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INDO-ISRAEL RELATIONS : A BALANCING ACT

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ABSTRACT

Relations between India and Israel have evolved over time towards strategic co-operation beyond the opening up of bilateral relations in 1992. This interaction has been extended to agriculture, defence, strategic and security areas with an emphasis on collaborative research in various areas. This paper analyzes this evolution since India's recognition of Israel to the recent developments and the context of relations with other Middle East nations, particularly the Arab countries. It also considers the role of Indian leadership in shaping recent foreign policy. The paper concludes that India's foreign policy approach towards Middle East has matured and become one of a balancing act despite existing limitations.

KEYWORDS: India, Israel, Middle East, collaboration, security

INTRODUCTION

The relations between India and Israel have seen several changes over the years from an informal one to a formal bilateral one. The first phase can be considered from the period of 1950-1992, whereby bilateral relations failed between the two countries despite several common values in terms of its advent towards a democratic set-up and freedom from persecution. In 1947, India opposed the partitioning of Palestine into a Jewish and Arab based state in the United Nations Special Commission on Palestine (UNSCOP)¹.

It became apparent that India was in favor of the federal plan while the majority considered partition as the required solution². India also voted against Israel's membership in the United Nations in 1949. Thus, India's open hostility was apparent

immediately after Israel's genesis. This hostility stemmed from its relations with the Arab world (which would influence the opinion of its Muslim demographic on a domestic level) and also the idea of a Jewish State itself given the recent history of Partition on religious lines. The State of Israel gave formal recognition to India, while the latter postponed its recognition until 17 September, 1950.

A rather cryptic statement was issued: "The Government of India has decided to accord recognition to the government of Israel"³. This statement did not mention the nature of recognition, the diplomatic relations and the exchanges between the nations. A pre-dominantly passive anti-Israeli, pro-Arab attitude prevailed in the ruling government and the elite section.

The stance of the Congress remained mostly unchanged under Indira Gandhi who was against the

¹ Sharma, Ashok & Bing, Dov (2015) "India-Israel relations: the evolving partnership, Israel Affairs" Pg 1

² Kumaraswamy, P.K (2011) "India's Israel Policy" Book Discussion Forum IDSA 9 March available at <http://www.idsa.in/event/IndiasIsraelPolicy>

³ Gerberg, Itzhak (2008) "The Changing nature of Israeli-India relations : 1948-2005" Pg 39

policy of force against the Arabs. Relations with Israel remained hostile during her regime.

India had cooperated with the Soviet Union against Israel while Israel had aligned with the US that supported China and Pakistan which were rivals of India. An anti-Israel rhetoric prevailed in Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) particularly since 1973. The Middle East issue became a frequently discussed one in NAM agenda.⁴

On the other hand, the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) government had pro-Israeli roots since its admission into Indian politics as Janata Sangh coalition since 1977. Moraji Desai did meet with Israeli high ranking officials in secret which eventually led to a military arms deal via Cyprus although disagreements prevailed regarding withdrawal of forces from the areas occupied by 6 day war⁵. However, given its focus on maintaining its position against the Congress, less focus was laid on developing friendly relations. Additionally, BJP was unable to come to power again till the 1990s anyway. During the Rajiv Gandhi regime, indirect contact was made through Washington to improve diplomatic relations but there were no positive results. In 1988, the Soviet Union began the process of normalizing relations with Israel.

The second phase was during a break in this hostile diplomatic environment occurred in 1992, whereby full-fledged diplomatic relations were announced between the two countries. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of US as the sole super-power, provided momentum for the peace process in the Middle East and operated with factors that caused the shift in India's stance towards Israel⁶. In 1996, another change occurred in India-Israel relations when the Likud Party, led by Benjamin Netanyahu came to power. He considered relations with India as a priority, particularly in the defence sector. Nonetheless, the slowed peace process with Palestine had an impact on this development. A new Israeli government emerged in 1999 under the name One Israel by Ehud Barak whereby meetings occurred confirming the improved relations between the two nations. The Likud Party came to power in 2000 and PM Ariel Sharon's official visit to India in 2003 marked a new change during NDA regime. During the UPA regime in 2004, official relations cooled though economic and military co-operation strengthened. The role of Narendra Modi in Israel was noted in 2006 itself when acting as Chief Minister of Gujarat, he visited the nation and

established ties. In the year 2015, he forged closer ties with the nation as the first Indian PM to announce a visit to Israel. Sushma Swaraj, External Affairs Minister also visited the nation in 2016. Clearly, there has been a decisive attempt to further improve relations.

