

Pragati

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GEOPOLITICS

The India-Israel imperative

Indo-Judeo commonalities: the symbolic and the substantive

MARTIN SHERMAN

This [growing Indo-Israeli nexus] is particularly significant when one realises the existing commonalities between the Jews and the Brahmins. Both propagate the purity and superiority of race, share somewhat bitter historical legacies, suffer from delusions of greatness, demonstrate almost regularly animosity against the Muslims, and assertively stress that the past subjugations (*sic*) and deprivation will 'Never Again' be allowed to manifest.

- Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, President of the Islamabad Policy Research Institute, September 9, 2001

THE PRECEDING excerpt may appear a somewhat incongruous choice to introduce a discussion on strategic co-operation between India and Israel. However it does serve to underscore how the two ancient peoples, the Jews and the Indians, may have a common destiny foisted on them—even if it is by common sources of enmity

that have emerged since both succeeded in asserting their political independence from British colonial rule six decades ago. For among India's potential—indeed current—antagonists are countries and organisations which may pose a threat to Israel in time to come, or are likely to ally themselves with Israel's adversaries in some future conflict. Indeed, in the words of Lieutenant-General Vinay Shankar "...if we carefully look at the sequence of global events over the last ten to twelve years, Indo-Israeli relations have moved along a path that had an element of inevitability about it."

Prima facie there might appear to be little commonality between a titan subcontinent like India and a tiny micro-state such as Israel. Indeed, at their inception, the newly born states could hardly have been more dissimilar. The former, steeped in the culture of the East, having an enormous, and often impoverished, indigenous

population; the latter founded by pioneers who hailed largely from central and eastern Europe, and eager to increase the sparse numbers of its domestic populace by large-scale immigration from countries as diverse as Yemen and Austria.

However, first appearances can be misleading. For in fact there is much that binds the two nations—both symbolically and substantively.

For those who place store on the symbolic, it will be undoubtedly significant to note the striking similarity between written form of the word for "Indian" and that for "Jew", which in Hebrew script, are almost identical. While the Hebraic characters for "Indian" are: "יהודי", adding "י" the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet will give the word "יהודי" which is "Jew" in Hebrew. Indeed even the phonetic articulation in Hebrew of the two words is also very much alike: "Hodi" for Indian; "Ye-Hodi" for Jew.

Of course, the practical significance of these interesting similarities—beyond obvious curiosity value—is unclear. Nevertheless, in the context of the history of Judeo-Indian relations, it is worth noting that India, unlike many countries across the globe, can boast of a past that is almost entirely without any major manifestation of animosity towards the Jews. In fact, the only significant incident of anti-Semitism was the persecution of Jews in Cranganore, on what is now the Kerala coast, in the 16th century...by the Portuguese. As P R Kumaraswamy, a leading analyst of Indo-Israeli relations, puts it: "In light of the absence of anti-Semitism in India, one can argue that the lack of diplomatic relations [until 1992] was an aberration in India's overall policy toward Jews".

Indeed, on closer examination there does appear to be a considerable degree of compatibility between both the Jewish and Indian people and their respective national-states—Israel and India.

Both Indians and Jews are ancient peoples, with a long history and illustrious civilizations dating back thousands of years, which still deeply impacts the national mindset and the conduct of many aspects national life today.

Both emerged into an era of post-colonial sovereignty from British rule which left lasting imprints on the two nascent independent societies.

Both maintain a strong commitment to democratic governance and to values of tolerance, pluralism and liberty in domestic political environments might have been expected to be highly conducive to the growth of dictatorship

Both countries have had to contend with external threats to national security, periods of economic hardship, political assassination and

ethno-religious rivalries but have never wavered in their belief in, and their commitment to, open pluralist societies—even in these extremely testing conditions.

Both maintain a belief in, and a commitment to, a knowledge-based society, placing great store on learning, science and technological advancement.

Both people have highly successful diaspora (particularly in the United States) who maintain strong affinity with their respective countries of origin, and who strive assertively to enhance the security and other strategic interests of their ethnic homelands, which are in no way discordant with those of their host country.

Much has changed in the international system since the 1990s and much has remained unchanged. Both that which has changed, and that which has not, contribute towards making a compelling case in favour of the establishment of a long-term, multivalent, strategic bond between Israel and India that is both desirable and durable.

