

Time to give Israel its due

IN A historic first, Narendra Modi is currently in Israel, thereby becoming the first Prime Minister of India to visit the country. Modi had visited Israel as chief minister of Gujarat in 2006. And as Indian Prime Minister, he had met his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu, a few times already. Though the President of India and a number of Modi government ministers have already been to Israel in the last three years, Modi's visit marks a new phase in a relationship that has been becoming robust over the last few decades.

Hallmark

A hallmark of Modi's foreign policy has been a self-confident assertion of Indian interests. This is reflected in his government's moves vis-à-vis Israel, marking a distinct break from unnecessary and counter-productive diffidence of the past. Despite sharing 25 years of diplomatic ties and working closely on defence, counter-terrorism, agriculture and energy-related issues, no Indian PM has ever visited Israel.

When it comes to India's Israel policy, hypocrisy has been the norm. Despite representing a nation that is one of the biggest victims of cross-border terrorism in the world, the Indian political establishment has had no compunction in time and again equating the actions of a liberal democratic Israel with the murderous extremism of a terrorist organisation such as Hamas. And despite developing close ties with Tel Aviv, previous governments had been reluctant to openly embrace ties with Israel.

There has been a steady strengthening of India's relationship with Israel ever since the two established full diplomatic relations in 1992. It is a tribute to PV Narasimha Rao's foresight that he was able to lay the basis of Indo-Israeli partnership. In contrast to the back-channel security ties that existed before the normalisation of bilateral relations, India has been more willing in recent years to carve out a mutually bene-



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ficial bilateral relationship with Israel, including deepening military ties and countering the threat terrorism poses to them.

Over the years, the Indian government has also toned down its reactions to Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. India has also begun denouncing Palestinian suicide bombings and other terrorist acts in Israel, something that was earlier regarded as justified in light of the Israeli policies against the Palestinians. India is no longer initiating anti-Israel resolutions at the UN and has made serious attempts to moderate NAM's anti-Israel resolutions.

This re-evaluation has been based on a realisation that India's largely pro-Arab stance in West Asia has not been adequately rewarded by the Arab world. India has received no worthwhile backing from the Arab countries in the resolution of problems it faces in its neighbourhood, especially Kashmir. There have been no serious attempts by the Arab world to put pressure on Pakistan to reign in cross-border insurgency in Kashmir.

Perspective

On the contrary, the Arab nations have firmly stood by Pakistan, using the Organisation of Islamic Conference to build support for Islamabad and the jihadi groups in Kashmir. If Arab nations, such as Jordan, have been able to keep their traditional ties with Palestine intact while building a new relationship with Israel, there is no reason for India not to take a similar route, which might give it more room for diplomatic manoeuvring.

Keeping India's wider strategic interests in perspective, successive Indian governments since the early 1990s have walked a nuanced line between expressing genuine concern for the Palestinian cause and expanding its commercial and defence ties with Israel. India is the world's largest

buyer of Israeli weaponry and is Israel's second-largest trading partner in Asia, second only to China.

The domestic political milieu continues to exert its substantial influence on the trajectory of Indo-Israeli relations. Israel has been a good friend of India but New Delhi continues to be shy of demonstrating its friendship. At crucial times, when India needed Israeli help, it got it unreservedly. Israel was willing to continue and even step up its arms sales to India after other major states curbed their technological exports following India's May 1998 nuclear tests.

Imagery

Israel provided India with much-needed imagery of Pakistani positions using its UAVs during the 1999 Kargil War, which was instrumental in turning the war around for India. When India was planning to undertake a limited military strike against Pakistan in June 2002 as part of 'Operation Parakram', Israel supplied hardware through special planes. The terrorism that both India and Israel face comes not only from disaffected groups within their territories; it is also aided and abetted by neighbouring states, increasingly capable of transferring weapons of mass destruction to terrorist outfits.

And yet previous governments had been reticent in acknowledging Israel's partnership. In diplomacy, public affirmation of friendships at the highest levels is often as important as drawing red lines for adversaries. The Modi government is doing well by repudiating the discredited Israel policy of its predecessors. An open relationship with Israel serves India well and it's about time Tel Aviv gets the recognition it deserves from New Delhi.

It is tempting to say that India continues to follow a balancing act between Israel and Palestine as New Delhi hosted Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in May. But by personally visiting Israel, Modi is making it clear that India's relations with Israel have now turned a corner. As India expands its diplomatic footprint in West Asia, Israel will be an important pillar of that outreach and New Delhi is ready to say this openly.

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