

# COMMENTARY

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## **Here's How President Mahmoud Abbas Visit Signals India's New Approach towards Palestine**

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**T**he four-day (May 14-17, 2017) visit to New Delhi of President Mahmoud Abbas comes at a crucial time. This is his fifth visit to India but the first since May 2014 when Prime Minister Modi came to power.

The two leaders had, however, met on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in September 2015. A month later, President Pranab Mukherjee visited Palestine during his three-nation Middle East tour. That was followed by the visit of External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj to Ramallah in January 2016. During these visits, both Mukherjee and Swaraj reinforced India's commitment to the Palestinian cause and reiterated support for the nation-building process in Palestine. During her visit, Swaraj also inaugurated the Palestinian Digital Learning and Innovation Centre built with Indian support.

Historically, India has maintained steadfast support for Palestine and has continued to extend political, diplomatic and developmental support. In his press statement during Abbas' visit, Modi said, "India has been unwavering in its support of the Palestinian cause. And, we hope to see the realisation of a sovereign, independent, united and viable Palestine, coexisting peacefully with Israel."

Earlier, during his October 2015 visit, President Mukherjee had said: "India would like to see the people of Palestine living within secure and recognised borders, side by side and at peace with Israel, as endorsed in the Arab Peace Initiative, the Quartet road map and relevant United Nations Security Council Resolutions."

Over the years, however, the Indian position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has evolved. Earlier, India's solidarity with the Palestinian struggle was stronger to the extent that for more than four decades it refused to have formal diplomatic ties with Israel. But post-Cold War geopolitical shifts compelled India to chart a new foreign policy course leading to the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992. Since then, India has maintained a balance between furthering bilateral relations with Israel and expressing solidarity with Palestine.

India and Israel share strong bilateral relations with robust security and defence ties, counter terrorism cooperation and growing collaboration in other fields including agriculture, IT and environment. Cultural contacts, educational exchanges and business ties have also grown significantly in recent years.

The growing warmth between India and Israel was on display when President Reuven Rivlin visited India in November 2016. Rivlin was not only accompanied by a large government and business delegation, but he also stayed in India for a week during which he visited the Centre of Excellence in Agriculture in Karnal, Haryana and the 'Aqwise' water treatment plant in Agra, both set up and run with Israeli support.

He also jointly inaugurated the Agro Tech 2016 in Chandigarh with President Mukherjee. Further, India signed contracts worth USD 1.4 billion with Israel Aerospace Industries to purchase two Phalcon/IL-76 AWACS and 10 Heron TP UAVs.

Critics have argued that India's growing relations with Israel dilutes its commitment to the Palestinian cause. However, the fact remains that flourishing ties with Israel has not changed India's stance on the conflict and it continues to support the realisation of a sovereign and the independent state of Palestine. Nonetheless, it has also become sensitive to Israeli security concerns.

Hence, India is at times seen as a suitable international interlocutor to facilitate negotiations. The Palestinian side has on many occasions urged India to be more active along with other international players to facilitate Israel-Palestine negotiations. For example, in an interview to The Hindu on May 16, Abbas said: "In the case of India, we have always mentioned that we want India to be involved, besides Arab countries, EU, Russia and other members of BRICS." New Delhi has, however, so far kept away from any active involvement in the peace process. Global efforts to resume the peace talks have come to a nought due to various factors, the most important being the lack of political will on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides. The lack of a credible mediator has also been a major roadblock for the resumption of talks.

President Trump, like his predecessors, is trying hard to bring Israel and Palestine to the negotiating table. He has chosen to visit Saudi Arabia and Israel for his first foreign tour, which was preceded by several high-level meetings with regional leaders in Washington including with King Abdulla II of Jordan, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Abbas.

Of late, countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and UAE have initiated backroom efforts to resume talks and the Trump administration has shown a keen interest in the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian talks. In the wake of the planned Trump tour to the Middle East, a Wall Street Journal report noted that the Arab Gulf states “have offered to take concrete steps to establish better relations with Israel if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will make a significant overture aimed at restarting the Middle East peace process.”

The timing of Abbas’s visit to India is significant at many levels; most importantly because Modi is all set to undertake a maiden visit to Israel in July. Since it will be the first ever visit by an Indian prime minister to Israel and will not be accompanied by a customary visit to Palestine, pundits believe that Abbas’s visit is a balancing act. However, there is more to the visit than just maintaining a balanced relationship with Israel and Palestine.

India has been reinvigorating its policy towards the Middle East and has been keen to engage with the wider region, going beyond the core area of its interest—the Persian Gulf. Modi has visited major countries of the region including Saudi Arabia, UAE and Iran, while Swaraj has undertaken a number of visits including to Israel-Palestine, Iran, Egypt and some GCC countries. In addition, President Mukherjee also visited Israel, Palestine and Jordan in October 2015.

India has also engaged with Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and countries in North Africa through visits by Minister of State for external affairs M. J. Akbar and Vice President Hamid Ansari. The flurry of engagements shows that the Middle East is a priority for Prime Minister Modi. Given that India has friendly relations with all countries in the region, has good ties with both Israel and Palestine and vital stakes in the Middle East, it can use diplomatic channels to emphasize to all stakeholders the need for the resumption of the peace process.

Though a challenging and arduous task, the changing geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East and India’s own growing interests make it difficult for India to remain indifferent. India might not be keen on undertaking a larger role in the peace process but its friendly relations with major stakeholders and major Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt can help it to facilitate the resumption of talks.

There are indications that the Modi government is rethinking New Delhi's hands-off approach toward the Middle East peace process. For example, India sent the prime minister's special envoy on counter-terrorism, Asif Ibrahim, to the Paris Peace Conference in January 2017, underlining its preference for the resumption of the peace process and indicating its willingness for involvement.

Though this was not the first time that India was part of such an international effort, it is the changed circumstance of continued stalemate, rising tensions and growing instability in the region that make India's participation notable. India has in the past participated in peace conferences such as the Madrid conference of 1991 and the Annapolis conference of 2007, but has not been actively involved in international efforts for the resumption of talks.

Abbas's visit to New Delhi following his meeting with Trump in Washington and preceded by Modi's visit to Israel, if seen alongside Ibrahim's participation in the Paris Peace Conference and India's growing engagements in the region, appear to indicate that India is adopting a new approach toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

**Note:** This article was originally published in *India Times* on 20 May 2017 and is reproduced with the permission of the author. Web Link: <http://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/here-s-how-president-mahmoud-abbas-visit-signals-india-s-new-approach-towards-palestine-322046.html>

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