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## **Relations with Israel: The UPA and the Indian Left**

By

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It is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend.

William Black (1757–1827)

The Indian government cannot rest with just issuing a statement of condemning violence. It must stop all military and strategic relationship with Israel. As a minimum, it must stop its Free Trade Agreement talks with a country that does not even allow free flow of humanitarian materials into Gaza and its 1.5 million people.<sup>1</sup>

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The willingness of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) headed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to continue closer ties with Israel comes against the background of persistent opposition from the Indian Left. Their limited support base and parliamentary strength have not hampered the Left parties, especially the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M), from emerging as hardened critics of India's growing political, economic and above all, military ties with Israel. The support of the Left parties, which commanded just about ten percent of the seats in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Indian parliament), was vital for the survival of the first term of the UPA government (2004–09). As highlighted by the 2007

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<sup>1</sup> Prabir Purkayastha, 'Massacre at sea: Israel as a rogue state', *People's Democracy* (New Delhi), 6 June 2010, [http://pd.cpim.org/2010/0606\\_pd/06062010\\_21.html](http://pd.cpim.org/2010/0606_pd/06062010_21.html).

Presidential and Vice-Presidential elections, at times, the Left parties have enjoyed a political veto over the choices and preferences of the Congress party.

Until they withdrew their support over the Indo-US nuclear deal in July 2008 the Left parties occupied a pivotal role in governance. As part of their outside support, they hoped that the UPA government would modify and abandon the policies pursued by the National Democratic Alliance led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) during 1999–2004. The Left depicted India's Israel policy during this period as *anti-Muslim, anti-Arab and a pro-US conspiracy*. However, the defeat of the BJP in the May 2004 elections did not adversely affect Indo-Israeli relations. Despite their repeated demands and public criticism of the Manmohan Singh government, the Left parties were unable to bring about any far-reaching changes or dilution in India's Israel policy. Indeed, neither the NDA nor the UPA, which depended heavily upon the support of the Left, was prepared to accommodate the demands of the Left vis-à-vis Israel.

The much talked-about 'course correction' never happened. The government that depended heavily upon the parliamentary support of the Left parties refused to yield on Israel. How could one explain the failure of the Left party to influence the policies when they were supporting the government? What were the main arguments of the Left parties in demanding a course correction? Where did they go wrong and what were the reasons for their failure to modify India's Israel policy? Is it a sign of ideological limitations or a result of their failure to understand Indo-Israeli dynamics?

## Background

Since the early 1920s, Indian nationalists had identified with the Arabs of Palestine and were unsympathetic towards the creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine. In November 1947 when the United Nations voted in favour of the partition of Palestine, India not only opposed the move, but also floated a federal Palestine as the alternative. In the wake of the formation of the State of Israel in May 1948 and its subsequent admission into the UN, India gradually came to terms with reality and granted recognition to Israel in September 1950. The establishment of diplomatic relations, however, did not happen until January 1992. The end of the Cold War and rapid transformation of the international order enabled Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao to abandon past hostilities and establish full diplomatic ties with the Jewish State.<sup>2</sup>

Not everyone, however, was happy with the normalization of relations or the pace with which the bilateral relations have progressed since 1992. Due to their anti-imperialist underpinnings

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<sup>2</sup>For a detailed discussion see, P R Kumaraswamy, *India's Israel Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

and ideological proximity with the erstwhile Soviet Union, many Indians were not enamoured by Rao's decision. For the traditionalists, his decision to establish relations more than four decades after Jawaharlal Nehru's recognition was a hasty and unnecessary move. They felt that New Delhi should have waited until the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. For them, the normalization of relations before a comprehensive settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict was a betrayal of the Palestinians.<sup>3</sup>

In 1992, the Left parties in India faced a few additional challenges. Since the end of the June 1967 war between Israel and its Arab neighbours, the Communists in India had followed the Soviet model. As Professor M S Agwani summed up, 'their larger interests in the Arab countries induced them to support the Arab nationalist causes.'<sup>4</sup> The Communist parties did not make significant gains in the Lok Sabha elections held in the summer of 1991. The inconclusive election ironically favoured Israel. The decision of the Congress party to normalize relations with Israel was enthusiastically supported by the main opposition party, the BJP. For long the Hindu nationalists had been critical of the prolonged absence of relations with Israel and had attributed it to the 'appeasement policy' of the Congress party. The Indian socialists, who had in the past maintained fraternal links with the Israeli Labour Movement, also welcomed the move. Hence, only smaller parties like the Janata Dal and the Muslim League shared the reservations of the Left parties vis-à-vis Israel.

