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The Significant Warming of Indo-Israeli Relations in the Post-Cold War Period

December 7, 2009 By [Arielle Kandel](#)



The Republic of India and the State of Israel, both territories formerly administered by Great Britain, were established less than a year apart (India in August 1947 and Israel in May 1948). From the beginning, relations between the two new states proved rather arduous. Since the 1920s, the leaders of the Indian liberation movement Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru had fervently opposed the partition of Palestine and the creation of a Jewish state on this territory. On November 29, 1947, India's representative to the UN General Assembly had voted against the partition resolution. While the State of Israel proclaimed its independence in May 1948, it was only two years later, in September 1950, that India officially recognized the Jewish State. Even then, the two states did not establish full diplomatic relations. In 1952, India reluctantly permitted the

opening of an Israeli consulate in Bombay and maintained a fairly hostile posture toward the Jewish state in the following decades.

A confluence of ideological, strategic, and political factors—both international and domestic—impeded the relationship between India and Israel. While the Indian rejection of the partition of Palestine and the anti-Western, anti-imperialist worldview of Indian leaders certainly played a role in the country's stance toward Israel during the entire period of the Cold War, India's strategic interests and political constraints—in particular those related to India's close links with the Arab and Muslim world and to India's Muslim domestic population—contributed to India's anti-Israeli stance. Despite occasional cooperation between Indian and Israeli authorities—especially the military and security establishments—it took India nearly 40 years to change its stance toward the Jewish state. On January 29, 1992, Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao officially normalized relations with Israel.

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This article examines the dynamics of Indo-Israeli relations since normalization. First discussed are the three main areas of bilateral cooperation—diplomatic and political, military, and economic—followed by the main constraints hindering the advancement of these ties in each area of cooperation. Last, the nature of the Indo-Israeli relationship is discussed, with particular focus on the question of whether the Indo-Israeli relationship forms a “strategic partnership.”

BILATERAL COOPERATION BETWEEN INDIA AND ISRAEL

Diplomatic and Political Cooperation

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been significant progress in Indo-Israeli relations on the diplomatic and political level. In the early 1990s, several major shifts in the international system as well as changes on the regional and domestic levels decreased the impact of the constraints that had hindered relations between India and Israel throughout the Cold War and created favorable conditions for the rapprochement and normalization of relations between the two states. India's fear of alienating Arab and Muslim states if it forged ties with Israel diminished when it saw those states soften their attitudes toward Israel with the opening of the peace process. The impact of the Muslim factor on India's domestic politics decreased on account of the ascension to power in the 1990s of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu nationalist party with very favorable views towards Israel.^[1]

Even more significant were new constraints that made it necessary for India to rethink its foreign policy and favor rapprochement with Israel. First and foremost, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union greatly affected India's interests. India and the Soviet Union had been close allies for several decades and above all, the Soviet Union was meeting nearly 80 percent of India's military needs in 1991.^[2] During the early 1990s, it thus became imperative for India to find itself new partners and most importantly, new military suppliers. Improving relations with Israel was therefore an interesting option, especially in the field of defense.

Second and no less important, the majority of India's political establishment understood in the immediate post-Cold War period that it was imperative for India to build sound relations with the United States, the sole hegemonic power in the changed international system. Indian leaders came to assume that normalization with Israel would facilitate India's rapprochement with the United States, since they believed that the American Jewish lobby had a major influence on the foreign policy decisions of Washington. Indian Prime Minister Rao, in particular, was convinced that normalization with Israel was necessary to improve India's standing vis-à-vis the American Jewish community and the U.S. political establishment.^[3]

Thus, on January 29, 1992, Prime Minister Rao decided to normalize relations with Israel and to establish full diplomatic ties with the Jewish state.

