

# The Maturation of Indo-Israeli Ties

by P. R. Kumaraswamy

Since their establishment in January 1992, Israeli-Indian relations have improved dramatically. Israel has emerged as a major Indian trading partner in the Middle East with bilateral trade rising from a meager US\$100 million to over \$6.6 billion.<sup>1</sup> Cooperation in the military-security arena has similarly grown,<sup>2</sup> and there are widespread popular exchanges between the people of the two countries. The Israeli ambassador is the most sought after diplomat in New Delhi after his U.S. counterpart, and Indo-Israeli ties seem extraordinarily robust. Yet failure to acknowledge the limitations of this relationship would be costly.

## DELINKING THE PEACE PROCESS

India's Israel policy falls into three broad phases. Beginning in the early 1920s, the nationalist leadership adopted a pro-Arab position, which largely continued until January 1992. Its recognition of the Jewish state in September 1950 did not materially alter this stand. The adoption of a pro-Arab stand was seen as critical for its interests in the Middle East and was pursued through a pro-Palestinian foreign policy. While it did not identify with the Arab extremism of that period, recognition without relations was the hallmark of Indian policy until January 1992.

The end of the Cold War and the transformation of the global order brought an end to this

zero-sum approach as New Delhi concluded that, in order to make a difference in this new era, it was both possible and necessary to maintain normal relations with the Israelis and the Palestinians, who seemed to be moving toward a historic reconciliation. Shortly after the decision to normalize relations with Israel was announced on January 29, 1992, the two countries opened diplomatic missions and paved the way for increased political, economic, cultural, and security cooperation.

After the Congress party returned to power in 2004, bilateral relations moved to a third and more complex phase. In a radical departure from its pre-1992 position, New Delhi began to delink bilateral relations from the vagaries of the peace process. While disagreements with Israel over the peace process had earlier prevented full normal-

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1 *The Times of India* (Mumbai), June 20, 2012.

2 Efraim Inbar and Alvite Singh Ningthoujam, "Indo-Israeli Defense Cooperation in the Twenty-First Century," The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Jan. 2012.

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ization of relations, New Delhi quietly began to pursue the peace process as if there were no bilateral relations with Israel and to pursue bilateral relations as if there were no differences with Israel over the peace process. This move was not only inevitable but has also been critical for the consolidation of the bilateral relations.

However, New Delhi continues to maintain some of its core pre-1992 positions vis-à-vis the Palestinians. Most importantly, it continues to

support the pursuit of Palestinian political rights that will result in the formation of a sovereign and independent state coexisting with Israel. Ever since its decision to recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the “sole and legitimate” representative of the Palestinians, political ties and interactions have improved and strengthened between the two parties with the PLO mission in New Delhi granted embassy status in early 1980. At that time, the Israeli representation was still confined to a consulate in Mumbai, which was often described as India’s diplomatic Siberia. In November 1988, India was among the first countries to recognize the “state of Palestine,” proclaimed by the PLO in Algiers, and began receiving PLO chairman Yasser Arafat and his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, as heads of state. In the wake of the Oslo agreement, in 1993, India opened a separate mission in the Gaza Strip. As has been the practice in the West, the Gaza mission reported directly to the Foreign Office in New Delhi and not to the Indian embassy in Tel Aviv. When the situation in Gaza became more difficult, the mission was moved to Ramallah in the West Bank in 2004.

New Delhi’s staunch support for the Palestinian political position was vividly illustrated by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who spoke to the U.N. General Assembly (UNGA) on September 24, 2011, a day after Abbas applied for Palestinian U.N. membership. Singh described the

continuing non-resolution of the Palestinian question as “a source of great instability and violence” in the Middle East, reiterating New Delhi’s “steadfast” support for “the Palestinian people’s struggle for a sovereign, independent, viable and united state of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital, living within secured and recognizable borders side by side and at peace with Israel.”<sup>3</sup> A year later, on November 29, 2012, India was among the countries that sponsored the UNGA resolution granting nonmember observer state status to the Palestinians.

