

# PM Modi lands in Israel today, his eyes set on removing more 'hesitations of history'



IN FACT

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EXPRESS EDITORS INTERPRET

SOON AFTER returning from Europe in 1938, Jawaharlal Nehru, having seen firsthand the plight of European Jews before the onslaught of Fascism, sponsored a resolution in the Congress Working Committee: "The Committee sees no objection to the employment in India of such Jewish refugees as are experts and specialists and who can fit in with the new order in India and accept Indian standards".

The CWC and, in particular, then Congress president Subhas Chandra Bose, however, did not agree — in a letter written to Bose on April 3, 1939, Nehru recalled that Bose had been "astounded" by the suggestion "to make India an asylum for the Jews". (P R Kumaraswamy, *India's Israel Policy*, Columbia University Press, 2010)

Subsequently, in 1942, *The Jewish Chronicle* of London, the world's oldest Jewish newspaper, reported that Bose had, in an article written for *Der Angriff*, the newspaper set up by Adolf Hitler's Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, said that "anti-Semitism should become part of the Indian liberation movement because the Jews had helped the British to exploit Indians". (Yulia Egorova, *Jews and India: Perceptions and Image*, RoutledgeCurzon, 2006) It must be remembered, however, that in 1942, Bose was Hitler's guest and focussed on India's liberation, which he hoped to achieve with German help — it is unclear whether he really accepted the ideology of the Nazis.

Nehru's proposal was also opposed by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, then the president of the Hindu Mahasabha. Speaking in Nagpur, Savarkar, while accepting that Indian Jews "have given us no political or cultural troubles and are not in the main a proselytising people", warned against repeating "the suicidal generosity our forefathers" who had "invit[ed] colonies of non-Hindus to India".

"...The Hindus must", Savarkar said, "oppose the present Congressite proposal of inviting or allowing any new Jewish colony to settle in India. India must be a Hindu land,



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Israeli President Reuven Rivlin at Hyderabad House in November 2016. Reuters

reserved for the Hindus". (Egorova, 2006)

When Narendra Modi lands at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport today — the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel — he will be initiating a historic process of formally changing India's public and political approach towards dealing with the Jewish nation. And make polite amends for what one of his ideological gurus had said almost 80 years ago.

Nehru's empathy for the persecuted Jewish people notwithstanding, India's political attitude towards Israel was set shortly after Independence, when he and Mahatma Gandhi vowed to support the Palestinian cause, and rejected the idea of two nations based on religion. Nehru declined to honour a request from Albert Einstein for India's support for the United Nations resolution proposing the partition of Palestine.

"Perhaps he (Nehru) was influenced by India's own experience of Partition. He strongly favoured a federation of two states, with a special regime for Jerusalem for a period of 10 years, to be followed by a referendum," Chinmaya R Gharekhan, a former Indian Permanent Representative to the UN

and former Special Envoy to West Asia, wrote in the journal of the foreign policy thinktank Gateway House in August 2014.

It took about 45 years to unlock the relationship — India established full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992, days after the Chinese did the same.

In January 1992, during a meeting between Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao and the visiting Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Arafat was told that it would help the Palestinian cause if India established diplomatic relationship with Israel, and had an

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ambassador in Tel Aviv. Arafat came on board — and, at his press conference, famously said, "Exchange of ambassadors and recognition (of Israel) are acts of sovereignty in which I cannot interfere... I respect any choice of the Indian government."

It was the game-changer moment. About 10 days after Arafat's publicly-stated approval, on January 29, 1992, India established diplomatic ties with Israel.

around cooperation on science and technology, agriculture and commerce — talks on defence and security were avoided in public.

The three years of Prime Minister Narendra Modi have seen the bilateral relationship become increasingly more visible. Modi met Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in New York on the sidelines of the UNGA in September 2014 — the first such meeting in a decade. Home Minister Rajnath Singh travelled to Israel in November 2014, President Pranab Mukherjee in October 2015 — the first visit by an Indian President — and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj in January 2016. A number of Ministers and parliamentarians too have visited Israel in the past three years, and in February 2015, Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Ya'alon openly discussed security and defence co-operation during a visit to India.

While Modi will skip the customary stop at Palestine — a given during all previous Indian ministerial-level visits — India has been careful to make sure the Prime Minister has already visited Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar and the UAE, Israel's regional rivals, over the last three years. New Delhi, in fact, hosted Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas this May — his second meeting with Modi after the one in New York in September 2015. And in all public pronouncements, External Affairs Minister Swaraj and South Block officials have maintained India's position on support for the Palestinian cause — even as India has been able to de-hyphenate its Israel-Palestine relationship.

Kumaraswamy, a professor at JNU's Centre for West Asian Studies at the School of International Studies, and one of the foremost scholars on Indo-Israel relations, summed up the change: "The relationship with Israel, so far, was like the one with a mistress, a clandestine affair. One can go out in public with one's wife, but with a mistress, one will have to explain. Now, there is growing maturity, because the regional and domestic situation has changed. Now it feels like one is confident of taking the girl to meet one's parents... one is not apologetic about it."

A year after he announced to the US Congress that the Indo-US "relationship has overcome the hesitations of history", Prime Minister Modi will aim to do the same with respect to Israel, and to set a strategic and political direction for the bilateral relationship.