Of the many bilateral visits of officials and agreements signed by India and Israel since 1992 signal the significant improvement of diplomatic and political ties between the two states. Then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's 2003 visit to India constituted the first official visit of an Israeli prime minister to India. During his three-day visit, Sharon held talks on a wide range of issues with India's Prime Minister Vajpayee and other senior Indian officials. In addition, six bilateral agreements

were signed as a result of these discussions.^[4] At the conclusion of the visit, the two prime ministers issued the Delhi Statement on Friendship and Cooperation.^[5]

Another significant change in relations between India and Israel on the diplomatic and political level since 1992 was the positive shift in India's attitude with regard to Israel on the Palestine issue. Though its representative in the UN General Assembly continues to vote in favor of most resolutions condemning Israeli policy as in the past, India has ceased to participate along with the Arab states in the active promotion of texts hostile to Israel.^[6]

Military Cooperation

Arms sales and defense cooperation formed a prime impetus for improved ties between India and Israel in the early 1990s. Indo-Israeli military ties have considerably expanded since 1992, especially after the BJP's ascension to power in 1998, and even more so since around 2005. Today, military cooperation continues to form the core of the Indo-Israeli relationship.

Initially, a buyer-supplier relationship was formed between the two countries. India purchased from Israel advanced weapons systems and technologies. In addition to large volume of military sales by Israel to India since 1992, in the early 2000s, under the favorable auspices of India's BJP-led government, the first joint Indo-Israeli military ventures were formed for the development of specific weapons systems and technologies. It marked a new phase in the military relationship, signaling a greater trust and synergy between the defense establishments of the two states.^[7] Accrued cooperation in intelligence and counterterrorism has also further strengthened bilateral military ties, especially after then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's 2003 visit to India.

In 2004, there were concerns that the return to power of the Indian National Congress party in India would strain the two states' defense and security ties. However, Indo-Israeli ties have continued to expand at an even faster pace, and in early 2009, various media outlets reported that Israel had become India's prime supplier of weapons and military technology.^[8] The reception by India of the first Israeli Phalcon early warning plane in May 2009 was enthusiastic.^[9]

Several strategic interests account for the extensive development of Indo-Israeli ties on the military front since normalization. After having lost the Soviet Union as its primary strategic and military partner, Israel rapidly emerged as an alternate military supplier for India. For Israel's part, the need for considerable resources to finance the development of new weapons systems and technologies and the country's limited domestic market^[10] required Israeli defense industries to generate revenues through military product exports. With its large domestic market and growing defense budget, India is an extremely attractive partner for Israel.

As both India and Israel are eager to improve capabilities to fight against similar challenges and threats, military cooperation between the two states allows the defense industries to share the expensive development costs of new weapons systems and technologies. Three other major mutual strategic interests that have enhanced defense and security ties include the fight against terrorism and radical Islam, concerns over proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and long-range missile technology, and the growing interest of the two states for the Indian Ocean.

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Economic Cooperation

Though it did not initially form the main impetus for improved ties and still does not constitute the core of the Indo-Israeli relationship, economic cooperation between the two countries has steadily increased between since 1992. In 2008, the total volume of bilateral trade was over \$4 billion, and India has become Israel's third largest trading partner in Asia.^[11] Economic ties have also greatly expanded in the fields of agriculture, science, and technology. In the scientific and technological sectors, cooperation has mainly involved joint research and development projects, especially in the fields of telecommunications and software. Since the 1990s, cooperation has also prospered in the space sector, an area of strategic importance for both states. As for agriculture, dozens of joint ventures have been formed by Indian and Israeli companies and research institutes, mainly in irrigation, water management, and crop production.

Though trade has been diversified to a certain extent, the diamond industry is still Israel's main trade area with India. Yet there is greater potential for cooperation in other trade sectors as well, including agriculture, renewable energies, and industrial research and development.

There are several interests underlying the Indo-Israeli economic relationship. The limited size of the Israeli domestic market is a major constraint on Israel's economic development. It is imperative for Israeli companies to generate profits through

exports to foreign countries; if not, the cost per unit of research and development of innovative products and technologies remains too high to allow firms to prosper and expand their activities. The huge size of the Indian market and the high prospect of sales thus make India particularly attractive to Israeli companies.

At the same time, India benefits from the transfer of Israeli advanced technology and expertise, which contributes to the modernization of and strengthens the Indian economy. Joint Indo-Israeli ventures in the fields of agriculture, science, and technology allow India and Israel to undertake research and development projects requiring important financial resources that they would not be able to raise on their own. Cooperation with Indian firms also facilitates Israel's entry into the Indian market and enhances Israel's access to Southeast Asia and the Third World through India's own ties with these countries. In addition, Israel's good relations with the United States and the European Union facilitate the access of Indian goods to these markets.