The region spanned by Israel and India, aptly described by Paul Sheehan in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as "an 'Arc of Instability'...stretching

Three areas—security, agriculture and technology—aptly demarcate major spheres of strategic co-operation for a far-reaching—albeit not exhaustive—menu for joint Indo-Israeli enterprise.

unbroken through Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Lebanon," includes many of most implacable epicentres of radical extremism. A similar geo-strategic argument was reflected in the *Washington Post* where Jim Hoagland identified "Jerusalem and New Delhi [as] end points... in a vast swath of countries from North Africa through the Himalayas that should now be seen as a single strategic region [in which] India and Israel are the most vibrant democracies ...who can build and sustain consensus and commitment to ideas and values".

Nothing, therefore, seems more appropriate or more pressing than that the two nations, who straddle such a highly inhospitable neighbourhood, should cultivate countervailing centres of powers which genuinely and autonomously embrace a similar ethos of social tolerance and political pluralism.

An inauspicious start

[This is] one of the few occasions when the Government of India may be said to have been behind its own public opinion ... [for] public opinion was almost wholeheartedly in favor of an early recognition of your government."

- K. M. Panikkar in a letter to an Israeli friend, lamenting the delay in establishing ties with Israel, 19 September, 1950

While it is not all that surprising to know that Indo-Israeli co-operation in various fields is taking concrete shape, what appears to be somewhat incomprehensible is why so much time has lapsed in forging closer ties?

- Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, *ibid.*

The bilateral relationship between India and Israel got off to an inauspicious start. The newly born states could hardly have been more dissimilar in geography, demography and political affiliation.



While the early Indian leadership linked the Zionist enterprise to Western colonialism, other factors also weighed against close and cordial bilateral bonds—such as New Delhi's fear of antagonising its large Muslim population; pressures from the Islamic world, India's major source of energy; and the adoption of an anti-Israeli policy by the non-aligned movement in which India was a prominent member. Moreover, in terms of strategic allegiances, an additional rift between the two states existed: Israel aligned itself firmly with the United States, while India, traditionally suspicious of American foreign policy, opted for close links with the Soviet Union.

The significant disparity between the two countries hardly boded well for mutual co-operation between them. However, since the early 1990s, with the fall of the Soviet bloc and the accelerating liberalisation of the Indian economy,

considerable changes began to take place, bringing with them a marked convergence of Indo-Israeli interests.

The culmination of this process took place in 1992, when full diplomatic relations were established. Since then, a burgeoning relationship has blossomed, whose vigour, cordiality and durability have taken both its proponents and its opponents by surprise.

An agenda for co-operation

We in India hold in admiration the immense progress that the people of Israel have made in various fields, especially in agriculture, irrigation and science and technology. There exists enormous potential for enhancing the depth and content of our interaction in these areas as well as in the sphere of defence co-operation

- K R Narayanan, former President of India, September 19, 2000

There appears to be a remarkable compatibility between the aspirations of modern India and its leaders on the one hand, and the areas in which Israel has acquired exceptional expertise on the other. This dramatically reflected in Lal Bahadur Shastri's dictum in praise of martial and the agricultural endeavour (Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan), and the later addendum by Atal Bihari Vajpayee to include scientific and technological endeavour (Jai Vigyan)

Indeed, these three areas—security, agriculture and technology—aptly demarcate major spheres of strategic co-operation for a far-reaching—albeit not exhaustive—"menu" for joint Indo-Israeli enterprise.

Security and military matters

It is in this field that Indo-Israeli collaboration has been most significant. Israel has become New Delhi's preferred source of advanced military technology, and is today its second-largest defence supplier after Russia. It is thus taking a leading role helping India implement its planned drive to modernise its military over the coming decade. While accurate figures are difficult to ascertain reports indicate Israel sells between US\$1-2 billion worth of military merchandise to India annually. Purchases include a wide range of sophisticated equipment—from land-based surveillance systems to sea-borne missiles.

Of course the most important deal was the sale in 2004 of the Phalcon airborne early-warning, command and control systems. The deal, reportedly worth over \$1 billion, was particularly significant in view of the fact that only a few years earlier, Washington intervened vigorously to

block a similar sale to China. This divergent US attitude to technological transfers from Israel to India on the one hand, and to China on the other, could harbour far-reaching geo-strategic significance in the future.