On all the major issues concerning the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, such as settlements, borders, refugees, or the security fence, normalization has not resulted in a dilution or shift in New Delhi’s positions, sometimes stated explicitly but more often conveyed through its voting pattern in the U.N. Indeed, with only two exceptions—the 1991 U.N. vote repealing the 1975 “Zionism equals racism” resolution and the Durban conference of 2001—there has been no marked difference in India’s voting pattern on the peace process since 1992.

## THE JERUSALEM QUESTION

The most striking aspect of New Delhi’s recent position toward the Middle East has been the unprecedented focus on Jerusalem. Its support for an independent Palestinian state in the past had been expressed without any explicit reference to Jerusalem. In January 2005, upon his election as Palestinian Authority president, Abbas sent a letter to India’s junior foreign minister Ahamed that made explicit reference to East Jerusalem. Conveying his gratitude for New Delhi’s congratulatory message, Abbas expressed hope that “with the help of India and other friends,” the people of Palestine would be able to “practice and restore their inalienable national rights and establish their independent state with holy East Jerusalem of 4/6/1967 borders as its capital.”<sup>4</sup>

3 Manmohan Singh, speech to U.N. General Assembly, New York, Sept. 24, 2011.

This did not influence New Delhi's position. For example, in a statement following Hamas's electoral victory in January 2006 and welcoming "the holding of free and fair elections," the Ministry of External Affairs observed that the elections "have strengthened the democratic process in Palestine." It hoped that the new government "representing the will of the Palestinian people" would continue to pursue the peace negotiations, "leading to the establishment of a viable, united, and sovereign State of Palestine living in peaceful co-existence with the State of Israel."<sup>5</sup> There was no reference to Jerusalem.

According to *WikiLeaks* cables, the issue cropped up in August 2008 when Rajiv Sikri, secretary (East) in the Ministry of External Affairs and the third senior-most diplomat in the ministry, visited Israel as part of the routine bilateral exchanges between the two foreign offices. According to one Israeli diplomat serving in New Delhi at that time, Sikri appeared "more often to be the representative of the Palestinians, rather than India." The cable further added:

The Israelis went all out for this visit, supplementing the formal Foreign Office talks (led by Deputy Director-General for Asia and Pacific Amos Nadai) with a call on Deputy Prime Minister Silvan Shalom. [Israeli deputy chief of mission Yoed] Magen reported that Indian ambassador to Tel Aviv, Arun K. Singh, seemed shocked by Sikri's unreformed positions on issues like disengagement, adding that the Indian delegation appeared completely unmoved



*Normalization of relations with Israel in 1992 has not translated into abandonment of India's traditional support for Palestinian aspirations. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (left), a staunch leader of the so-called "Non-Aligned Movement," hosted PLO chairman Yasser Arafat (right) on numerous occasions. India was among the first countries to recognize Arafat's self-declared "state of Palestine" in the late 1980s.*

by changes sparked by Arafat's death, the Gaza withdrawal, and strengthened India-Israel ties. "It was like nothing had changed," the Israeli DCM concluded.

According to the Israeli diplomat, "Because Sikri insisted that the draft joint statement should be datelined Tel Aviv (vice Jerusalem), the Israelis refused to issue any document."<sup>6</sup>

The insistence on a Tel Aviv dateline was a reversal of the Indian position since 1992. This issue first cropped up during the visit of Arjun Singh, a senior minister in P.V. Narasimha Rao's government, to Israel in June 1994. The occasion was the signing of the first bilateral agreement that envisioned periodic consultations. While the Israeli government wanted the capitals to be identified as the alternate venues, India was not prepared to explicitly recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. At the same time, identifying Tel Aviv was

4 Briefing points, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, Jan. 20, 2005.

5 Government of India, statement on the results of the elections in Palestine, Jan. 28, 2006.

6 Israeli embassy, New Delhi, Sept. 1, 2005, published in *The Hindu* (Chennai, Madras), Mar. 16, 2011.

equally problematic and would have caused tension and unpleasantness. An innovative compromise was reached by agreeing that meetings would be held alternatively in India and Israel.

