighbours oscillating between cordial and contentious periods.

Even with such a similar trajectory of historical events, India's foreign policy towards Israel remained adverse until the beginning of 20th Century. In 1947, India was a member of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine where it supported the plan advocating for a federal Palestine with internal Jewish autonomy (Hafeez, 2009). However, India aligned itself with Arab nations, opposing the division during the UN General Assembly vote on the partition of Palestine. India not only opposed the establishment of Israel, but also voted against its admission to the United Nations, after Israel declared its independence in May 1948. (Sethi, 2022). Although India formally recognized Israel in 1950, the subsequent four decades saw the absence of full diplomatic relations due to India's pro-Arab policies and its role as a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). India-Israel relations witnessed a new horizon, only under Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao in January 1992, with establishment of full-fledged diplomatic ties between both the nations. This shift paved the way for cooperation in political, commercial, and security domains, with notable agreements signed during Ariel Sharon's visit to India in 2003, marking a significant milestone in bilateral ties.(Bagchi,2003) The deepening of India-Israel ties can also be witnessed by glancing over the diplomatic statements that have been made over this period. Rabbi Yona Metzger, Israel's chief Rabbi commented during the first Jewish-Hindu Interfaith Leadership Summit in February 2007, that, "Jews have lived in India for over 2,000 years without facing ethnic discrimination. This is a unique chapter in human history" (Gautam, 2020). Highlighting India's global image, President Shimon Peres in November 2012, commented that, "I believe India is the greatest example of how linguistic and communal diversity can coexist with mutual respect and pride."(Shimon,2012) These



affirmations underscore the uniqueness of this bilateral relationship, which not only offers a new dimension to West Asia but also lays the foundation for collaborative efforts to secure a sustainable future for the citizens of both nations. In their journey ahead as a nation-state, both India and Israel would benefit from a collaborative action to counter religious extremism and its repercussions in their neighborhoods and in addressing grave global issues such as climate change, water scarcity, population growth, and food security. The two strongholds of their bilateral cooperation since the normalization of relations in 1992 are defense and agriculture. In the contemporary times, this partnership has also gone more intense with its expansion into other areas such as science and technology, education, and homeland security. The future of this relationship lies in strengthening a high-tech partnership, aligning perfectly with the aspirations of these two emerging global powers.

Research Objectives:

The main objectives of this research paper are outlined below:

- To analyze the trajectory of India-Israel relations.
- To investigate the current status or progress in bilateral relations between India and Israel.
- To outline the challenges in future India-Israel relations.

Research Methodology:

To fulfill its research objectives, the study deploys both statistical and qualitative data adopting a structured approach. The source of data are secondary sources such as published interviews with leaders, commentaries, articles, and historical texts. Along with the secondary data analysis, the official documents, including circulars, orders, agreements, and treaties issued by policymakers from both nations, have also been thoroughly examined, integrating them into the analysis to align with the study's goals. For data interpretation, the research utilizes thematic analysis as its primary method.

Historical Overview:

It was only in the final decade of the twentieth century- 1992, that a comprehensive diplomatic relationship was established between India and Israel. Since then, this relationship has only strengthened encompassing several pivotal domains such as economy, military, agriculture, and politics (Kumaraswamy,2010). Both India and Israel identify themselves as democratic nations that have consistently faced challenges from their neighboring states. They also share an identical



connotation that their neighbours have historically trained and financially supported terrorism (Blarel, 2014). This has strengthened their commitment to bilateral relationship as a diplomatic necessity. Both these nations have gained their independence from the British rule around the same period, months within each other. However, even after this both India and Israel have remained aloof from each other in the international domain for about four decades. It is notable to highlight that both these nations achieved independence, in a post-world war period, in a world divided into two factions of the Cold-war era. Under these conditions, India, as a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement and a nation with socialist-orientation established strong relations with the Arab world and the Soviet Union. Israel, however, since its inception aligned itself with the European Nations, and United States (Pant, 2004). A major impediment to India's closer engagement with Israel was its large Muslim population, approximately 150 million, which raised concerns about potential radicalization and the impact on India's economic relationships with Arab nations (Varshney, 2003). Even when maintaining distance from Israel until the 1990s, India facilitated bilateral interactions on a limited scale in earlier years. In 1950, India granted de facto recognition to Israel in 1950 and to facilitate the voluntary migration of thousands of Indian Jews to Israel allowed it to maintain a consulate in Mumbai (then Bombay) (Katz,2000). Notably, during the Kargil war of 1999 between India and Pakistan, Israel provided military assistance to India by supplying weapons (Naaz,2000). Both these nations have benefitted mutually since 1992, after the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between them. India is now amongst the Israel's largest trading partner. High-tech companies from both the nations have established collaborations and joint ventures, marking their presence in the international market. Presently, along with the defense agreements, both India and Israel are actively exploring collaboration in agriculture and water desalination technologies (Pandey, 2021).