Secondly, in an unprecedented development, state governments took the lead in promoting bilateral ties with Israel. The economic liberalization policies ushered in by Rao (with Manmohan Singh as his Finance Minister) resulted in a number of Chief Ministers visiting Israel. This was true for Congress-ruled states such as Gujarat Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana and Orissa as well as opposition-ruled states such as Rajasthan and Karnataka. Indeed, during the 1990s, most bilateral interactions took place at the level of the State government rather than the Centre. Unconcerned about political controversies, the state leaders sought economic cooperation and assistance in areas such as agriculture, horticulture and water management.

Thirdly, contrary to prolonged fears, the majority of Indian Muslims reconciled to Rao's decision and there were no major upheavals or protests over normalization. Indeed the erosion in Muslim support for the Congress party in the 1990s was primarily due to the demolition of the controversial Babri Masjid in Ayodhya than due to normalization of relations with Israel.

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<sup>3</sup> Among others, see Punyapriya Dasgupta, 'Betrayal of India's Israel policy', *Economic and Political Weekly*, (Bombay), vol.27, nos.15-16, 11-18 April 1992, pp.767-772; Mani Shankar Aiyar, 'Chutzpah', *Sunday*, (Calcutta), 6 June 1993, pp.14-17; and Bansidhar Pradhan, 'India's policy toward the PLO' in Riyaz Punjabi and A.K. Pasha, (ed.), *India and the Islamic World* (New Delhi: Radiant, 1998), p.73.

<sup>4</sup> M S Agwani, *Contemporary West Asia* (New Delhi: Har-Anand, 1995), p.221.

Fourthly, the international climate was also unfavourable to the Left. Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, the Indian Left was used to taking ‘inspiration’ from Moscow in their reading and assessment of international developments. The willingness of Moscow to normalize relations with Israel just days before the inauguration of the Madrid Peace conference in October 1991 and the sudden disappearance of the USSR left them rudderless. The end of the Cold War meant the emergence of American hegemony and the end of the Soviet Union and made them orphans ideologically. For a while, the end of history visualized by Francis Fukuyama looked frighteningly real and the triumph of liberal western democracy over dogmatic Soviet-modelled communism looked a real possibility. Under such circumstances, the Left was unable to develop a coherent path vis-à-vis normalization of relations with Israel.

Moreover, India was not alone in normalizing relations with Israel. The Madrid peace conference enabled a number of countries to re-examine their policy towards Israel. They discovered that recognizing and establishing diplomatic ties with Israel would further their interests in the Middle East. Such a policy, they figured out, would not impede their relations with the Arab and Islamic countries. Great powers such as China considered to be progressive by the Indian Communists had abandoned their past hostility and sought closer cooperation with Israel. Beijing, for example, was able to pursue strong military ties with Israel without abandoning its traditional interests in the Arab world. In the post-Oslo phase, a number of Arab countries were even prepared to establish low-level ties with Israel, including trade missions in Tel Aviv.

These developments inevitably resulted in a gradual reappraisal by the Indian Left. When Arab adversaries, especially Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, were pursuing peace negotiations and seeking political accommodations with the Jewish State, the anti-Israeli postures had little political logic. Their domestic political dividend was also limited. Such a realization resulted in the veteran Communist leader Jyoti Basu signalling a break from the past by making an official visit to Israel in July 2000. In his last foreign visit as Chief Minister, Basu took a 25-member business delegation to Israel.<sup>5</sup> During the visit, the Communist leader met Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and senior Labour leader Shimon Peres. A few days later, another business delegation headed by Somnath Chatterjee (who was elected the Speaker of Lok Sabha in 2004) went to Israel. As the chairman of the powerful West Bengal Development Corporation, Chatterjee was exploring investment opportunities from Israel.<sup>6</sup>

This Left-Israel bonhomie, however, did not last long. The outbreak of the Al-Aqsa intifada in September 2000 destroyed the delicately-constructed national consensus. The Palestinian uprising radically changed the international climate towards Israel and the Indian Left returned to its pre-1992 stand against Israel. Their task was made easier by another factor: the emergence of

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<sup>5</sup> Subodh Ghildiya, ‘Jyoti, Somnath visited Israel’, *The Pioneer*, (New Delhi), 9 June 2004

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

the BJP as the ruling party and the growing contacts with Israel when the NDA was in power between 1998 and 2005.

### Left and NDA Phase, 1998–2005

When the BJP-led NDA was in power, the Left depicted the relations as a nexus between the Hindu nationalists and Israel rather than a bilateral affair between the two. Historically, the BJP and its forerunner the Jan Sangh had been sympathetic towards Israel and had been demanding that Jawaharlal Nehru and his successors normalize relations with that country. When the first non-Congress government under Prime Minister Morarji Desai came to power in 1977, the Jan Sangh was unable to bring about any radical changes in India's Israel policy. However, in August that year, Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan came to Indian incognito and unsuccessfully explored normalization of relations.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Rao's decision to normalize relations was enthusiastically embraced by the BJP.

