

## Focus on defence, oil as India, Israel chart road map to boost ties



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu in New Delhi on Monday. PRADEEP GAUR/MINT

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India and Israel on Monday outlined a blueprint for deepening bilateral relations in the next 25 years, during the first visit to India by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The blueprint lays particular emphasis on traditional areas like defence, homeland security and agriculture besides newer areas like oil and gas and cyber security.

To add further content to their economic relationship, the two sides will hold another round of talks to close a free trade pact with an Indian delegation due to visit Israel next month. The two countries will also hold discussions on a bilateral investment treaty shortly in a bid to encourage two-way investment flows.

In defence, the two ministries are to hold discussions this year "with active involvement of the public and private sectors, in order to create the basis for viable, sustainable and long-term cooperation in the defence industry," a joint statement released after talks between Netanyahu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi said.

"The two Prime Ministers believe that durable and multi-faceted cooperation is beneficial for the welfare of the people of both countries, and consider the next 25 years as an opportune time to strengthen bonds between the peoples of India and Israel through activities that enhance understanding and create opportunities for mutual progress," the statement said.

The two countries also signed nine pacts to boost cooperation in cyber security,

energy, connectivity, space and technology.

Netanyahu is only the second Israeli prime minister to visit India—the first such visit took place in 2003 when Ariel Sharon was in New Delhi at the invitation of then prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The visit marks the close of celebrations marking 25 years of India establishing diplomatic ties with Israel. It comes six months after Prime Minister Modi paid a stand-alone visit to Israel, the first ever by an Indian prime minister, bringing ties "out of the closet."

Once seen as a strong backer of Palestine, New Delhi announced the opening of diplomatic ties with Israel in January 1992 after Israeli and Palestinian delegations began peace talks that culminated in the Oslo accord between the two in 1993. India-Israel ties have soared since then with defence, agriculture, water conservation, technology and innovation being the focus areas for cooperation. But there was little open acknowledgement of the depth of the relationship in a bid to balance ties with India's partners in the Arab world.

But in the past three years—since the Modi government took office—there has been a flurry of high-level visits. Apart from Modi's own visit to Israel in July 2017, then President Pranab Mukherjee in 2015 and foreign minister Sushma Swaraj in 2016 also travelled to Israel, signifying an upscaling both in terms of visibility and focus.

In comments to reporters after talks with Netanyahu on Monday, Modi said the discussions were "marked by convergence to accelerate our engagement and to scale up our partnership."