Recent Developments in Bilateral Relations:

In 2017, Narendra Modi, the then Prime Minister of India visited Israel marking the first-ever visit by an Indian head of government to the country. Since then, there has been a tremendous progression in the India-Israel relationship. (TOI,2017) This visit elevated Israel to the status of a strategic partner for India. In reciprocation, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited India in 2018. (HT,2018) Regular exchange and communication between the presidents, defense ministers,

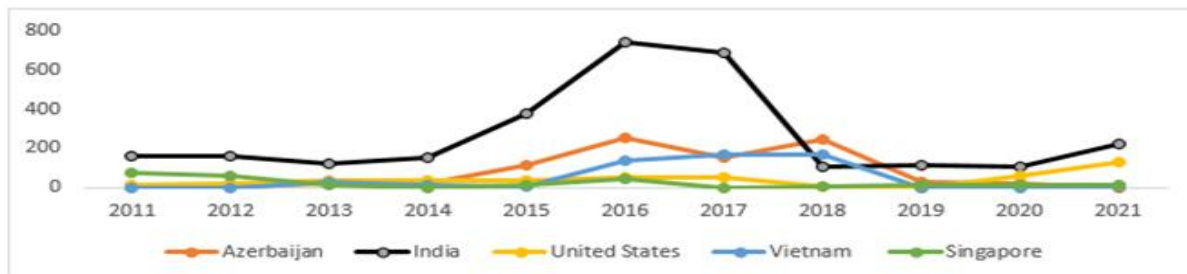


agriculture ministers, and foreign ministers of both India and Israel has cemented their bilateral relations, strengthening their collaboration in diverse aspects. Analysts see Pakistan's acquisition of nuclear weapons as a turning point in consolidation of the India and Israel (Kumaraswamy, 2010). Israel, which is also under the continuous threat regarding potential transfer of nuclear weapons to Iran or extremist organizations, finds with India a common standpoint addressing security challenges posed by unfavorable regional dynamics. Under the ceaseless threats from their neighboring countries, both these nations have supplemented their collaboration diplomatically, and technologically. Historically too, Israel has supported and assisted India at various critical junctures, especially in times of war and outside threats. One of such crucial assistance was during the India-Pakistan War of 1965, when it supplied M-58 160 mm mortar ammunition to India. During the 1999 Kargil War, Israel provided India with aerial drones, laser-guided bombs, ammunition, and other essential weaponry, underscoring its role as a reliable defense partner (Ningthoujam,2021).

Defense Relations:

Israel has shared critical defense technologies with India, including sensors, Heron drones, handheld thermal imaging devices, and night-vision equipment. This has enabled India to check the cross-border infiltration while also strengthened the capacity and capability of its counter-terrorism operations in the Kashmir Valley. (Naha, 2020) Israel has also helped India in upgradation of its MiG-27 fighter jets and the Navy's Ka-25 anti-submarine and patrol helicopters. India has also acquired Howitzer tanks from Israel with a worth of 1 billion American dollars. Along with this, Israel has also assisted India in upgrading the Russian-made T-72 tanks by providing advanced fire-control systems and thermal imagers (Bhattacharya, 2021). Soltam Systems, an Israeli company also helped India upgrade its Soviet-purchased 133 mm artillery guns and L-60 anti-aircraft guns. Soltam also supplied the Indian Army with 155 mm self-propelled artillery systems. In 1996, India acquired an air combat maneuvering instrumentation system from Israel to establish an air combat training facility in Jamnagar, Gujarat. In the same year, Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) built two Dvora MK-2 patrol boats for India. Apart from ammunitions and arms assistance and upgradation, Israel has also helped modernize the Information and Communication technology of Indian military. Over the past decade, India has emerged as the Israel's key ally in the West Asia, and is also the largest arms buyer from Israel, surpassing the United States