MAIN CONSTRAINTS HINDERING DEVELOPMENT OF INDO-ISRAELI TIES

Diplomatic and Political Constraints

While Israeli leaders and top officials—including the prime minister and president—have made several official visits to India, there have been relatively few visits by Indian leaders and top officials to Israel. Prime Minister Sharon's September 2003 visit to India was expected to pave the way for a reciprocal visit of Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee. Yet despite Vajpayee's and the BJP-led government's expressions of sympathy for the Jewish state and the expansion of bilateral ties, such a visit never took place. Since the return to power of the Congress party in 2004, the prospects for an Indian prime minister visiting Israel have only become dimmer.

Two main factors strain Indo-Israeli ties on the diplomatic and political levels. First, though the country's sizeable Muslim population^[12] is not especially hostile to Israel—partly because the majority adheres to the more moderate Sufi school of Islam—there is a widespread perception among the Indian elite and political establishment that it has to be careful when dealing with relations with Israel. While the BJP (the Hindu nationalist party) is relatively immune from such a consideration, the Muslim factor does play a role in the policies adopted by the Congress party. A large section of India's Muslim population has traditionally voted for the Congress party in India's national elections, and the party fears it would lose the support of these voters if it adopted an overly friendly attitude toward Israel.

Fears also exist within India's political and military establishments that some of India's Muslim population may be drawn to Muslim fundamentalism coming from outside India. India's leadership, in particular the Congress party, has thus become more aware than ever before of the sensitivities of the Muslim population; relations with Israel have thus been kept low-profile and the government has refrained from overtly expressing close ties, especially in fields of defense and security.

Yet there are also several left-wing political parties in India that are openly hostile toward Israel, in particular the Marxist Communist Party of India (CPI(M)). After the 2004 general elections, in which the Congress party returned to power as the head of the United Progressive Alliance, the government faced pressure from these left-wing political parties (both those that were part of the coalition as well as those in opposition) to distance itself from Israel. The effect of such pressure, however, has been limited. Nonetheless, Israel's leadership still watches the Indian elections closely and the role of the left in government.

Another often forgotten strain on Indo-Israeli relations is Israeli domestic politics. According to Harsh V. Pant, an Israeli government that is less flexible on peace negotiations makes it harder for India to develop relations further.^[13]

Military Constraints

Military cooperation between India and Israel continues to be subject to three major constraints: the U.S. factor, bureaucracy and corruption, and competition from foreign companies.

The United States has played a rather ambivalent role, both as a constraint and an encouragement. Since the 1970s, the United States has been Israel's prime supplier of weapons and advanced military technology. Pant explains this means Washington has a "significant veto over Israel's defense exports" and has "been reluctant to give its nod to systems involving American technology or financial input."^[14] In 2003, the United States opposed Israel selling India the Arrow anti-ballistic missile defense system, a system jointly developed by Israel and the United States. As a result, this deal was abandoned.

The Indo-Israeli defense partnership has suffered less on account of the U.S. factor than have Chinese-Israeli military ties. In 2000, the United States vetoed Israel's sale of the Phalcon to China. Yet in 2004, Israel signed a defense deal for the sale of three Phalcon systems to India. One explanation for the more favorable attitude towards Indo-Israeli military ties is that while the United States feared Israeli military sales to China would cause a direct threat to U.S. strategic interests in the region, it did not perceive Israeli military sales to India as such a threat.

In fact, several Israeli scholars have argued that the close ties forged by India and Israel in the fields of military and defense serve U.S. strategic interests in the region. Martin Sherman has underlined that “in the newly emerging balance of geo-strategic power, the growing Chinese challenge to U.S. primacy will almost inevitably dictate the need for a regional counterweight to Chinese domination. In this regard, a powerful, progressive India bolstered by Israeli technological expertise appears the most plausible and practical alternative.”^[15] Efraim Inbar has suggested that a trilateral U.S.-Indo-Israeli alliance “could result from the new U.S.-Indian-Israeli convergence on strategic issues such as counterterrorism, missile defense, and preemption.”^[16]

Two other major issues strain Indo-Israeli military and defense ties. The first relates to India’s bureaucratic system, characterized by its slowness, complexity, and lack of coordination. The process of negotiating, signing, and implementing deals with India is very slow, especially in the military and security fields, where India’s domestic politics can affect what is purchased and who India works with on such projects.