The Indian market is of crucial importance to the Israeli defence industry since it helps bear the significant overhead costs which the country needs to maintain in order to keep its qualitative edge over its adversaries. To remain viable, Israel's armaments industries cannot depend on the Israeli market alone and, according to authoritative estimates, need to export over 70% of their production. While to date, most of the contacts have centred on the supply of Israeli equipment to India, or on Israeli upgrading of existing Indian equipment, there is room and reason for developing more far-reaching joint enterprises.

A preliminary delineation of spheres that appear amenable to such mutually beneficial co-operation include: the development of enhanced power projection capabilities—particularly in terms of air and naval forces; ballistic missile defence systems (BMD)—including exploration of the boost phase intercept (BPI) technologies; and enhancement of effective second-strike capabilities which are essential for any credible no-first-use nuclear policy. In this regard, recent reports indicate that India's Cabinet Committee on Security chaired by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh approved a US\$ 2 billion joint Indo-Israeli development project for a missile system capable of detecting and destroying hostile aircraft, missiles and spy planes within a 70 kilometre range.

Co-operation in the naval sphere offers particularly intriguing possibilities which could serve both India's declared aim to develop a blue-water navy and Israel's increasingly challenging geo-strategic needs. Given its minuscule territorial dimensions, especially after recent withdrawals in its vain quest for peace, Israel is being compelled to turn to the marine theatre for strategic depth allowing dispersal of weapons systems for second strike capability. Likewise, due to the mounting threat from Iran and the growing importance of sea routes to the east, the Indian Ocean is assuming an ever more strategic importance for Israel.

All this militates towards Israel seriously considering the need to develop nuclear-powered naval craft (in particular submarines) with the required speed, range and stealth to contend with the increasing array of hazards it faces. In light of India's declared intention to develop its own indigenous ability for the production of nuclear powered vessels, the time may well be ripe to

consider a bold Indo-Israeli initiative, involving the co-opting of Israel into the India's Advanced Technology Vessel (ATV) project. The ATV project reportedly plagued by numerous setbacks could be significantly bolstered by the input of Israeli expertise and produce far-reaching strategic benefits for both countries. However it is precisely because of the potential strategic ramifications of this idea that it should be explored with appropriate caution and sensitivity.

Technology and commerce

On the interface between the military and civilian, a milestone event was the recent launch last January, of an advanced Israeli satellite by an Indian Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) rocket. While for Israel, the satellite was reportedly intended for intelligence purposes, for India the launch was a commercial mission—the second for another country carried out by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO).

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In the sphere of civilian trade, volume reached almost \$3.5 billion in 2007—nearly three times that of 2002 and over 15 times higher than the volume in 1992 when diplomatic relations were established—making India one of Israel's largest trading partners in Asia, having overtaken Japan. Indeed, the two countries have much with which to supplement and complement each other—particularly, in the IT and high-tech sectors, where both proven abilities and competencies.

Israel has considerable experience and success in launching companies on international capital markets. According to Israel's Foreign Ministry, in 2007, "[w]ith 90 Israeli-related companies on NASDAQ the country is the number one foreign issuer on the US exchange" and "the fourth largest foreign issuer on the London Exchanges...after the United States, Canada, and Australia". To date it has been more common for Israeli corporations—such as Ness (software) and Teva (pharmaceuticals)—to invest in Indian companies, with Indian investment in Israel largely confined to the diamond trade. However, a recent development may herald a change in this trend, when Jain, an

Indian conglomerate, acquired a 50.01 percent stake in Israel's NanDan irrigation technology company to form what reportedly plans to become the world's largest irrigation company.

And there is another dimension to be considered. Given the prevailing mood in international geo-political trends, a compelling case can be made for Israel to relate to India as more than an additional market for Israeli goods and services. Indeed, political prudence should bring Israeli policy-makers to look at India's economy in strategic terms. In light of the growing animosity of the European Union countries toward Israel, coupled with the impressive and sustained growth of the Indian economy over the last decade (and predictions for even greater growth in the this one) Israel ought to consider cultivating the increasing purchasing power of the Indian middle class as a potential strategic alternative to the EU consumer.