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But the issue of East Jerusalem has remained problematic since the first public reference to the city in July 2009 by Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee. He reiterated the position during a visit to India by Mahmoud Abbas, referring to a "state of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital."<sup>7</sup> Since then, references to East Jerusalem have become a regular feature in many of New

Delhi's statements and declarations on the Middle East.

## CONVERGENCE BUT NO AGREEMENT ON IRAN

On the face of it, both countries are in sharp disagreement over the threat posed by Tehran's nuclear ambitions. Since normalization in 1992, Iran has figured prominently in Israel's interactions with India. In March 1993, Indian foreign secretary (permanent under-secretary) J.N. Dixit visited Israel for the preparatory work relating to the forthcoming visit of Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres. The Israeli media was eager to learn more about New Delhi's possible nuclear cooperation with Tehran.<sup>8</sup> Nearly two decades later, Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna faced similar questions on Iran and its nuclear program.<sup>9</sup> During

the visit of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to India in September 2003, the Israelis added another concern—technology leaks. Fearing that sensitive military technology supplied to India could be re-exported or leaked to Tehran,<sup>10</sup> the Israelis sought and obtained guarantees against such possibilities. In the words of one Israeli official accompanying Sharon, "We got answers to the questions raised, and we are satisfied with the answers."<sup>11</sup>

In recent years, Tehran and its nonconventional weapons ambitions have emerged as the principle security concern for Israel and have dominated its foreign and security policies. New Delhi, by contrast, appears indifferent toward these developments. Interestingly, if its Defense Ministry rarely discusses Tehran's nonconventional program, the general tendency of the Indian intelligentsia is to view this program as a corollary of the perceived threat posed by Israel to the Islamic Republic. That New Delhi's sensitive strategic assets on its western coast are within striking distance of Iranian missiles is rarely discussed in public.

Even on a direct bilateral level, New Delhi has maintained a studied silence over many anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic remarks by Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In October 2005, responding to one of his statements that Israel should be "wiped off the map," an official Indian spokesperson merely reminded reporters that India had recognized Israel "decades ago" and had diplomatic relations with it.<sup>12</sup> While Israelis see Iran as the epicenter of international terrorism, Indians view the Islamic Republic as a partner in fighting terrorism, especially in Afghanistan. India and Israel, thus, are not on the same page over Iran. But there remains a series of subtexts that reflect a more complicated picture.

First and foremost, Tehran has not made Israel an issue in its bilateral relations with New Delhi. Meaningful improvements in Indo-Iranian ties happened around the same time as normalization and consolidation of Indo-Israeli relations.

7 External Affairs minister's statement on the workings of the Ministry of External Affairs, July 31, 2009; Pranab Mukherjee, banquet for Mahmoud Abbas, New Delhi, Sept. 9, 2012.

8 *The Jerusalem Post*, Mar. 26, 1993.

9 *The Times of India*, Jan. 11, 2012.

10 *Defense News* (Springfield, Va.), Sept. 15, 2003.

11 *The Times of India*, Sept. 11, 2003.

12 *The Hindu*, Oct. 28, 2005.

Except for an initial protest at the time of the 1992 decision, Tehran has remained indifferent to New Delhi's burgeoning relations with the Jewish state. While Pakistan and, at times, Egypt have made noises over the military dimension of Indo-Israel relations, Iran has remained seemingly indifferent and passive, apparently content with the growth and intensity of its own relations with India.