An even more sensitive issue, corruption, has on more than one occasion posed a serious threat to Indo-Israeli defense ties. The so-called Barak controversy constituted the first major occurrence of alleged corruption in Indo-Israeli military ties. In October 2006, six years after the signature of a deal to supply India with several Barak anti-missile systems by Israel Aerospace Industries and Rafael, India’s Central Bureau of Investigation launched an investigation into the matter, alleging that bribes had been paid to influence the decision of the Indian defense minister. As of early 2010, the investigation into the Barak case was still in progress.

Allegations of corruption have also been raised against Israeli Military Industries regarding a March 2009 deal signed with India for the building of chemical plants. In June 2009, several Indian and Israeli media outlets reported that the firm had been blacklisted by the Indian government and that all defense deals with it had been frozen.^[17] While corruption in India affects arrangements with all foreign companies, it becomes an even more sensitive issue when it involves Israeli companies, simply because it gives more ammunition to those in India that are unfriendly toward relations with Israel.

Competition from foreign companies constitutes another major constraint. Arms sales and transfer of military technology to the Indian Defense Ministry operates through a relatively standard bidding process, similar to that which exists in the civilian business sector. However, what differs is that defense firms wishing to participate in the bidding process are generally required to first obtain security clearance from their state’s defense ministry authorities for every system offered to India for sale or joint production and development. Israeli defense firms have benefited from a relatively low level of competition from foreign companies, since Israel has been one of the few states both willing and able to sell weapons and advanced military technology to India. Moreover, Israeli defense firms have generally managed to obtain security clearance for the sale of advanced weapons systems and military technologies to India from the Israel Defense Ministry authorities without difficulty.^[18]

U.S. and European defense firms, on the other hand, did not obtain security clearance and were unable to compete in the Indian military market. Following India’s first nuclear device test in 1974 and even more so after the 1998 Pokhran tests, the governments of the United States and several other Western countries imposed severe restrictions on the export of advanced technology to India—primarily in the nuclear and space fields, but which also impacted other military sectors, such as missile development.^[19] However, this changed following the 2003 agreement between the United States and India to lift U.S. restrictions on high-technology trade.^[20] This has led to increasing concerns among the Israeli defense industry that the entry of U.S. and European defense firms into the Indian military market could hinder the further expansion of Indo-Israeli military ties in the coming years.

In July 2009, Israel Aerospace Industries was reported to have been forced under pressure of the Pentagon to withdraw its bid with the Swedish company Saab for the sale of fighter aircrafts to the Indian Air Force.^[21] The complaint specified was a concern that American technology used by Israel would be integrated into the Gripen offered to the Indians.”^[22] This complaint, however, may have been intended to help two U.S. companies—Boeing and Lockheed Martin—competing in the same deal. Some Israeli officials claimed the U.S. goal was to prevent Israel from lowering the price or winning the bid.^[23] The Israeli Defense Ministry apparently ordered Israel Aerospace Industries to withdraw for fear that competing would damage the U.S.-Israel relationship.^[24]

It is difficult to predict the extent to which Indo-Israeli military and defense ties will suffer in the future from these constraints, especially from corruption and foreign competition. Still, considering the major strategic interests and challenges that the Israeli and Indian military establishments and industries share, it is unlikely that such relations will decline in the short-term. Israeli defense firms also continue to benefit from their recognized expertise in specific areas of military production and services as well as strong ties with the Indian military establishment. Yet in order to lead to a more sustainable relationship between the two states, and one less dependent on the military sector, Israeli leaders should seek to the further and improve Indo-Israeli ties in other sectors (i.e. trade and agriculture) as well.

Economic Constraints

In non-military dealings, Indian bureaucracy, corruption, and foreign competition have also been major constraints on the expansion of Indo-Israeli cooperation. Further, dissimilarities in business culture have sometimes impeded efforts to work together.

THE INDO-ISRAELI RELATIONSHIP: A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP?

According to some analysts, India and Israel have entered or are moving toward a “strategic partnership.”^[25] A strategic partnership, however, implies a long-term commitment for cooperation. It also implies that the two states share a common view of world politics and of their respective positions in the international arena. Yet there is still a long ways to go before India and Israel forge a genuine strategic partnership. Though a series of strategic interests underlie Indo-Israeli ties, they are not sufficient to characterize the relationship as strategic.