While the relations were established when the Congress party was in power, they acquired greater public visibility during the tenure of Atal Behari Vajpayee as Prime Minister during 1998 to 2004. Some of the high-profile developments in the bilateral relations took place when the NDA government was in power; they include the state visit of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in September 2003 and visits of Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and Home Minister A K Advani in the summer of 2000. The visit of Communist leader Basu also took place when the BJP was ruling India.

However, when the international community began criticizing Israel for its handling of the Al-Aqsa intifada, the Left used the pro-Israeli leanings of the BJP to rationalize its criticisms of the bilateral relations. Within days after the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising, the CPI-M, the largest of the Left parties, demanded that India should seek a meeting of the UN Security Council where Israel should be condemned for 'sponsoring' violence in the occupied territories. Joining the chorus against the 'silence' of the NDA government, the Congress, the principal opposition party, also criticized Israel for its 'unwarranted and deplorable' actions against the Palestinians.<sup>8</sup>

Conveniently forgetting that Chief Minister Basu and Somnath had been in Israel only a few months earlier, CPI-M General Secretary Harkishan Singh Surjeet castigated the Indian

<sup>7</sup>Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough: A Personal Account of the Egypt-Israel Peace Negotiations* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1981), pp.26–29.

<sup>8</sup> 'India should condemn Israel for violence: CPI (M)', *The Hindu*, 15 October 2000.

government for ‘reversing’ the national consensus on the Palestinian issue.<sup>9</sup> In December that year, at meeting organized by various Left parties and groups the leaders wanted the Vajpayee government to ‘take a clear and forthright stand condemning Israel’s latest atrocities and anti-human actions.’ It also called for a halt to ‘harmful policy’ of security cooperation with Israel and demanded that the government adopt a ‘clear, forthright and measurable practical support to the Palestinian cause.’<sup>10</sup>

Recalling the bygone days of the Cold War, in January 2002, an editorial in the CPI-M weekly commented:

Not very long ago, Indian passports had a printed qualification that the holder is not permitted to visit Israel. Those were the days when India’s steadfast commitment to non-alignment and to the cause of the Palestinian struggle for their homeland was unequivocal.<sup>11</sup>

This remark came 18 months after Basu’s visit to Israel and was in response to suggestions by Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres that both the countries were ‘natural allies.’ In its eagerness to ‘please its US imperialist masters and their allies’, the CPI-M charged that the BJP ‘undermines’ India’s support for the Palestinians. Longing for the Cold War, another intellectual lamented:

There was a time when India was seen, internationally, as an originator and major force in the Non-Aligned Movement, a leader of the developing world, and generally a bulwark against imperialism. Much has changed since then.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, the Cold War should have continued if only to prevent India from moving closer to Israel!

During the NDA years, the Indian Left depicted Indo-Israeli relations as an anti-Muslim, anti-Arab and pro-US conspiracy. Within this broad prism, it offered four principal arguments for the BJP seeking ‘special relations’ with Israel.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The leader of the smaller Communist Party of India (CPI) condemned the government for letting ‘down an old friend.’ John Cherian, ‘India’s changing stand’, *Frontline* (Chennai), 28 October–10 November 2000, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1722/17220140.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> V Sridhar, ‘An expression of solidarity’, *Frontline*, 23 December 2000–5 January 2001, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1726/17260600.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Betrayal of the Palestinian cause, Editorial, *People’s Democracy*, (New Delhi), 13 January 2002. [http://pd.cpim.org/2002/jan13/01132002\\_edit.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2002/jan13/01132002_edit.htm). There were suggestions that until normalization, Indian passports were not valid for travel to Israel. This is not correct and India abandoned this provision perhaps during the tenure of the Janata government during 1977–79. Indeed, the passport issued to the author in July 1987 did not contain any such restrictions.

<sup>12</sup> Jayati Ghosh, ‘The dubious new alliance’, *Frontline*, 7–20 June 2003, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2012/stories/20030620005411900.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> The expression ‘special’ relations figured most prominently in the discourses of the CPI (M) on Indo-Israeli ties. Likewise, much of the criticisms were directed at the BJP and not the NDA.