Israel has extensive experience in weathering severe crises in the agricultural sector, in generating income sources for the rural population from tourism, outdoor recreational activities and cottage industries.

Agriculture and rural development

"Everything else can wait, but not agriculture"
- Jawaharlal Nehru, 1947 & P Chidambaram, 2007

One area of particularly acute importance for India—and one in which Israel can make a particularly significant contribution—is that of rural development. There is a growing consensus among a wide cross-section of decision-makers in India, that the country's most pressing long-term strategic problem is the income of the small farmer.

There is, thus a pressing need to find ways to increase the income of the small farmer and at the same time locate other alternative additional sources of livelihood—in order to allow the orderly transformation of Indian agriculture to more modern configurations (such as perhaps larger agro-corporations or large co-operatives).

As Israeli expertise in this respect is among the most advanced in the world, the contribution Israel can make toward advancing rural India is substantial—not only by enhancing existing production techniques—but by upgrading pre-

and post-harvest operations and inputs as well.

In addition to considerable know-how in agro-logistics, storage, processing, packaging, marketing and export of agricultural produce, Israel also has extensive experience in weathering severe crises in its agricultural sector, in innovative societal organisations for the conduct of rural life, and in generating additional income sources for the rural population (such as rural tourism, outdoor recreational activities, and cottage industries). All of these competencies would be of great value in helping rural India restructure for the coming decades, generating lucrative opportunities for both countries.

Some progress in this regard has been made. Several joint ventures have been set up in the field of drip irrigation, floriculture, horticulture, water management and arid region cultivation. In recent years there have been numerous visits by high level delegations to both countries. Typically, the Indian delegations to Israel's major agricultural exhibition, Agritech, have been among the largest to attend, reflecting the awareness of, and interest in, the potential contribution Israel could make in this field. But much more should be done—at an accelerated pace, on a wider front and in a more systematic manner

A few sparse clouds on an otherwise clear horizon

Strategic relationships are not built on gestures alone; their success depends ... on reciprocity. India has enormous expectations from Israel and so does Israel from India. Yet, the process will not be assisted if the supply of the Phalcon radar system is accompanied by India maintaining its dismal record of voting for anti-Israel resolutions in the United Nations.

- Swapan Dasgupta September 12, 2003

While Indo-Israeli ties have remained robust for almost two decades, flourishing under both BJP and Congress governments, there are however a few points of contention that mar an otherwise remarkably unblemished relationship—and which must be openly aired and frankly confronted.

One irksome issue for Israel is India's almost consistent support of anti-Israel resolutions in international fora, particularly the United Nations. The reasons usually advanced for this behaviour by senior Indian representatives are the alleged sensitivities of India's large Muslim minority, dependence on energy sources in the Muslim

world, and concern for its expatriate communities working in Arab countries.

Israel has also expressed grave concern—bordering on alarm—over New Delhi's cordial relations with Tehran. The Indian response to these fears typically refers to the long-standing history of cultural relations between the two nations, energy supplies and strategic considerations regarding Pakistan and Afghanistan, with whom Iran shares a common border. However, in view of Iran's overt declarations of its intention to destroy Israel, coupled with its determined drive to attain nuclear capabilities to do so, Israel's consternation is not difficult to understand, despite assurances that the Indo-Iranian entente does not involve any military component that could threaten Israeli security.

India also has some concerns regarding Sino-Israeli ties especially in the area of arms supplies to China. However, in view of strong US disapproval of Israeli sales of advanced military equipment to the Chinese, as demonstrated by Washington blocking the Phalcon deal in 2000 and strong Pentagon reaction to Israel's planned upgrading of Chinese aerial drones in 2004, there appears little cause for serious worries that Indian security interests could be undermined in the foreseeable future.

Without going into a detailed analysis of the substantive validity of these points of dissent, or of the merit of the responses to them, suffice it to say that they appear unlikely to undermine the ties between India and Israel from continuing to develop and to strengthen, ties which, in the words of Raminder Jassal India's former Ambassador to Israel, "are following a natural flow."

Indeed, given a judicious mixture of political wisdom, will and goodwill, there seems every reason for optimism. For just as Israel, arguably the world's most beleaguered democracy, has established a special relationship with the world's most powerful democracy, there seem to be strong—and mutual—incentives for the establishment of a similar relationship the world's most populous democracy.

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