This paper analyzes the relations between India and Israel in the context of Arab world. It also takes into account the role of leadership and other factors which helped in improving relations beyond a strategic one from the previously hostile one. Thus, the paper has been divided into the following sections: (i) Commercial and Economic Relations between the nations (ii) Evolution of India's policy towards Israel (iii) Role of Present Leadership (iv) Conclusion.

I. AREAS OF COMMERCIAL AND ECONOMICS LINKAGES BETWEEN THE NATIONS

India and Israel have benefited greatly from their economic and military exchanges, particularly since 1992 when the relationship deepened after the establishment of bilateral relations. The main areas of cooperation are:-

a) Agriculture and Water Technology⁷:-

India has particularly found benefits from Israeli expertise in scientific farming, soil treatment, horticulture, nursery management, post-harvest management and orchid, canopy management. Israeli experts have benefited Indian farmers. Since 2006, bilateral projects through the Inter-Governmental Work Plan on Agricultural Cooperation have been implemented. Various states in India were included under the Action Plan of 2012-15 whereby Israel would build 28 centers of Excellence across 7 states within 2015 itself. These centers would promote a scientific approach to farming. In accordance with this, centers were indeed set up such as Center for fruits in Sirsa, Punjab. The Third Phase of the work plan (2015-18) has been signed as well whereby Israel would build a Dairy management center in Haryana.

Several successful joint ventures have also occurred between the two nations in the area of water technology as well. One joint venture such as NaanDan Jain irrigation was based on micro-irrigation which improved water usage in canal irrigation. This venture was possible when Jain irrigation took a 50% stake in the Israeli irrigation

⁴ See reference 3, Pg 132

⁵ See reference 3, Pg 222

⁶ See reference 3, Pg 287

⁷ Embassy of India, Tel Aviv "India-Israel Economic and Commercial Relations" 16 January 2016 available at <http://www.indembassy.co.il/pages.php?id=14>

equipment maker company NaanDan and eventually acquired the entire company. Israeli organizations like IDE and Merkot have built desalination plants and provided expertise to concerned organizations in India.

b) Defence Trade and energy security:-

India is an attractive market for Israel's defence equipment⁸. Both countries face terrorism threats from Islamic organizations in particular. Additionally, India requires technology and up gradation of its stock-pile of weaponry. The geostrategic locations of the nations are such that this cooperation is immensely beneficial for both. The Indian Ocean is an important part of Israel's security and it requires second-strike capability which can be found there. India is a key ally in protecting commercial routes of shipping through Israel, Middle East and Asia. According to Joshi(2005), Russia has joined in the military cooperation between the two countries and this is important for India given that the former is part of the Middle East peace process. India's space program is such that it focuses on satellites, space applications and launch vehicles while Israel's strength lies in high-resolution imaging abilities.

According to Feiler⁹, there are four elements to defence ties – (i) Israel's export of complete weapon systems (ii) Israel's export of sub-systems and components, mainly in the area of electronics (iii) Entry into joint weapon programs (iii) India's export of military hardware. Thus, the countries share close ties in terms of military cooperation. In terms of energy security, there is much potential as well. Israel's focus has been on expanding its renewable energy program¹⁰ and reduces its dependence on oil. This is of interest to India as well which plans to build 30 giga-watts of renewable energy mainly through private sources.

c) Industrial Research and Development:-

India and Israel signed a bilateral agreement for Industrial R&D called i4RD to set up joint services to match partnering Indian and Israeli firms,

provide R&D funding and lead to further commercialization in the market. The framework for this agreement is itself managed jointly by Israeli Industry Center, Global Innovation and Technology Alliance (GITA)¹¹ and MATIMOP.

d) Miscellaneous Exports and imports:-

Bilateral trade between the two nations has been increasing rapidly since 1992. This has been further discussed in the upcoming sections. In general, India's major exports to Israel comprise of metals and precious stones, chemical products, plant and vegetable products, base metals and machinery while imports consist of vegetable products, products of chemical or allied industry, textile and textile articles with a high percentage of chemicals and fertilizers¹². Israel's main exports to India comprise of base materials, transport equipment and machinery. The trend has been outlined in the appendix.

II. EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY WITH ISRAEL

India's relation with the Arab nations had a role to play in deciding its foreign policy towards Israel. According to Kumaraswamy(2013)¹³, there were three phases of India-Israel relationship:-

- 1) No diplomatic relations before 1992
- 2) Establishment of bilateral relations since 1992
- 3) Maturing of bilateral relations since 1998

These phases have been discussed in terms of three levels – international, domestic and the society and state level analysis. They are discussed as follows –

III. Phase I: NO OFFICIAL DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

This phase is one where the relations between the two countries have been openly cold though Israel has made attempts to establish ties with India. To understand the root of this phase, it has been sub-divided into two sub-phases:

a) Pre-Independence of India:-

The attitude of Indian leadership, particularly the Indian National Congress (INC) towards the Arab world was apparent through two

⁸FICCI (2013)"Diplomacy and Foreign Affairs – Israel Special"17 July, available at <http://fikki.in/spdocument/20287/Special-Israel-Feature.pdf>

⁹ See reference 8

¹⁰ Udasin, Sharon(2012) "Renewable Israeli Innovation suited to India" The Jerusalem Post, 17 October, available at <http://www.jpost.com/Enviro-Tech/Renewable-Israeli-innovation-suited-to-India>

¹¹ See reference 8

¹² Israel Trade & Economic Office, Embassy of Israel "Overview of India-Israel Bilateral Trade and Economic Relations"

¹³ Kumaraswamy, P.R (2013) "Israel in the world: The Maturation of Indo-Israeli Ties" pg 1

instances¹⁴ – (i) The Khilafat Movement and (ii) The Palestine Issue. In the former, INC expressed solidarity for the fate of Turkey and considered this issue as one that was important enough to forge unity among the Hindus and Muslims in India. It had caught the interest of Muslims all around the world. An important part of the Non-cooperation movement's resolution in the Calcutta session in 1920 was the Khilafat issue. The latter issue was the more pivotal one though. The Congress was closer to the Palestinian cause because of their common history of British Rule and the opinion of its Muslim population was important as well.

Muslims in India had even started organizations in support of the Palestinian Arab cause. In Uttar Pradesh, they organized the Provisional Palestine Conference in 1936¹⁵. They actively discussed the issue as well. The first session of the Muslim Independent Party Conference in Patna also criticized the British government on the Palestinian issue. The opinions of Gandhi¹⁶ and Nehru were important in deciding the basic Indian stance on the issue. They had sympathy for the Jewish community's plight but opposed the creation of another state. Nehru focused on the role of imperialism in creating the problem¹⁷. They did not believe in religious exclusivity and also did not endorse the view that the Arabs should pay for the persecution of the Jews by Hitler and European nations. Thus, this view carried over in the actions of the political leadership in foreign policy when India became independent in 1947.

b) Cold War Period:-

As previously mentioned India delayed its recognition of Israel and continued to maintain a pro-Arab stance throughout the Cold War Period. This happened under the leadership of the Gandhi's and continued despite much critique by alternate governments. Falk (2009)¹⁸ is of the opinion that India's policy towards Israel is based on trade interests in Middle East and not on the ideological factors as discussed by other authors. In 1948, when

Israel was created, India still had strong historical relations and a number of Indians in the Middle East. This number has steadily grown over the years as shown by the following table in the Appendix.

The role of Arab countries as a source of Petroleum was also pivotal for India as a newly formed country. Any shortage of this resource would have resulted in severe inflationary pressures in both industry and agriculture. According to Azhar¹⁹, it was a matter of choice between the economic and political resources that 130 million Arabs had versus that of 3 million Israelis. The latter represented limited advantage at that point. Clearly, India could not afford to ruin its relations with the Arab world by adopting a Pro-Israel policy at that point. Domestically, the issue of Palestine which was a very sensitive one for the 40 million Muslim population in India prevented the leaders further from adopting close diplomatic ties with Israel.