Second, in the wake of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's visit to Tehran in April 2001, there were agreements and expectations over increased military cooperation between the two states. Over time and under pressure from Washington, New Delhi appears to have backtracked on some of its earlier initiatives. As one analysis put it: "Following the 2005 nuclear deal between New Delhi and Washington, Israeli concerns over the relationship between India and Iran began to dissipate. U.S. pressure on India to end all military relations with Iran appeared to have been a condition for the nuclear deal."<sup>13</sup>

Also, under U.S. pressure, New Delhi has substantially reduced its export of oil products to Tehran. Despite its large hydrocarbon reserves, due to sanctions and atrophy of the domestic oil industry, Tehran relies heavily on imports to meet its growing demand for oil products. India has been one of its principal suppliers. Oil products have constituted a sizable portion of India's total exports to Iran, and between 2005 and 2009, they accounted for over a third of New Delhi's total exports to Tehran, reaching a peak in 2008-09 when India exported over a billion dollars worth of oil products to Iran; this dropped to just over \$180 million during 2009-10 and has been declining since then.<sup>14</sup> On the more



*India continues to execute a complex balancing act between Israel and other nations opposed to the Jewish State. Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon (left), here welcomed by Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in 2003, received some security-related assurances but was unable to convince New Delhi to end its on-again, off-again cooperation with Iran.*

serious issue of Tehran's nuclear ambitions, New Delhi has sided with Washington. Despite some initial foot-dragging and uncertainties, since September 2005, it has firmly expressed disapproval of the Iranian pursuit of a nuclear program. In actions by both the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the U.N. Security Council, New Delhi joined the majority in opposing Tehran's nuclear ambitions. India's September 2005 vote at the IAEA was severely criticized within the country, especially by the communist parties, as surrender to U.S. hegemony.<sup>15</sup> India's carefully constructed neutrality evidently does not extend to the Iranian nuclear question.

The delicate balance with which New Delhi has been handling its relations with Iran and Is-

13 Inbar and Ningthoujam, "Indo-Israeli Defense Cooperation."

14 Compiled from reports by director-general of Foreign Trade, Government of India, Kolkata; Shayerah Ilias, "Iran's Economic Conditions: U.S. Policy Issues," Congressional Research Service, Washington, D.C., Apr. 22, 2010, p. 22.

15 Prakash Karat, "Betrayal of Iran: Costs of India-U.S. Partnership," *Mainstream Weekly* (New Delhi), Oct. 14-20, 2005.

rael came into sharp focus in 2003. In January of that year, Iranian president Mohammed Khatami was the chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations, the highest honor bestowed on a visiting head of state. During Khatami's visit, both countries signed the Delhi declaration, which set the tone for cooperation in various fields, including energy. A few months later, in September, New Delhi rolled out a red carpet welcome for Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon. Both countries issued a Delhi statement,

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whereby they pledged to cooperate toward achieving peace in their respective regions. On both occasions, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the host and this evenhandedness remains the public face of a complex Indian balancing act.

On the substantive level, there are more Indo-

Israeli convergences on Iran than meet the eye. New Delhi's connections with Tehran are due to its energy security concerns, which must not be misconstrued as support for or endorsement of Tehran's nuclear ambitions. Like Israel and many Arab countries, India is wary of a nuclear Iran. As Prime Minister Singh put it in an elliptical fashion, New Delhi's decisions at the IAEA over Tehran were influenced by "our security concerns arising from proliferation activities in our extended neighborhood."<sup>16</sup>

## **DELINKING THE INDIAN FOREIGN OFFICE**

There have been a number of high-level visits between India and Israel during the past two decades. Notable among these have been the visit of President Ezer Weizmann in December 1995-January 1996 and Prime Minister Sharon in Sep-

tember 2003, but no reciprocal visits from India have taken place. Nor have there been visits by the defense ministers of the two states, and reciprocal visits have primarily happened at the level of foreign ministers. Silvan Shalom was in India in February 2004, and Shimon Peres has been a frequent flyer, visiting India four times (May 1993, August 2000, January 2001 and January 2002). Two of these visits took place when he was minister for regional cooperation under Ehud Barak. From India, Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh visited Israel in July 2000 and S. M. Krishna in January 2012, as did Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister L. K. Advani in June 2000. There have also been visits by numerous other ministers, officials, and other functionaries.

