

# Coming Out Party

*Modi's visit to Israel marks a pragmatic turn in Indian foreign policy*

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel is hailed as a historic moment marking 25 years of full diplomatic relations, it's surprising that it took so long for an Indian PM to visit Israel. India had recognised Israel way back in 1950. But progress in bilateral ties since then has been impeded, it has to be said, more by New Delhi than by Tel Aviv.

In that sense, Modi's visit to Israel is a coming out party for bilateral ties and marks a pragmatic turn in India's foreign policy. New Delhi can certainly boost ties with Tel Aviv without diluting its position on the two state solution vis-à-vis Palestine. The argument that Israel's treatment of Palestinian Muslims should make India wary of deeper engagement doesn't cut much ice. There are many countries such as Saudi Arabia and China which score poorly on the human rights



index, but India maintains wide-ranging relations with them. Why should Israel, a vibrant democracy, be treated differently? Even on the specific question of oppression of Muslims Pakistan, China and Saudi Arabia do much worse (look at Pakistani/Saudi suppression of Shias or Ahmadiyyas, or Chinese suppression of Uighurs).

From a historical perspective, Israel's support for India during the 1971 war and the Kargil conflict had long laid the foundation for a strategic partnership. Modi's visit now should fast track engagements across both traditional and non-traditional sectors. While defence ties are slated to receive a further fillip – since April India has inked three missile deals with Israel worth \$2.6 billion, and is looking forward to receiving armed drones – agreements on space cooperation and water and agriculture are also on the anvil.

The latter is particularly relevant as Israel is a country that turned the desert green with its agriculture technology, while Indian agriculture is increasingly water depressed. Additionally, Israel has the second largest number of start-ups in the world and a strong R&D culture – things that India should leverage. Co-production in sectors such as defence, IT and space technology will boost the Make in India initiative. Both India and Israel are victims of terrorism and could gain much through further enhancing counter-terror cooperation. Lastly Israel has strong ties to the Jewish lobby in the US, which in turn is well connected to the Trump administration. Those are useful connections New Delhi could turn to its advantage.