

Modi's historic Israel trip underlines how even as India attempts to 'Act East', it is 'Thinking West'

Finally, a Promised Visit



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Not that long ago, the words 'Not valid for travel to South Africa or Israel' used to be clearly written on all Indian passports. Narendra Modi's recent visit to Israel, the first by an Indian prime minister to that country, brings a long diplomatic arc to its natural conclusion.

Since normalising relations in 1992, the India-Israel relationship has grown to cover not just defence sales but also pharmaceuticals, infrastructure, information technology, tourism, entrepreneurship, and especially agriculture and water management. A prime ministerial visit was, therefore, long overdue, a fact recognised by Modi's host.

Welcoming his counterpart, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, "Prime Minister Modi, we have been waiting for you for a long time, for almost 70 years, in fact." The India-Israel relationship may, in fact, be an old one, taking on new dimensions. But it now assumes greater importance for both countries given the changes underway across West Asia.

India has long had vital interests in the region. The first involves the safety and well-being of the almost nine-million-strong Indian diaspora in West Asia, who contribute remittances of around \$40 billion annually. Their security is also a politically sensitive issue for the Indian government,

and has necessitated evacuations of Indian nationals, whether from Kuwait in 1990, Lebanon in 2006, Libya in 2011 or Yemen in 2015.

The second interest concerns energy security, which is vital for the health and well-being of the Indian economy. About 60% of all Indian oil imports — and even more of its natural gas — come from West Asia, making India one of the major economies that is most dependent on the region for its energy needs.

A third consideration is security, including cooperation on counter-terrorism. This has required India to develop important, if sometime tacit, security- and intelligence-sharing mechanisms, as well as broader defence partnerships across the region. These critical Indian interests concerning the diaspora, energy and security have required India to maintain a delicate balancing act in the region between its major players, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and others.

Oil Off the Boil

But the situation in West Asia is fluid and ever-changing. There are indications that the US might play a less active role as a security guarantor in the region. This was implied previously in Barack Obama's 'pivot' to Asia, and more recently by Donald Trump's general wariness about the US' international military involvement.

The Arab Spring, instead of resulting in mass democratisation across the region, witnessed the breakdown of governance in Egypt and triggered civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. The 2015 Iran nuclear agreement may have dealt with the immediate challenges posed by that country's nuclear programme. But it has generated fears in other regional capitals, who worry that the removal of international sanctions against Iran



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may have emboldened Tehran and upset the balance of power.

Meanwhile, as oil prices remain low, several Gulf Arab countries are beginning to plan for a post-oil future. The Saudi Vision 2030, a signature project of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, marks an ambitious plan to reorient and modernise the Saudi economy.

While preserving ties with Iran, a vital conduit into Afghanistan and Central Asia, India has tried to seize the opportunities presented by this changing landscape to strengthen ties with the likes of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Modi has reportedly noticeably increased the proportion of the prime minister's time spent abroad in West Asia relative to his predecessor. It's a reflection of the increased political importance India accords to the region. Even as India attempts to 'Act East', it is increasingly 'Thinking West'.

This is where Israel's importance becomes apparent: looking west from India, it is an island of stability amid a region beset by considerable political, military, economic and social upheaval. And the sentiment is reciprocated. "When I turn my head to the right," Netanyahu joked while recre-

ating a yoga pose, "India is the first democracy that I'll see." For India, a deeper, more normal relationship with Israel has been made easier by the thaw in Israel's relations with Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies.

But Pally With Palestine

And, notwithstanding Modi's decision to skip Ramallah, New Delhi has discovered that a better relationship with Israel does not necessarily mean that it should distance itself from Palestine. The recent visit to India of Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian National Authority, was an ample demonstration of this.

Moving forward, India's vital interests and the changing regional dynamics will require it to deepen relations with all important actors in West Asia, preserving its careful balancing act while stepping up to play a more active regional role. Completely normalising relations with Israel, as this first visit by an India prime minister irrevocably does, is an important step towards that objective.

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