The picture remains uneven. While there have been periodic foreign ministry level contacts, ministerial visits, especially from India, have been few and far between with principal functionaries refraining from visiting Israel. On several occasions, planned visits by defense ministers have not materialized because of the rapidly-changing political landscape in the Middle East. Even those Indian leaders who visited Israel in the past could not do so as ministers. Official contacts at the senior level have been kept to the barest minimum.

It was the Congress Party, under Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao that normalized relations; yet, the present Manmohan Singh-led Indian government has been rather coy toward Israel. Though a number of junior ministers have visited Israel, senior leaders have carefully skipped the country. They have, however, been willing to travel to Israel's Arab and Iranian neighbors.

Since 1992, for example, there were three state visits between India and Syria: Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and President Pratibha Patil visited Damascus in 2003 and 2010 respectively while Bashar al-Assad visited New Delhi in June 2008. Similarly, since 1991, there have been six state visits between New Delhi and Tehran, including a brief stopover by President Ahmadinejad in April 2008.

This political pattern of limited direct contacts at the highest echelons with Israel was maintained by senior officials of the government. Since 2004, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) has

<sup>16</sup> Manmohan Singh, statement on Iran, New Delhi, Feb. 17, 2006.

had three national security advisers: J. N. Dixit, M. K. Narayanan and Shivshankar Menon. While Dixit announced the normalization of relations in January 1992, Menon served as India's ambassador to Israel in the mid-1990s. Yet none of them visited Israel. This partly explains the considerable media attention to Foreign Minister Krishna's arrival in January 2012, which was in fact promoted within India as a regional visit that included the Palestinian Authority-controlled West Bank, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates.

High level political contacts are important for their visibility, direction, and significance. Ironically, these appear neither important nor a precondition for Indo-Israeli relations. Two factors have contributed to this autopilot like mode of the bilateral relationship. To begin with, the decentralized nature of the Indian federal structure has immensely benefitted Israel. The introduction of economic liberalization in the 1990s gave the provincial states of the Indian Union greater autonomy to pursue their individual economic agendas. Enjoying new openness and opportunities provided by economic liberalization, state governments began engaging with foreign countries to promote their economic rather than political interests.

For both Congress and opposition-ruled states, Israel has become a favorite destination. Unlike the Union government in New Delhi, the states have been unconcerned with the vagaries of the Arab-Israeli peace process since, as specified in the Indian constitution, foreign policy is beyond the jurisdiction of the states. They pursue their economic agenda, especially agriculture, water management, power generation, and farming without any overt political motives, designs,



*On January 21, 2008, India launched a closely-guarded Israeli-built radar spy satellite to begin gathering valuable intelligence data. According to Israeli reports, the satellite would “dramatically increase Israel’s intelligence-gathering capabilities regarding ... [Iran’s] nuclear program, since the satellite can transmit images in all weather conditions, a capability that Israel’s existing satellites lacked.”*

or controversies. Their agendas are focused on their states' welfare and have thus largely remained noncontroversial. Without attracting undue attention or negative publicity, various state chief ministers and their officials have visited the Jewish state and sought economic cooperation and investments. Even the communist parties, which have been critical of India's policy toward Israel, have not hesitated to seek economic opportunities through cooperation with Israel for states under their rule.<sup>17</sup>

These interactions at the state level have brought three tangible benefits to the bilateral relationship:

- They have significantly broadened its horizons and brought tangible benefits to millions of Indians who are not even remotely concerned with foreign policy. Not many countries, including promi-

<sup>17</sup> *Times of India*, Sept. 10, 2003, Apr. 10, 2009.

Photo will not display.

*Muslims offer Eid al-Adha prayers at the Taj Mahal mausoleum in Agra, India. No Indian government can remain indifferent to possible backlash from its substantial Muslim minority over relations with Israel. At the same time, the Indian Muslim community is not blindly and rabidly anti-Israeli; one tangible shift is the steady increase in the number of Muslim students who wish to study in Israel and apply for scholarships offered by the Israeli government.*

nent Western countries, have achieved the reach that Israel has managed in two decades.

