

# Modi has laid the groundwork for businesses to engage with Israel

The PM's visit will give India's private sector the confidence to do work in the country and W Asia

PR  
KUMARASWAMY



**H**ow does one read the three-day visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Israel? Both before and during the visit there has been a running commentary in the media, which leaves little to interpretations and assessment. The announcement of direct flights and multiple visas for longer duration would help those who commute between the two countries. Modern India continues to remain an enigma to much of the Israeli public, and if structured properly, the cultural centre should take them closer to the contemporary landscape than the romanticised version of ancient Bharat.

Recognising the value of symbolising in their societies both Modi and his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu went out of their way to make one another comfortable and at ease. Though both the leaders have met in the past, this was their first working meeting. If Modi charmed the ordinary Israeli by taking the time to visit 11-year old Moshe Holtzberg (who survived the 26/11 terror attacks in Mumbai) and Netanyahu was with Modi throughout the time, overlooking some of the serious challenging facing his coalition.

This bonhomie was clearly reflected in the joint statement. Both are committed to raising the bilateral relations to 'strategic partnership' but avoided spelling out the details. Though food security, namely cooperation in agriculture, water, desalination, water management and cleaning the Ganga were referred, the details are missing. Out

of the seven agreements, five are Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) whose effectiveness would be tested when they are implemented on the ground. While terrorism figured prominently, both followed the traditional template. India has a qualitative edge over Israel in space technology, and this is reflected in the three MoUs signed on behalf of Isro.

Both countries are committed to the 'reinforcement and expansion' of existing cooperation in agriculture, and in practical terms, this would mean a quantitative change. For example, currently, Israel has established 17 centres of excellence in India and hoping to expand it to 25 within the next two-three years. This is a sizeable number for Israel but a drop in a bucket in the Indian context. The transformation has to be quantitative but cannot be carried out only by the government, but by private companies and parties.

The real impact of the visit has to be located elsewhere. Political hurdles and uneasiness marked the bilateral relations both before and after normalisation. There were no bilateral problems or disputes between the two countries but their different worldviews and India's desire to accommodate third parties, namely, Palestinians, Arabs, and Pakistan, in that order, has limited its ability to pursue an independent policy towards Israel.

Normalisation partly reduced this but it did not remove the political hesitation. This is more visible in the bilateral trade and reluctance of Indian business houses to engage with Israel even on a commercial basis. Many of the business 'giants' are concerned that their limited presence in West Asia would be hampered by the Israeli 'connections' and possible sanctions and boycotts. Their unfamiliarity with the complex and changing West Asian dynamics only make matters worse.

By his visit to Israel and de-hyphenating



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attend an Innovation Conference with Israeli and Indian CEOs, Tel Aviv, Israel, July 6 REUTERS

Palestine from India's West Asia policy, Modi has mowed the grass, as they say, and created a level playing field. Whether it is defence or cyber security, India's private sector will have to take the lead. The initial signal was the signing of deals worth \$4.3 billion in the first meeting of the CEO Forum. The size might look small, but it is worth noting that the total bilateral trade is just over \$5 billion and is dominated by the diamond trade.

While preparing to be a facilitator through visa, flight, and other economic opportunities, Modi puts the private sector as the prime force behind the bilateral relations. This is in line with the de-centralisation of the bilateral relations since the mid-1990s when much of the focus moved away from the national capital

to states and from political issues to economic development.

By 'normalising' Israel within India's West Asian interests and policy, Modi has done the political work and signalled a warmer political climate vis-à-vis Israel. He has used his charm offensive to reach out to the ordinary Israeli and the local media, which normally cover local and sensational issues. The result: Local media devoted considerable space to Modi's visit. The murmurs against Netanyahu spending the whole three days with Modi were also far limited by Israeli standards. Now it is up to the business communities of both the countries to take things forward.

*PR Kumaraswamy teaches at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi  
The views expressed are personal*