

# Indian - Israeli Ties Could Neutralize Delhi's Palestinian Policy

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A seminar on "Palestine: 1967 and After" organized by the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) and the mission of the League of Arab States (LAS) in New Delhi on June 22 highlighted India's still unwavering historical support for the Palestinian people, but failed to address the potential political effects of the growing Indian - Israeli ties on New Delhi's more than ten - decade old policy on the Arab - Israeli conflict in Palestine.

Only the criticism of those ties by the participating Indian intellectuals, university professors and journalists made up for ignoring the factor of the Indian - Israeli ties by the major speakers like the Indian Prime Minister's Special Envoy for West Asia and the Middle East Peace Process, Chinmaya R. Gharekhan, the Director General of the ICWA and the newly - appointed ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, Talmiz Ahmad, and M.P. Sitaram Yechury as well as the Secretary General of the LAS, Amr Moussa, whose contribution was read by ambassador Ahmed Salem Saleh Al-Wahishi.

Similarly all attending Arab and non - Arab ambassadors and diplomats, except for the Palestinian ambassador Osama Mousa Al-Ali, also diplomatically avoided raising up the issue, which could not but affect positively or negatively India's role in any Arab - Israeli peace process, which was the main concern of all speakers.

Diplomats of the Palestinian embassy in the Indian capital proudly showed this writer a four - dumum plot of land in the diplomatic corps neighborhood of New Delhi donated by the Indian government as a "present from the Indian people to the Palestinian people" to build a complex for the embassy of the "state of Palestine."

It was part of a package of a \$15 million grant donated to the Palestinian Authority during the visit of President Mahmoud Abbas to New Delhi in May 2005. \$ 2.25 million of the grant was allocated for building the complex and the rest went to infrastructural projects in the Israeli - occupied Palestinian territories, Palestinian ambassador Al-Ali said.

In addition to political and diplomatic support, \$20 million volume of bilateral trade and several shipments of medical supplies for Palestinian hospitals, India was careful to cement her Palestinian ties culturally and had completed two - Indian aided projects in the Gaza Strip, namely the Jawaharlal Nehru library at Al-Azhar University and the Mahatma Gandhi library at the Palestine Technical College in Deir Al-Albalah; a third project, a center of Indian studies, is also being planned at Al-Quds University.

Historically India's Palestinian policy has been drawing on the ideological guidance set by the world's spiritual leader of non-violence and the father of Indian independence, the Mahatma Gandhi, who consistently rejected Zionism over a period of nearly twenty years

despite unrelenting Zionist lobbying, because according to Paul Power: “First, he was sensitive about the ideas of Muslim Indians who were anti-Zionists because of their sympathy for Middle Eastern Arabs opposed to the Jewish National Home; second, he objected to any Zionist methods inconsistent with his way of non-violence; third, he found Zionism contrary to his pluralistic nationalism, which excludes the establishment of any State based solely or mainly on one religion; and fourth, he apparently believed it imprudent to complicate his relations with the British, who held the mandate in Palestine.” (1)

Although his sympathies were all with the Jews, who as a people were subjected to inhuman treatment and persecution for a long time, Gandhi wrote, “My sympathy does not blind me to the requirements of justice. The cry for the national home for the Jews does not make much appeal to me... Why should they not, like other peoples of the earth, make that country their home where they are born and where they earn their livelihood?”

“Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French. It is wrong and inhuman to impose the Jews on the Arabs... Surely it would be a crime against humanity to reduce the proud Arabs so that Palestine can be restored to the Jews partly or wholly as their national home,” he wrote in a widely circulated editorial in the Harijan of 11 November 1938, which was a major statement that has decided the Indian foreign policy on Palestine and the Jewish question to this day.

Accordingly, India was among 13 nations who voted against the UN General Assembly resolution 181 for the partition of Palestine in 1947. In the same year, as a member of the UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), India proposed a minority plan which called for the establishment of a federal Palestine with internal autonomy for the Jewish illegal immigrants. She was also among the first non-Arab nations to recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in 1974 and the first non-Arab country to recognize Palestine as an independent state in 1988; in 1996 India opened a diplomatic representative office with the autonomous Palestinian Authority.

Talmiz Ahmad’s reference in his opening remarks of the New Delhi seminar to the “resurgence of imperialism” in West Asia would undoubtedly assure Arabs that India would continue Mahatma Gandhi’s heritage of dealing with the Palestinian - Israeli conflict within the context of the international national liberation movements against colonialism, but the pragmatism which marked the Indian foreign policy in dealing with Israel, particularly since 1992, would potentially compromise this approach sooner or later. Arab and Palestinian strategists should not underestimate this possible strategist shift in the foreign policy of the world’s largest democracy, which a CIA study in 2005 envisaged as the second rising world power after China during the next two decades.

New Delhi is very well aware of her rising international status and that’s why she has been vying with Japan and Germany for a permanent seat at the Security Council of the United Nations. “The most important development of the 21st century will be the rise of Asia. India’s independence from colonial rule and the gradual evolution of a strong, stable, dynamic and democratic India has also contributed to Asia’s resurgence... Our Government has re-activated the Indian Council of World Affairs and has offered support to other think tanks to invest in the study of Asia, Africa and our neighbourhood... We have imparted new energy to our “Look East Policy”, launched in the early 1990s. This has contributed to a comprehensive re-engagement with Asia to our East,” said the incumbent Prime Minister,

Manmohan Singh, when his book, "The New Asian Power Dynamic," was released recently.

An indicator of the new Indian strategic shift is the Indian focus on the Palestinian - Israeli peace process more than on the struggle of the Palestinian people for liberation, a development that was highlighted by the appointment of the veteran diplomat and former assistant to the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, C. R. Gharekhan, as India's Special Envoy for the Middle East Peace Process.