- They provide a strong economic content to the bilateral relations, which is at the national level skewed in favor of the military-security component and make state ties stable, viable, and mutually beneficial.
- Interactions with state governments offer Israel a critical alternate channel, especially when the attitude of the Union government is dominated by the international political climate, and of late, coalition compulsions.

In contrast, India's Foreign Ministry has to balance bilateral cooperation with concerns and conflicting pressures from other countries of the Middle East. Support for the Palestinians still enjoys a considerable constituency in the country. Hence, the ministry's ability to take initiatives is significantly hampered, bogged down as it often

is over issues such as Jerusalem, settlements, statehood, or recurring cycles of violence. It is even possible to suggest that when it comes to Israel, the Ministry of External Affairs is not the principal player on the Indian side. The task of pursuing relations has been taken over by less political and more specialized ministries of the Indian government. Most prominent among them are the ministries of defense, agriculture and, of late, infrastructure. Professional and pragmatic in their approach, they are indifferent toward the vagaries of the peace process but are concerned with tangible benefits and are in the forefront of promoting bilateral relations with Israel. The absence of top-level ministerial visits, for example, has not prevented the chiefs of Indian and Israeli se-

curity establishments from periodically visiting and interacting with one another. The same holds true for the ministry of agriculture and its current head Sharad Pawar.<sup>18</sup> Thus, while the Foreign Office makes politically correct noises, other departments of the government have been adopting professional and nonpolitical approaches toward Israel.

The marginal role of the Foreign Office will not change until New Delhi becomes a stakeholder in the Middle East peace process. While supporting a two-state solution, negotiated by the concerned parties, India is not an active player. It was present at the Annapolis conference in November 2007 and has been providing aid and assistance to the Palestinian Authority. But it has yet to assume any meaningful role, especially one that reflects its growing economic power and influence, in promoting the peace process. For instance, economic investment in resource-starved

<sup>18</sup> "Timeline of Indo-Israel Relations," The Israel Project, Jerusalem, accessed Nov. 28, 2012.

Jordan would considerably reduce some of the ongoing tensions in the Hashemite kingdom and, in the process, reinforce the Jordanian-Israeli peace. Until such initiatives are undertaken, the Foreign Office will continue to have marginal influence in Indo-Israeli relations.

## ARE MUSLIMS MOVING BEYOND THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION?

New Delhi's prolonged absence of relations with Israel has often been attributed to official concerns over possible backlash from its substantial Muslim minority population. Under the British, it had the largest Muslim population in the world and currently has the third largest Muslim community in the world (Indonesia and Pakistan being the other two). With over 120 million followers, no government in India could be indifferent to how Muslims view and perceive the Middle East, especially Israel. In the past, Indian leaders expressed their concerns to Israeli counterparts in private; but of late, there has been some open discussion of the views of the Muslim population and its perceived opposition to Israel.

India's pro-Palestinian position is due partly to the domestic Muslim factor. The junior foreign minister Ahamed, for example, has been more vocal in criticizing Israel than other members of the government. Ahamed represents the Indian Union Muslim League, a small regional party within the ruling UPA coalition in the state of Kerala. Partly because of the league's support base and partly due to his own convictions, his interactions have been confined to Arab and Islamic countries of the Middle East—in other words, every place except Israel. Since joining the government in 2004, he has visited the Palestinian territories three times but has consciously avoided meeting Israeli officials.<sup>19</sup> There is no information in the public domain to indicate that he has interacted with Israel in his official capacity as minister of

state for external affairs. By not meeting Israeli officials and through his anti-Israeli statements, Ahamed has sought to pacify hardliners within his party.

At the same time, and contrary to conventional perception, one could note a perceptible shift in the attitude of the Indian Muslim community toward Israel. Middle East violence often generates strongly negative reactions from the Muslim community. Sometimes this leads to public protests organized by Muslim groups, as during Sharon's visit. But the community is not blindly and rabidly anti-Israeli. Younger Muslims are eager to understand and learn from Israel and to engage with their Israeli counterparts. One tangible shift is the steady increase in the number of Muslim students who wish to study in Israel and even apply for scholarships offered by the Israeli government.<sup>20</sup> Not that they have turned into Zionists, but unlike their parents and grandparents, younger Muslims appear willing to pursue a dialogue with the Jewish state despite the differences. This is a far cry from the Three Nos enunciated by the Arab League in Khartoum in September 1967: No recognition, no negotiation, and no peace with Israel.