From an international point of view, the Arab states had seven important votes in UN and a single vote in the Security Council which would have been pivotal for India. This was important in context of India's issue with Kashmir whereby Pakistan could have gained favor with the Middle if India had decided to support Israel openly. India's involvement with the NAM and friendship with Egypt along with trade through the Suez Canal were also important factors. However, over time, it became apparent to India, particularly during the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War that the Arab countries favored Pakistan. According to Ward²⁰, 56.3 per cent of West Asian Countries voted against India's interests on the Kashmir Issue in UN Security Council debates during 1948-65. Pakistan received military aid and monetary assistance from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey during the war. On the other hand, Israel provided aid to India²¹.

Even during the East Pakistan crises, countries like Syria, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia remained in favor of Pakistan and called India an aggressor²². It became interesting to note this lack of support from the Middle East especially in the context of India's pro-Arab policies since pre-independence. This is primarily due to Pakistan's identity as an Islamic State while India retained a secular image. This exclusive nature was apparent

¹⁴ Tripathy, Sasmita (2012) "India's Palestine Policy since 1992" Chapter 1, pg 22

¹⁵ See Reference 8, pg 28

¹⁶ Gandhi & Zionism: "The Jews" (1938) Jewish Virtual Library available at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsources/History/JewsGandhi.html>

¹⁷ Gordon, Leonard A. (1975) "Indian Nationalist Ideas about Palestine and Israel" pg 225

¹⁸ Falk, Joshua (2009) "India's Israel policy: The Merits of a Pragmatic Approach" pg 1

¹⁹ Evans, Daniel (2015) "Journal of the International Relations and Affairs Group" pg 127

²⁰ Ward, Richard E. (1992) "India's Pro-Arab Policy: A Study in Continuity" pg

²¹ See reference 12, pg 3

²² See reference 14, pg 80

when India’s invitation to Islamic Summit at Morocco was delayed until Pakistan relented. Thus, it appears that though India’s relations with the Arab world appeared somewhat strained, the economic incentives and domestic pressures to maintain it remained strong. In light of this, a shift in power blocs finally led to a change in India’s incentives to pursue a bilateral relationship with Israel.

IV. Phase II: ESTABLISHMENT OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

In 1992, India ended its zero-sum approach and normalized relations with Israel. According to Feiler(2012)²³, this would have been impossible previously given that Arab nations had imposed a trade embargo on Israel and organizations, nations that traded with it. However, he mentions three factors that led to this change –

- (i) The liberalization measures undertaken as a result of the Balance of Payments crises which was worsened by the Gulf War in 1991 that sent crude oil prices spiraling and also the loss of remittances from Indian workers there who fled to India for their safety. This sent India into dire economic crises and resulted in its further integration with the world economy.
- (ii) The second was the Madrid Peace Conference in October 1991 which happened after the Gulf War itself which brought the Israelis and other Middle Eastern nations in a peace-making process. The Palestinian issue was discussed more pro-actively there and eventually Israel was recognized by the Arab nations. This led to several nations, including China recognizing Israel as well.
- (iii) The third and most important factor was the collapse of the Soviet Union itself in December 1991. India lost an important ally as a result. The USSR was its largest trade partner of crude oil and high-technology. It also provided the largest development aid to India. This enabled India view Zionism beyond a movement of imperialism, racism etc

²³ Feiler, Gil(2012) “India’s Economic Relations with Israel and the Arabs” pg 1,2,3

and see it as a liberation-based one for the Jewish people²⁴.

Thus, it appears that India had great incentive to consider Israel as an ally and receive economic, technological benefits. Prior history had also shown Israel’s interest in helping India during a military crisis as well. According to Falk(2012), the priorities of Indian politics had changed substantially as well. India no longer needed to consider the anti-colonial or religious divide factor in ascertaining its foreign policy unlike the time of its inception. Additionally, the Arabs had recognized Israel which led to ease of establishing better ties. Although Muslims in India were opposed to this alliance, the benefits appeared to outweigh the effects of upsetting them.