### **Accelerated Pace of Ties with Israel**

Since Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao decided in January 1992 to establish full and normal diplomatic relations with Israel, Indian diplomats felt it necessary to "brief" Arab ambassadors in the Indian capital at regular intervals of India's ties with Israel, but India is now Israel's second largest trading partner in Asia after Hong Kong and Israel is now India's second largest supplier of military equipment after Russia.

Official Israeli figures show that Israeli exports to India valued \$1.270 billion in 2006 and imports \$1.433 billion, to double the bilateral trade to more than tenfold since 1992. India's Ambassador to Israel, Arun Kumar Singh, said recently that Israeli investments in India top \$1b. Agricultural, water and IT technologies in addition to fertilizers and diamonds are major mutual trade concerns. The State Bank of India (SBI) became in June the first foreign bank to open a branch in Israel's diamond exchange.

However both countries are careful to remain discreet about the defense component of their relations and trade. Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) Limited is looking for Indian partners to build two types of aircraft and jets in India and set up software and aeronautical engineering companies in Bangalore, according to The Hindu on July 2. The Times of India on June 14 reported that a top-level Israeli Army delegation, led by Israeli deputy chief of general staff Major-General Moshe Kaplinsky, was to visit Jammu & Kashmir after wide-ranging discussions with the top Indian military brass.

In August 1994, Israeli Defense Ministry's Director-General David Ivry visited New Delhi and Indian Defense Secretary T. K. Banerji visited Tel Aviv. In March the following year the Israeli Air Force chief visited India and his Indian counterpart was in Israel in July 1996, one month after a strategic visit by the leading defense scientist, Abdul Kalam. In April 1996 the first Indian defense attaché, an air force officer, arrived in Israel. Prolonged cooperation between India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and its Israeli counterpart, the Mossad, is also reported; the RAW reportedly arranged in the late 1970s a visit by former Israeli defense minister Moshe Dayan to India.

Defense also figured high on the agenda of visits by President Ezer Weizman in December 1996 and the then Foreign Minister (now President) Shimon Peres in May 1993. Comatose Ariel Sharon became the first Israeli prime minister to visit New Delhi in 2003. However, late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat used for decades to visit New Delhi on a two-hour notice.

Several factors contributed to the Indian pragmatic shift in foreign policy. Internally India in the early 1990s started her "look Asia policy" towards West and East Asia. Internationally the collapse of the former Soviet Union, which led to the emergence of the United States as the unipolar world power and globalization were the most prominent factors. Regionally the nuclear and technological race with China and Pakistan made New Delhi more responsive to more opening to the US, Israel and Japan. The Indian - Pakistani conflict was another

regional factor. Except for the Baath-led Iraq and Syria, most conservative Arab governments were leaning towards Pakistan; the historical visit to New Delhi of the Saudi monarch King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz in 2005 had however balanced their imbalanced policy.

Diplomats of the ruling Congress party like to blame the Israeli shift policy on the former ruling conservative Janata (“people’s” in Hindi) party and the war with Pakistan in the Kargil district of Kashmir in 1999, when Israel reportedly promptly supplied the Indian army with much needed military equipment, including night vision devices, thus kicking off a growing defense cooperation ever since.

But in September 1950 Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1947-64), a founding father of the Congress, granted Israel *de jure* recognition. A few months later, Israel opened a trade office in Bombay which gradually became a consular mission, and the first Israeli consul took over in June 1953; in early 1952, Nehru expressed his willingness to establish diplomatic relations. Another Congress leader, Rajiv Gandhi (1984-89), initiated a few direct and indirect contacts with Israel. (2)

### **Arab ‘Green Light’**

Arab and Palestinian diplomacy’s ambivalent refrain from publicly warning against the growing Indian – Israeli ties could be interpreted as a refrain from demanding from friendly countries what Palestinians and Arabs have “green-lighted” for themselves when they collectively chose the Arab Peace Initiative as their “strategic option” with Israel in an Arab summit meeting held in Beirut, Lebanon in 2002; non-Arab countries could not be more Arab and Palestinian than Arabs and Palestinians themselves. It is noteworthy that the Indian – Israeli relations accelerated pace in 1992, a year after the Arab – Israeli peace conference in Madrid, Spain.

However the presence of more than five million strong expatriate Indian labor force in Arab countries, three million of whom are to be found in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and the more than \$25 billion value of Arab – Indian trade, including 60 percent of Indian oil and gas imports worth \$20 billion, are enough pragmatic reasons not to be politically compromised by the newly-found pragmatic approach of Indian foreign policy.

“When we recognized Israel and normalized relations with her we did that after taking the approval of the Palestinian leadership; we said, after you agree we’ll recognize (Israel) ... the Palestinian leadership told us: There are signed accords between us (and Israel) and we are now talking to the Israelis; your establishing relations with Israel helps us,” the Indian representative to the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, Zikrur Rahman told the London-based Al-Haqeq newspaper on May 12, 2007.

Zikrur Rahman is a grandson of the Indian Muslim Mujahed Muhammed Ali Al-Hindi who died in battle in defense of the Palestinian people against the British mandate-protected Zionist paratroops early in the twentieth century, before Israel was created. His burial place alongside the graves of other Arab and Palestinian prominent freedom fighters is still standing as a symbol of Indian solidarity and friendship in the backyard of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam’s third holiest site in Jerusalem.

### **Notes**

(1) Quoted by Professor A.K. Ramakrishnan, "Mahatma Gandhi Rejected Zionism", Released August 15, 2001, The Wisdom Fund, Website: <http://www.twf.org>.

(2) P.R. Kumaraswamy, "India and Israel Evolving Strategic Partnership," Begin - Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, Israel, September 1998.

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