**Israel has become India's second largest arms exporter after Russia.**

## FRIENDSHIP, NOT ALLIANCE

Military cooperation has assumed greater salience in bilateral Indian-Israel relations. Most notable is that Israel has become India's second largest arms exporter after Russia. Considering that Israel does not export platforms such as tanks, aircraft, and ships, this is no mean achievement.<sup>21</sup> Growing military cooperation extends beyond arms sales to technology upgrades, joint research,

19 "India-Palestine Relations," Representative Office of India: Palestine, Ramallah, accessed Nov. 28, 2013.

20 Author interviews, New Delhi, Jan. 2012.

21 Inbar and Ningthoujam, "Indo-Israeli Defense Cooperation."

and intelligence cooperation. Despite its possible implications for use against Iran, on January 21, 2008, India launched a 300-kilogram Israeli satellite into orbit. According to Israeli media reports, the satellite “will dramatically increase Israel’s in-

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telligence-gathering capabilities regarding the Islamic Republic’s nuclear program, since the satellite can transmit images in all weather conditions, a capability that Israel’s existing satellites lacked.”<sup>22</sup> As manifested by the sale of the Phalcon advanced

airborne early warning system (AWACS), this budding military cooperation between the two countries enjoys the understanding and support of Washington.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, military ties are not without their share of problems, and unless attended to early, they could give way to a major crisis. Some of the defense deals are tainted with allegations of corruption and the payment of bribes. Though these are primarily Indian problems, Israel cannot be absolved of all responsibility—some of the prominent names among the Israeli defense industries are already blacklisted from competing for defense contracts in India. Though similar charges have been leveled against other countries, Israel is more vulnerable because of India’s historic baggage and prolonged non-relations.

Second, excessive focus on military cooperation could lead to a “securitization” of the bilateral relations and bring along uncertainties due to political pressures or changes. Israel-Turkey relations, for instance, were heavily characterized

by cooperation in the military arena. But the arrival of the Justice and Development Party and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan not only changed the political climate but has reduced the military component as well. New Delhi should be wary of similar developments. Third, Israel is also facing stiff competition from other countries, most notably France. Since it does not export platforms, it has to coordinate and synchronize its technological expertise with others emerging as major players in India’s defense market.

More importantly, both countries have carefully avoided depicting their relations as an alliance, something Washington failed to do in its relations with India. Partly because of the difficulties with which relations were established in 1992, and partly due to their reading of the bilateral convergence and differences, both countries describe themselves as friends of one another. This mature handling of its ties with Israel is also manifested in the manner in which New Delhi has sought closer ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran since the early 1990s. Its problems with Tehran have more to do with India’s burgeoning ties with the United States than its friendship with Israel.

**CONCLUSION**

The normalization of relations has not transformed India into an ally of Israel. Nor has it caused it to abandon its erstwhile positions vis-à-vis the Palestinians. But by gradually delinking the unending saga of the peace process from bilateral relations, New Delhi is moving toward a more mature understanding and closer friendship with Israel. Recognition by both countries of the limitations and potentials of the relations has enabled them to avoid pitfalls of grandiose visions. Israel is no longer India’s suitor; nor is it an ally. But both are emerging as a mature, dependable, and accommodating couple.

22 *The Jerusalem Post*, Jan. 23, 2008.

23 Wade Boese, “Israel, India Sign Major Arms Deal,” *Arms Control Today* (Washington, D.C.), Apr. 2004; “Israeli Sale of Phalcon AWACS Radar to India, a Hostile Act,” *Pakistan Defence*, Indianapolis, Jan. 25, 2010.