Although India’s interest in the Middle East is directed primarily by three factors – energy security, trade relations and employment opportunities in the Gulf, it has steadily increased trade with Israel. There has been significant trading rises with Israel since liberalization. This has been shown by the table below :-

Table 1: India’s bilateral trade with Israel (million USD)

Period	Israel
1991	129
1995	430
2005	2200
2009	3540
2010	3800

Source: Compiled from Feiler(2012)

Two contending opinions have emerged in this scenario of improved Indo-Israeli relations. According to Kumaraswamy, the relationship between India and Israel has made the Indo-Arab relation more complicated while others like Mustafa El-Feki²⁵ consider it in decline particularly due to the attitude of the Arab world towards Indo-Pakistan situation. According to Chengappa(2010)²⁶, India’s closeness to Israel would lead to dilution of its relations with the Middle East. Nonetheless, though

²⁴ Pinto, Cliff (2013) “The India-Israel Alliance- Part I: The Arab World’s betrayal (from pre-independence to 1992) The Israel Times, 5 February, available at <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-india-israel-alliance-part-1-the-arab-world/>

²⁵ El-Feki, Mustafa (2007) “An Indo-Arab Blunder??” Intellibriefs, 6 February, available at <http://intellibriefs.blogspot.in/2007/02/indo-arab-blunder.html>

²⁶ Chengapapa, Bidanda (2010) “India-Israel Relations: Politico-Military Dimensions” pg 254

the trade with Israel is small compared to countries like UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar featuring as the largest West Asian partners of India and massive even on a global scale, there remains much incentive to pursue this relationship. Both nations faced terrorist issues from their respective neighbor as well that required a great deal of military and intelligence cooperation. The 1999 Kargil War and 2009 Mumbai Terror attacks served to cement this relationship further.

i. What about the Palestinian Issue in the IInd Phase?

Despite the emergence of full bilateral relations, India continued to express its staunch support for Palestine which was reminiscent of its pre-1992 position. The representation of Israel was still limited to a consulate in Mumbai. In 1993, due to the Oslo Agreement, India started a mission in the Gaza Strip which reported Foreign Office in New Delhi instead of the Indian Embassy in Tel Aviv. In 2004, as the Gaza situation worsened, the mission was moved to Ramallah. Kumaraswamy highlights that India was not ready to explicitly recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. However, it was obvious to the Indian leadership that they could support the Palestine issue without losing benefits of a good relation with Israel. Nonetheless, things remain complex on a multilateral level as India's partnership with Israel has not translated into greater understanding in international forums on the latter's position with the Arabs. Israel has complained on many an occasion that India hasn't changed its voting pattern and continues to support the Arabs in UN. However, India entered another complex phase of its relationship with Israel since the NDA government took over in 1998.

V. Phase III: MATURING OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

According to Kumaraswamy(2010)²⁷, the countries entered a more complex relation since 1998 when the NDA government came to power. This was marked by intensified cooperation and a more nuanced perspective adopted by leadership. Inbar and Nigthoujam(2012)²⁸, state that the Hindu-oriented BJP which was focused on threat of Islamic terrorism found a natural ally in Israel. As India faced the onslaught of Pakistan-based terrorism and had concerns over its nuclear weapons, Israel too faced threats from Iran in relation to its nuclear program

and its endorsement of terrorist groups like Hizballah and Hamas. Closer ties occurred due to the US decision to reduce the sanctions against India's nuclear program which were imposed after the 1998 nuclear Pokhran test.

i. The Arab Response and India's position

According to Aaron(2003)²⁹, this warming of ties did not go unnoticed by the Arab media who repeatedly highlighted visits between the two countries. The ties between the countries strengthened further by several high-level visits from Israeli leaders to India. General J.J Singh, the Indian Army Chief visited Israel in 1997 and this visit was kept highly discreet. The Arab response was evident from the reaction of the Arab League³⁰ whose deputy secretary general Mohammed Ismail considered this growing closeness as a threat to the Arab interest. India sought to mitigate this growing concern by the Arab nations after the tests by requesting a cancelation of the proposed visit by Israel Staff Chief (General Amnon Shahak). In 2001, India's position became further evident from the refusal of Foreign Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh to acknowledge any relationship of strategic interest between India and Israel and he continued to downplay its importance while in Cairo. This is interesting to note because six months ago, Advani had publicly expressed a "nuclear cooperation" scheme between the two nations. Thus, it appeared that India was trying to maintain ties with Israel while trying to convince its Arab allies that there was no ongoing strategic interest.

ii. An Anti-Terrorism Axis?

