

Mr Modi in Palestine

The broader political questions that came up on the occasion of Narendra Modi's visit captured much of the public attention, but the parties also took advantage of the opportunity to strengthen their cooperation on economic and technical cooperation. India is a reliable and valued partner in these areas and the PM's visit, the first of its kind to Palestine, gives a good base on which to build for the next phase of the relationship



Prime Minister Modi's visit to Palestine was a reminder of the close ties between India and this neighbour across the Arabian Sea. India and Palestine have been historically close as friends and partners, and over the last several decades there has been a notable development of their relations, ever since they emerged from the colonial thrall at much the same time, to take their place in the comity of nations. India as a more substantial entity has been through a less taxing transition while Palestine has struggled from the start, having been buffeted by events that were largely beyond its control. It is a long and complicated story that is not over yet, but notwithstanding the vicissitude of events, India and Palestine have been able to build a strong association together.

India-Arab ties run deep and have now been revived and strengthened in the far-reaching post-war global reordering which saw them emerge as close partners and associates in NAM - which as an organization may be in eclipse today but was a badge of independence in its time, showing refusal, then as now, to be governed by the pre-occupations and interests of the powerful countries that sought to dominate the globe. Relations between India and Palestine were steered in considerable measure by Yasser Arafat, who was frequently in and out of New Delhi where he knew everyone and was welcomed as an old friend and comrade in a shared struggle, which position he was able to achieve despite the weakness of the state structure he represented. Mr Modi was able to pay appropriate respect to the memory of this notable figure who organized his people effectively and projected their needs before the world community.

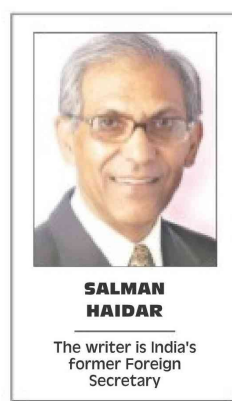
For India, no less important than conserving and projecting

its independent character on the world stage is the preservation of its secular identity. This was particularly relevant to its dealings within its neighbourhood, where maintaining friendly and cooperative relations with the many Islamic countries abutting India was from the start one of the important objectives of Indian policy. These are long-term objectives that have been well enunciated over the years and were once more to be seen when Mr Modi visited Palestine a few days ago. During his visit he made a pitch for further developing the long-established ties between India and Palestine.

Unlike many of the other Arab countries of the region, Palestine has very limited natural resources, having been bypassed by the oil cornucopia from which many others have benefited. It has also suffered from the instability that has afflicted the region as a whole, but notwithstanding the many problems it has had to face Palestine has maintained its position and strengthened its state structure. Visits like that of Mr Modi have a contribution to make in this regard, for they lift the Palestinian profile and emphasize its status as an independent actor on the world stage.

If Palestine has been beset with problems since its emergence, this owes much to the unresolved issues it has faced in its relations with Israel, part of the historic Arab-Israeli strife in the Middle East. Differences between them have been punctuated by bouts of military clashes making this one of the most volatile areas of the world. No answer to the core problems has yet been found and there is little sign of

improved conditions to encourage hope of an improved outcome in the future. But some of the regional statesmen have continued with the quest, and have on occasion shown extraordinary courage and persistence in trying to calm things down, and have taken extraordinary risks in pursuit of their mission. Thus the effort has never been abandoned, and though India is not directly involved, it has made a consistent contribution to the cause of regional peace and tranquility.



SALMAN HAIDAR

The writer is India's former Foreign Secretary

Mr Modi's visit took place at a time of more than ordinary questioning and controversy in the Middle East, owing to an unexpected initiative by the USA. That country is the ever-reliable friend to Israel with which it has developed very close ties over the years. One of the important matters on which Israel has sought US backing and support is the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital city of Israel, which is an emotional and controversial matter. For many years the USA resisted the request without rejecting it outright, and the request seemed destined to join the many difficult international issues whose time had not yet come, and perhaps would never come, but that was to reckon without the active intervention of President Trump: where others had hesitated, he plunged ahead, taking the bold decision to recognize Jerusalem as the Israeli capital.

This important step was not to be implemented immediately, and even now the arrangements for displacing Tel Aviv as the capital in place of Jerusalem are yet to take final shape. But there has been turmoil in the Arab countries as a result of the US decision, with extensive street

demonstrations against the US leader. The fact that little if anything was gained for US policy in the region did not act as any sort of deterrent.

India's position on this issue was conspicuously at odds with that of USA. In recent times these two countries have drawn closer and have found themselves making common cause on several important matters, but the status of Jerusalem was not one of them. India's notable show of solidarity with Arab opinion on this issue has served to enhance its good relations with the Arab world and has come as a disappointment to the Israeli leadership.

Apart from the unexpected boost to US-Israel ties as a result of President Trump's decision on Jerusalem, there were other significant developments involving these parties, including what was described as talks between the USA and Israel to annex Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank. Like practically every issue in that contested region, the matter of the settlements has a long and disputed past. The Israeli leader, Mr Netanyahu, said publicly that he had been holding discussions with the USA on the possibility of Israel annexing some Jewish settlements in the West Bank: as was only to be expected, his statement has been condemned in the Arab lands, where details are still awaited of which pieces of territory could be affected, how action could be taken on this sensitive issue.

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