

FROM ANTIPATHY TO MILITARY COOPERATION

India and Israel: an unlikely alliance

India has the world's third largest Muslim population, and political and economic ties with Arab nations. It is also buying weapons and military expertise from its new friend Israel

by Isabelle Saint-Mézard

India and Israel were born (in 1947 and 1948) through long and violent partition processes, from the ruins of the British empire. Both were caught up in inextricable armed conflicts. Yet this did not make for any particular affinity between the countries: rather the reverse.

From the 1920s onwards, the leaders of India's nationalist movement sided with the Palestinian Arabs against British imperialism, opposing the Zionist aim of establishing a Jewish state. India voted against the partition of Palestine at the UN General Assembly of 1947, and only recognised Israel in 1950. Until the 1980s it formed a bloc with the Arab countries at the UN and within the Non-aligned Movement, in defence of the Palestinian people's right to a sovereign state.

India had its reasons: it was worried that the Muslim world would side with Pakistan over its claim to Kashmir; it was concerned about energy security (India depends largely on the Middle East for its oil); and in the late 1980s and 1990s, when it had a serious payments imbalance, it relied on money sent back home by the many expatriates working in the Gulf states (1).

But the gap between India and Israel has narrowed over the years. As early as the 1960s the two countries established secret military and intelligence contacts. Israel was willing to help the Indian army in its conflicts with China (in 1962) and Pakistan (in 1965 and 1971). In 1978, Israel's foreign minister Moshe Dayan even made a secret trip to India to propose cooperation. In 1992 New Delhi established formal diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv. The decision was facilitated by the end of the cold war and the Madrid Middle East conference of October 1991, which gave hopes for peace. But it was also prompted by India's disappointment with the meagre results of its foreign policy: it had never managed to neutralise Pakistan's influence among the Arab countries and its own position on Kashmir had been repeatedly condemned by resolutions of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference.

Diplomatic relations with Israel were initiated by the centre-left Indian National Congress (Congress Party) but it was the extremist Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in power between 1998 and 2004, which developed the partnership and gave it meaning. Suspicious of, if not hostile to, the Muslim world, the BJP did not hesitate to show its sympathy for Israel. Unlike the Congress Party, the BJP

has never felt constrained by the opinion of India's Muslim minority in its domestic policy. The post-9/11 situation strengthened the relationship as the BJP-led coalition government eagerly promoted the idea of liberal democracies forming a united front against Islamist terrorism. The BJP invited Israel's prime minister Ariel Sharon to visit India in September 2003, to commemorate the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the US.

This led to the dream of a strategic triangle between Israel, India and the US (2), an idea first put forward on 8 May 2003 by Brajesh Mishra, then India's national security adviser, in a speech at a dinner of the American Jewish Committee: "Our principal theme here today is a collective remembrance of the horrors of terrorism and a celebration of the alliance of free societies involved in combating this scourge. The US, India and Israel have all been prime targets of terrorism. They have to jointly face the same ugly face of modern day terrorism" (3). Later, representatives of the governments discussed defence and anti-terrorism issues. Meanwhile, a decisive rapprochement was taking place between pro-Indian and pro-Israeli pressure groups in Washington.

Congress in power

After the Congress Party's return to office at the head of a coalition government in 2004 there was less emphasis on the ideology, but the Indian-Israeli relationship was not fundamentally affected because it concerned the priority areas of defence and security.

The range of links has diversified and there is now collaboration in agriculture, tourism, science and technology. Although largely dependent on the diamond industry, which accounted for nearly 50% of all trade between the two countries in 2008 (4), commercial exchanges between India and Israel rose in value from \$200m in 1992 to \$4bn in 2008. But defence remains the core of the cooperative relationship.

Israel's defence industry relies on exports for its survival. Until the end of the 1990s most shipments were to China. But the US veto on the transfer of sensitive technologies to China forced Israel to look to other markets, including India. This proved fruitful as economic growth allowed India to finance its (considerable) requirements for defence equipment. India was looking for new suppliers, as Russian manufacturers were only able to fill part of the void left by the disappearance of its former Soviet suppliers. (Many Soviet production lines were dismantled or put out of action after 1991.) The US was also moving closer to India, which facilitated technology transfer.