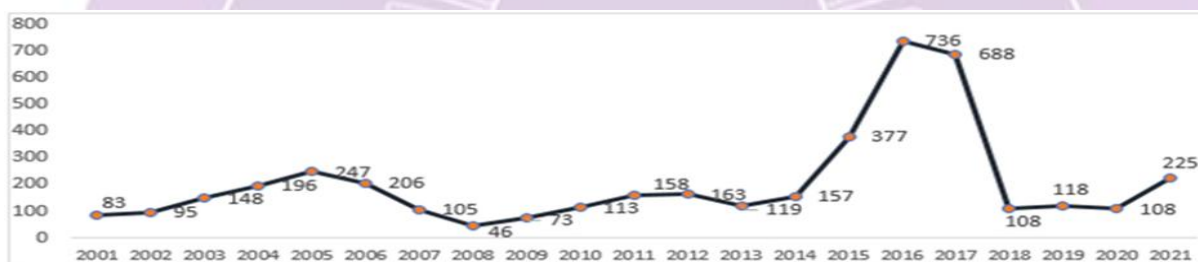
Value Index of Arms Trade Exported by Israel to India (2011-2021, Figures in Million Dollars)



Source: (SIPRI, 2022)

India's procurement of defense equipment from Israel is dominated by unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), missiles, and radar systems. According to available data, India has purchased weapons worth approximately \$4.2 billion from Israel to date.

Weapons purchased by India from Israel (2001-2021, figures in million US dollars)



Source: (SIPRI, 2022)

Key Defense Equipment Procured by India from Israel :

Table 1: Major Israeli defence equipment purchased by India	
Missiles	- Derby Beyond Visual Range Air to Air Missile (BVRAAM) - Harop loitering munition - Python-5 BVRAAM - SPIKE-2000 guided bombs - Popeye-1 Air to Surface Missile (ASM) - Griffin guided bombs - Spike anti-tank guided missiles - Popeye II (Crystal Maze) ASM - SkyStriker loitering munition
Unmanned Aerial Vehicles	- Heron - Searcher MkII - Harop
Sensors and Radars	- EL/M-2075 Phalcon airborne early warning radar system - EL/M-2248 MF-STAR multi-function radar - EL/M-2084 multi-mission radar systems - EL/M-2238 naval radar system - EL/M-2052 airborne AESA fire control radar - Litening electro-optical infrared sensor system
Air Defence Systems	- Spyder medium-range Surface to Air Missile (SAM) system - Barak SAM system
Small arms	Negev NG-7 light machine guns

Source: (SIPRI, 2022)



Collaboration in Defense Technology:

Apart from the traditional defense trade between both these nations, India and Israel have also collaborated in the field of defense research. For example, Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) and India's Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO) have jointly developed the Barak-8 Air and Missile Defense System. (Library, 2022). This Barak-8 Defense System can be deployed in both water and on land. This anti-missile defense system can detect and even neutralize targets such as fighter jets, cruise missiles, drones, and ballistic threats at a distance of up to 150 kilometers. Furthermore, IAI is currently working with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) to convert Boeing-767 civilian aircraft into mid-air refueling tankers for the Indian Air Force. The success of the Barak-8 Missile Defense System has emboldened the hopes and aspiration of both these countries in the field of defense research. They have also established a bilateral sub-working group to further expand their cooperation in defense technology with the primary objective to facilitate the sharing of resources and technical expertise between the two nations. (Library, 2022)

Trade Relations:

Strengthening of the diplomatic relations between India and Israel has also boosted the trade relations between both the nations. The trade relation between the two nations which was estimated to be around 1992 \$200 million has currently reached 4.82 billion dollars.(Trade Statistics, 2022) In the recent times, India and Israel have intensified discussions to reach a mutual agreement on a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Under Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), India's investments in Israel have amounted to \$118 million, while Israel's investments in India have reached \$254 million. (Annual Economic Survey, 2023)

Along with the defense sector, India's retail sector is also a crucial market for the economic future of Israel. For Israel, 30 crores out of India's mammoth population of 130 crores has the purchasing power similar to those of America and European nations. India's middle class therefore, opens up a large potential for Israel to see India as a substantial market in the near future. Globally, India is the seventh largest trading partner of Israel, and the third largest in Asia. In recent years, the bilateral relationship has expanded beyond trade to include sectors such as pharmaceuticals, agriculture, water management, information technology, and telecommunications. (Daniel, 2015)



Collaborative Efforts in Agriculture and Water Resource Management:

Since 2015, both India and Israel have been working on a joint program to enhance the cooperation agriculture and horticulture sector. Under this program 27 Centers of Excellence are being established across 21 states to promote advanced cultivation of fruits and vegetables.(Ministry of Agriculture, 2023) During its extensive desert and arid region, drip irrigation mechanism of irrigation is being deployed in Israel. Due to shortage of fresh water sources in the region, Israel has developed an efficient mechanism in the desalination technology. Following similar method addressing water-scarcity crisis, Israel has installed several effective desalination plants in India too. Additionally, Israel extensively utilizes recycled water in its agricultural, industrial, and irrigation processes.(Agrawal, 2023) To address India's challenges of polluted groundwater, saline water management, and water conservation, Israel has introduced advanced technologies and infrastructure in India. These efforts aim to improve water quality and promote sustainable resource use.