The visit by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2003 was a historic one particularly in the context of the still ongoing Palestinian issue. It was marked by widespread protests in India. The role of BJP government is important here. They had forged a close relation with the pro-Israel groups in Washington, particularly the American Jewish Committee(AJC). In 2003, Brajesh Mishra, the National Security Advisor addressed them and emphasized a India-Israel-US alliance to counteract the threat of terrorism. Though the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) clarified that this axis wasn't

²⁷ Kumaraswamy, P.R (2009) "The Friendship with Israel: India squares the circle" pg 17

²⁸ Inbar and Nigthoujam(2012) "Indo-Israeli Defense Cooperation in the twenty-first century" pg 1

²⁹ Aaron, Sushil J. (2003) "Straddling Faultlines: India's foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East", pg 25

³⁰ The Arab League comprises of Syria, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Mauritania, Egypt, Lebanon, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, Tunisia, Kuwait, Morocco, Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Somalia, Jordan, Palestine, Djibouti, and Comoros.

the case, Mishra's statement made it evident that closer ties were pro-Israeli groups were occurring. The AJC opened its office in New Delhi in 2004.

Despite these seemingly Pro-Israeli stances, it is evident that high level visits from the Indian Government hadn't occurred yet on a publicized basis. The rationale, however followed by India was based on pragmatic engagement such as that of China who engaged with both Israel and the Arab nations with the latter having no concerns about its defence ties. India even turned to Israel to update its outdated Soviet weaponry as the country already had the advantage of having many experienced engineers who had been associated with the USSR. Its interest did not lay in forming an axis with the US as well given its close link with Pakistan's military establishment. The US understanding though was implicit to let India acquire sensitive military equipment from Israel. Thus, the Israeli-Indian relationship was never a military alliance as both nations made no pledge to fight for each other during a crisis but heavily led by terrorism concerns.

iii. Increased Caution by Indian Leadership:-

Counter-terrorism cooperation between India and Israel did not automatically become an anti-Islamic extremism stance. Despite its anti-Muslim image, BJP was careful to engage with the Arab Nations and foster better ties. Therefore, while trying to forge closer ties with Israel, the government also engaged with high-level contact with Middle eastern nations like Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the response of India during the Iraq War in 2002-03 demonstrated its complex relationship with US and Middle East. It reflected the need for India to have favor with the Americans to counteract Pakistan's terrorism measures. Thus, Indian leadership favored short-term measures over long-term regional ambitions to foster internal security.

iv. Iran Crises and India-Israel Relations – The US Factor:-

Sajedi(2014)³¹ is of the opinion that developing Indo-Israeli relations has no bearing on the relationship India had with Iran. On the other hand, Kumaraswamy(2012)³² is of the view that Israeli-Iran tensions has affected India's relations with both the countries. India's ability to balance its relationship with the two is key to its success in its Middle Eastern policy. This was very visible in 2003

³¹ Sajedi, Amir (2014) "Indo-Israel Relations and the Iranian Factor" pg 180

³² Kumaraswamy, P.R (2012) "Israel: The Non-Parallel Player" pg 983

when India welcomed Iranian President Khatami as chief guest of Republic Day Event. It went on to sign the Delhi Declaration of intensified cooperation in various sectors, such as hydrocarbon energy. A few months later, Vajpayee hosted the Prime Minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon which also resulted in joint cooperation between the nations. Thus, it is evident that India was trying to maintain good relations with both countries and distancing itself from the Israeli demands to alienate Iran³³. This was different under the UPA government who struggled to not give in to US pressures, particularly evident in the controversial voting in 2005 International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Thus, it appears that the US had a greater role to play in this scenario than Israel in India's stance towards Iran. However, defence commitments continue to influence India's policy towards Israel. Till 2013, India became the largest buyer of Israel's weapons and remained as her third largest trading partner in the Asian sub-continent.