The Phalcon radar systems developed by Israel Aerospace Industries for the Indian air force (5) are a good example. Having forbidden their sale to China in

2000, the US authorised their sale to India. The conclusion New Delhi drew was that a rapprochement with Tel Aviv would give it access to technology the US was reluctant to export.

In a decade, Tel Aviv has become a leading supplier of arms to India, now its largest export market. The value of the contracts signed over the last 10 years is estimated at nearly \$10bn (6). Flexibility and responsiveness are Israel's great strengths. It was able to adapt right away to the needs of India's armed forces (most of whose equipment is Soviet or Russian) and gained lucrative contracts for the modernisation of Russian equipment: tanks, aircraft carriers, helicopters and fighter aircraft have all been fitted with Israeli electronics; it was able to respond quickly when supplying the Indian army with munitions during the 1999 confrontation with Pakistan in Kashmir, the "Kargil crisis" (7).

Industrial cooperation has centred on surveillance radar and drone aircraft, and on missile systems. India and Israel signed a contract worth \$1.1bn for three Phalcon radar systems in 2004. Cooperation on missiles began in 2001 with a contract worth \$270m for a ship defence system based on Barak missiles. It reached a new level in January 2006 when the countries agreed to jointly develop a new generation of missiles. This brought Israel into competition with Russia, which was also jointly developing cruise missiles with India. In 2007, India and Israel unveiled a joint project worth \$2.5bn for the development of a new air defence system based on Barak missiles, for use by the Indian air force and army.

Spy satellites

Another area of cooperation is satellite imaging. In January 2008 India launched an advanced spy satellite on Israel's behalf, capable of providing information on strategic installations in Iran. In April 2009 India launched its own spy satellite, acquired as a matter of urgency after the Mumbai terrorist attacks of November 2008 that left 170 dead and revealed serious gaps in its territorial surveillance network. India also spent \$600m on Israeli radar to strengthen the warning systems along its western seaboard.

Israel is certainly a privileged partner in India's efforts to improve its territorial security systems. The countries are strengthening an already close cooperative relationship on counter-terrorism. Israel has helped India to build a barrier along the "line of control", its de facto border with Pakistan; it has provided surveillance systems to prevent infiltration by Islamist militants and Israelis are among the few outside consultants to have visited the theatre of operations in Kashmir.

New Delhi, like most of the international community, still supports the creation of an independent and viable Palestinian state. But the crises between Israel and its neighbours have taught India to hedge its diplomatic bets. It tries to keep the relationship with Israel separate from the Middle East situation – to protect its cooperative relationship with Israel while taking care not to antagonise Arab countries. India's official statements are carefully worded, condemning in turn the violence of the terrorist attacks against Israel and the brutality of the reprisals. While moving closer to Israel, India also began to develop ties with Iran in the early 2000s. Before Ariel Sharon's visit in September 2003, New Delhi had received the Iranian president Mohammad Khatami. Paradoxically, the rapprochement with Israel has given India new leverage in its Middle East policy: since they cannot be sure of India's support, Middle East countries pay greater heed to Indian interests.

The relationship with Israel is a delicate matter for internal even more than external reasons: India needs to consider the feelings of its Muslim minority (14% of the population). It also has to take account of the left wing, heirs to the anti-imperialist tradition, who protest against any overtly pro-Israel policy. Indian decision-makers strive for discretion in their dealings with Israel, but maintaining a balance is much more difficult in times of crisis: during the Lebanon war of 2006, New Delhi at first confined itself to hesitant condemnation of Israel's actions, then hardened its tone under pressure from the communist parties and Muslim voters. Exasperation eventually led the Indian parliament to the unanimous adoption of a resolution condemning the offensive.

At a diplomatic level, India's hesitation over the Middle East is the result of a predictable polarisation between those who take the traditional pro-Arab position and those in favour of partnership with Israel. But it also reveals internal tension between the need to appease a minority of 160 million who make India the world's third largest Muslim population and a fascination with Israel's methods, which some in New Delhi would like to try against terrorist movements based in Pakistan.