Prevention of COVID-19 and Other Health Collaborations: A No-Contact Policy

Globally, Physical distancing was an effective mechanism to prevent the spread of Coronavirus. 'Namaste' a dominant way of greeting without any physical touch, in India stood out as a culturally embedded practice abiding the physical distancing norms. Israel also adopted 'Namaste' as a medium of greeting to as part of physical distancing to curb the spread and therefore, the mass impact of Covid-19.

In addition to adopting preventive practices, India has extended crucial support to Israel by providing essential medicines to combat the pandemic. Furthermore, India has approved the supply of medical teams, vaccine technology, N-95 face masks, and other critical medical equipment to support Israel's pharmaceutical industry and healthcare sector in their fight against the virus. (Ghosh, 2020)

Challenges:

Historically, India has adopted a balanced approach in foreign policy towards both the nations, i.e. Israel and Palestine. During the earlier part of the Indian history, it was more inclined towards pro-Arab attitude, maintaining a relative distance from Israel. Though, in current period, India has strengthened its relation with Israel in establishing advanced global counter-terrorism efforts and bolstering defense mechanisms.(Pate, 2020) This cordial bilateral relation between two non-Muslim countries in the Middle East would also serve to weaken Pakistan's ambitions and reduce India's



economic interdependence with China. Evidently, with the rise of right-wing power in India, it is visible that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been successful in establishing firm relations with Israel. Though this must also be seen as a deviation from the historic Non-Alignment stand of India, and is even pushing India towards being an ally of United States too.(Motwani,2023) However, it remains to be seen how India can sustain its 'de-hyphenation' policy with respect to Israel and Palestine. For India, it is crucial to continue strengthening its ties with Israel while also maintaining relationships with Arab nations, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia.(Barthwal, 2021) A significant part of India's crude oil imports is from Iran and Saudi Arabia. Apart from this, India's trade relation with Arab Nations are also of crucial importance. Millions of Indian migrate to these nations for employment. It would be important to reflect and calculate all these factors before accelerating diplomatic relations in the middle east. The relation between India and Iran might also be adversely affected due to the growing proximity between India, Israel, and United States, as Iran has always been a party to the Palestine question. Also, the Israel's discrimination with the Indian Jews minority is another hurdle in establishment of diplomatic relation between both the countries. Safeguarding national interest should always be the top priority for the government, even when exploring the potential for closer ties with Israel. India has thus far managed to balance its interests both bilaterally and multilaterally in Central Asia without taking sides between opposing nations. When establishing diplomatic relations with Sunni and Shia-majority Arab countries, as well as Israel, domestic religious dynamics have historically been a consideration. However, post-right-wing ascendance, these dynamics have undergone pragmatic changes. Also, India must prioritize its energy and security interest, while addressing emerging challenges in Central Asia and formulating new policies.(Asi, 2024)

Conclusion:

India and Israel have had continuous agreements and mutual collaborations, especially in field of agriculture, specifically irrigation technologies, and energy resources. Adopting a futuristic and farsighted approach, Israel is keen to partner with India in the manufacturing sector, whereas the retail market presents another promising area of collaboration. If India and Israel wish to expand their collaboration beyond the defense sector, it is crucial for both the nations to develop a Free Trade



Agreement between them. Such an agreement could pave the way for Indian companies to gain global exposure through partnerships with Israel. (Kumaraswamy, 2010)

Until now, Israel has supported India to "Reform, Perform, and Transform," and India's economic trajectory aligns closely with this vision (Karnad, 2018). In the contemporary global context, both these countries can play the role of a beneficial ally and partner mutually enhancing their capacity and potentials. However, to achieve this they must collaboratively take steps that unlocks their scope and potential for trade, and investment. Along with this, to strategically address the challenges posed by China and Pakistan, India need to work towards deepening its relations with Israel.

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