Thus, in light of the above phases, it becomes evident that the pro-Arab policy adopted by India had failed particularly in relation to the Pakistan-Kashmir related issue. The United States had a decisive role to play in India's responsiveness to Israel as well. In view of the present political scenario, it becomes important to discuss the role played by the current BJP Government so far. It is the first Central government in many decades to come to power with a majority, non-coalition rule. The role of Narendra Modi and the foreign ministry needs to be re-evaluated and possible caveats need to be discussed as highlighted in the next section.

VI. ROLE OF BJP LEADERSHIP SINCE 2014

The nature of interactions between the leadership of two countries has important bearing on its bilateral relationship which has been mainly strategic in this context. It is observable that the Prime Ministerial level meetings haven't occurred since 2003 and neither have Defence Ministers visited since Pranab Mukherjee's³⁴ cancelled visit in 2006 due to the Lebanon War and Gaza military operations by Israel. Expectations have been greatly fueled by the Modi Government's accession to power in 2014. High-level interactions with both Israel and Arab countries have been maintained by the Government. Pranab Mukherjee became the first President to visit Israel in 2014. Some of the official interactions between the governments have been shown as follows –

³³ See reference 26, pg 987

³⁴ Acting Defense Minister in 2006

Table 2: Important visits between India-Israel since 2014

Date	Nature of Interaction
July 2014	Indian Defence Secretary in Israel
Sep 2014	Modi-Netanyahu meet in New York
Oct 2014	Israeli National Security Advisor in India
Nov 2014	Home Minister in Israel
Feb 2015	Israeli Defence Minister in India
Oct 2015	Indian President in Israel
Nov 2015	Modi-Netanyahu meet in Paris
Jan 2016	Indian Foreign Minister in Israel
2016 (Pending)	Indian Prime Minister in Israel

Source: Compiled from Tanvi Madan, *The Brookings Institution*

It becomes evident from the above that the present government is indeed keen on pursuing a strong relationship with Israel. Narendra Modi had already forged strong relations with Israel while he was the Chief Minister of Gujarat by visiting the nation in 2006. This is interesting to note given that he was unwelcome in most countries during that time. The personal chemistry between Modi-Netanyahu has ensured boosted bilateral relations. This is evident during a time when Indian foreign policy towards Israel has matured and become more balanced despite the Palestinian issue that has remained unsolved till date. In this context, the Modi Government’s attitude towards the Arab Nations so far needs to be considered. The following table highlights the visits undertaken by the Government so far:

Table 3: Important visits by India to the Middle East (excluding Israel)

Date	Nature of Interaction
Feb 2015	Indian Foreign Minister in Oman
Aug 2015	Indian Prime Minister in UAE
Aug 2015	Indian Foreign Minister in Egypt
Nov 2015	Indian Foreign Minister in UAE
Nov 2015	Indian Prime Minister in Turkey
Jan 2016	Indian Foreign Minister in Bahrain
Apr 2016	Indian Prime Minister in Saudi Arabia

Source: Compiled from Indian Express articles

Thus, BJP government is keen on maintaining positive relations with both blocs although it has shown greater decisiveness and self-confidence in its foreign policy. This has its roots in the Look East Policy followed by Narashima Rao which is now being furthered by the implementation of the Act East policy of the Modi Government. The caveats that exist in the present scenario are pertaining to Israel’s continued offensive on the Gaza strip that has humanitarian concerns, its increasing closeness to China and the existing ties with the Middle East for the supply of oil, remittances from workers. According to Blarel³⁵, it is unlikely that India will change its traditional post-Kargil war approach. Much remains to be seen in terms of the paradigm shift that will occur in the present government’s tenure from a buyer-seller relationship to an openly pro-Israeli stance without alienating the Arab countries.