It is Israeli rather than Indian scholars and officials who have defined the Indo-Israeli relationship as a strategic partnership. Since Israel is a small state surrounded by much larger Arab countries and largely isolated in within the region, it has sought to forge alliances with extra-regional powers since the late 1940s. This so-called periphery doctrine, forged by David Ben-Gurion in the early years of the Jewish state, has remained a constant of Israel’s foreign policy and strategic doctrine.^[26]

In the current political climate, India does not, however, seem willing or able to forge a genuine strategic partnership or alliance with Israel. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, India has preferred to maintain amicable relations with the largest number of countries rather than entangle itself in formal alliances with foreign countries. In addition, India’s domestic politics and dependence on the Arab world will likely continue to strain any improvement in Indo-Israeli strategic ties.

Most importantly, the Indo-Israeli relationship does not form a strategic partnership because India and Israel do not share a common worldview or have fully common goals. Even on one of the key strategic interests shared by the two states, combating global terror, they have dissimilar views. While Israel views Iran as the prime source of global terrorism, India confers this status to Pakistan. Harsh Pant also stresses, “While India can learn much from Israel’s tackling of terrorism... there are limits to how far India sees Israel’s strategy as a viable one. It views Israel’s tough policy toward contentious neighbors and the Palestinians as an approach which has not brought peace and security, but has rather served to entrench hatred in the Arab world.”^[27]

Moreover, the two states do not share a set of common friends and foes. As P.R. Kumaraswamy notes, the Indo-Israeli partnership “does not revolve around a common enemy.”^[28] Indeed, while India’s main security concerns remain directed against its regional neighbors Pakistan and China, Israel’s existing and potential security threats mainly emanate from Arabic-speaking countries—especially Syria and Lebanon—as well as from more distant enemies, first and foremost Iran. Efraim Inbar also acknowledges that Indo-Israeli ties do not at all constitute a military alliance. Their cooperation in the defense field is “not directed against any third party” but rather meant to “enhance national self-defense capabilities and stability.”^[29] Inbar also stresses that while Israel does not want Pakistan and China to view its bilateral cooperation with India negatively, India also has no interest in emulating Israel’s hostile posture toward the Arab states and Iran: “[n]either side wants to be drawn into the regional conflict of the other.”^[30]

CONCLUSION

Despite some constraints, ties between India and Israel are likely to continue to expand. Serious efforts should be undertaken to further advance economic ties between the two countries, especially in the high technology sectors of agriculture and science, where there is great potential for cooperation. Furthermore, this could in turn strengthen overall Indo-Israeli ties and compensate for a possible weakening of bilateral cooperation in the military sector in the future. It is also more important to cultivate people-to-people contacts between Indian and Israelis, as there has been an increasingly negative perception of Israeli tourists by Indian locals in recent years. In this vein, several organizations and associations have developed Israeli volunteer projects in India. The “Be a Kli,” for example, is a project organized in India by the All for the Kids Association, intended to develop the Israeli knowledge of Indian culture and to change Indians’ perceptions of Israelis.^[31]

Other tools to improve and strengthen people-to-people contacts between Indians and Israelis could include a greater number of joint academic seminars and exchange programs between academic institutes—very few Indian students come to study in Israel and vice-versa—the organization of Israeli cultural events in India and vice-versa, joint projects between Indian and Israeli non-governmental organizations, etc.

In addition, superior education on Indian contemporary political studies is lacking in Israel. If Israel wishes to expand its strategic ties with India, it would greatly benefit from producing well-trained specialists on the subject of India’s foreign policy and domestic issues.

* Arielle Kandel holds degrees in international law and Middle East studies from the University of Aix-Marseille III and Ben-Gurion University. Her Master's thesis focuses on Indo-Israeli strategic relations.

NOTES

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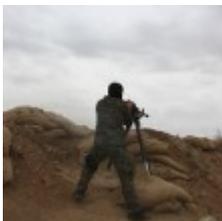
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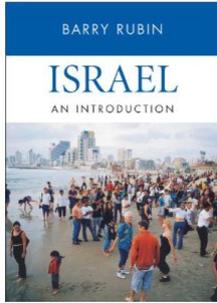
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