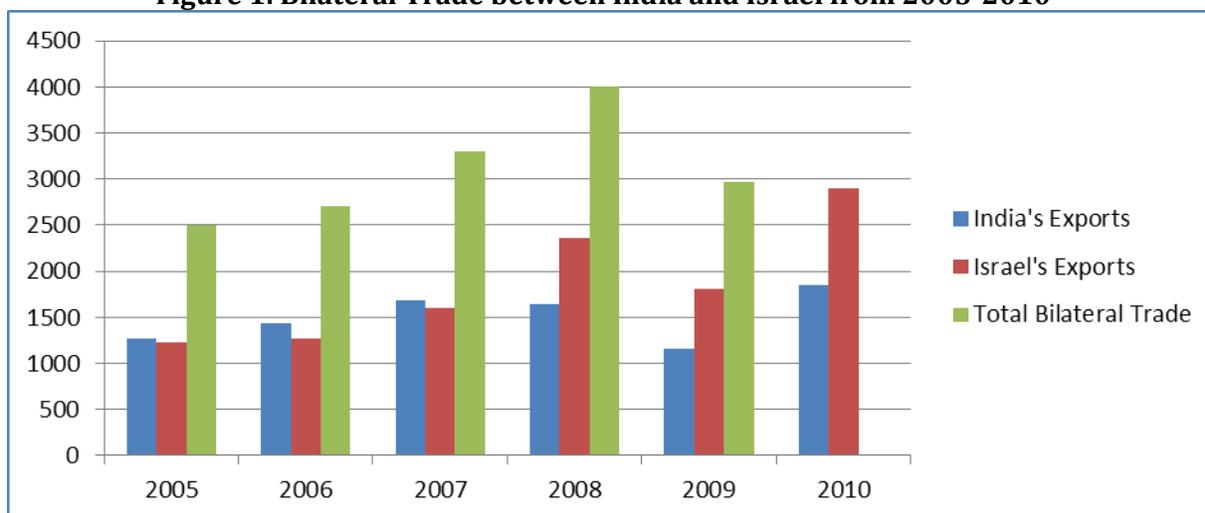
CONCLUSION

The relationship between India and Israel has changed substantially from a hostile one to a strategic one based on the relationship with Middle East countries and other international factors. Domestic factors, such as the large Muslim population and the Left who support the Palestinian cause have become less important over time in comparison to the benefits acquired by defence, infrastructure, and technology agreements. The Pro-Arab policy failed to yield the necessary political benefits expected by Indian leadership. The focus shifted towards developing relations with Israel without alienating the Arab Nations and de-linking the Palestinian issue. BJP Government has had an active role to play in the thawing of relations between the two nations and the present government is actively undertaking this role as well. The position has now changed to a one of a balancing act for India.

³⁵ Blarel, Nicholas(2015) “The Myth of India’s Shift Towards Israel” *The Diplomat*, 19 February available at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/02/the-myth-of-indias-shift-toward-israel/>

APPENDIX

Figure 1: Bilateral Trade between India and Israel from 2005-2010³⁶



	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
India's Exports	1276.3	1433.3	1688.8	1648.8	1157.4	1845.5
Israel's Exports	1224.2	1270.4	1606.7	2361.3	1810.9	2901.6
Total Bilateral Trade	2500.5	2703.7	3295.5	4010.1	2968.3	4747.1

Table 1: Number of Indians in Middle East in 1948, 1970-71 and 1981

Name of the Country	Immigrants in 1948	Immigrants in 1970-71	Indian Workers in 1981
Aden/Yemen	5594	2000	5000
Bahrain	1138	5500	25000
Egypt	1000	N/A	N/A
Iran	2500	1000	N/A
Iraq	650	12000	25,000
Kuwait	1250	12000	80,000
Muscat/Oman	1145	4500	65,000
Others	Less than 100 each ³⁷	3000 ³⁸	359,500 ³⁹
Total	14,000	40,000	559,500

Source: Compiled from Nair, P.R Gopinathan (1983) "Asian Emigration to the Middle East: Emigration from India" Pg 4, 5 and 7

³⁶ See reference 12

³⁷ These included Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Turkey

³⁸ Includes Saudi Arabia and Qatar

³⁹ Includes Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Jordan and Yemen

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