*a. It was part of the anti-Muslim policy of the BJP:*

The Left parties and its supporters perceived a nexus between the domestic and foreign policy agendas of the BJP. They offered simple but sinister explanations for the growing Indo-Israeli ties under the BJP. According to the Left, both were united by their common hatred towards the Muslims. In the words of CPI-M General Secretary Prakash Karat,

The chauvinist positions and military attacks by Sharon and his rightwing government find a positive response amongst the BJP and its RSS mentors in India. The war against the Palestinians is seen through the prism of *The Hindutva* war against Muslim minorities in India. Some of the barbarism which is taking place in Gujarat finds a parallel in the Israeli atrocities in the West Bank. That is why the Vajpayee government has remained silent throughout except for a muted expression of concern for Yasser Arafat during the siege. There is no indignation or revulsion at the savagery of the Israeli onslaught. The nexus with the Israeli regime established by the BJP rulers needs to be exposed and thwarted.<sup>14</sup>

On another occasion, Karat maintained: ‘What the BJP admires in Israel is that they are teaching the Arabs—the Muslims—a lesson. And this is what they want to emulate.’<sup>15</sup> Other party leaders saw Indo-Israeli relations as BJP-Israeli relations and a synergy between two ‘bigoted ethno-nationalisms.’<sup>16</sup>

Seeing the proximity of the BJP with Israel through an anti-Muslim prism, however, was not an outlook confined to CPI-M leaders. Writing on the controversies surrounding the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, one academic from the Jawaharlal Nehru University observed: ‘... in some circles, there is a growing suspicion of a nexus developing between Israel, BJP and its allies ranged against Muslims of India with the US appearing as an innocent spectator, which could have implications for the unity and integrity of India.’<sup>17</sup> In short, for the Left, the anti-Muslim sentiments of the BJP were not confined to its domestic agenda and were also carried forward to foreign policy and were manifested through the closer ties with Israel!

*b. The BJP diluted India's support for the Palestinians:*

<sup>14</sup> Prakash Karat, ‘Palestine: The Bush-Sharon axis of evil, *People's Democracy*, 12, May 2002, [http://pd.cpim.org/2002/may12/05122002\\_palestine.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2002/may12/05122002_palestine.htm).

<sup>15</sup> Prakash Karat's interview to *Frontline*, 1–14 March 2003, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2005/stories/20030314007001600.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Sukumar, ‘Hindutava's special relations with Israel: The impoverishment of the idea of India’, *People's Democracy*, 2 May 2004, [http://pd.cpim.org/2004/0502/05022004\\_sukumar.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2004/0502/05022004_sukumar.htm).

<sup>17</sup> A K Pasha, *India and OIC: Strategy and Diplomacy* (New Delhi: Centre for Peace Studies, nd), p.44.

In August 2001, the Central Committee of the CPI-M declared that the Vajpayee government establishing closer ties with Israel including the military sphere has 'lowered' India's prestige 'in the eyes of the anti-imperialist forces the world over.'<sup>18</sup> In response, it announced a four-stage mass protest against the government. While India had always supported the Palestinians and their struggle for independence, Surjeet charged, the BJP had created a 'divergence' between the government and the people of India. 'While our people still stand for Palestine's independence, the government is not prepared even to demand Israel stop its terror in the occupied territories.'<sup>19</sup> Surjeet elaborated this point in his personal letter to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat shortly after the Lok Sabha elections which saw the defeat of the BJP. Reiterating the traditional support for the Palestinians, the Communist leader observed:

The NDA government, which was ousted from power, was led by a communal party, which saw Israel as its natural ally. With the change of government at the Centre, we are optimistic that there will be a change in priorities and perception.<sup>20</sup>

Writing Arafat's obituary a few months later, the CPI-M leader repeated that India had always extended support to the Palestinians 'except for those six years when the BJP has been in power.'<sup>21</sup>

In short, close ties with Israel was not an Indian policy, the Left argued, but only the partisan politics of the BJP. Expressing their condolences for Arafat, they accused the BJP of breaking 'record of successive Indian governments which extended support to the freedom movement of the Palestinians against Israeli occupation.'<sup>22</sup> At times the BJP-led government was even accused of pursuing anti-Palestinian policies. The government demanding the recalling of the Palestinian ambassador in India over his controversial presence in an opposition meeting figured prominently in the deliberations of the CPI-M. Likewise, the refusal of the NDA government to support Arab calls to resurrect the racism charge against Zionism at the UN Conference against Racism in Durban in August 2001 did not go down well with the Left.<sup>23</sup>

*c. Improved relations with the US were part of the pro-imperialist foreign policy agenda of the BJP*

<sup>18</sup> Harkishan Singh Surjeet, 'NDA regime credibility plunges to zero point,' *People's Democracy*, 26 August 2001, [http://pd.cvim.org/2001/aug26/aug262k1\\_nda\\_regime.htm](http://pd.cvim.org/2001/aug26/aug262k1_nda_regime.htm)

<sup>19</sup> Harkishan Singh Surjeet, 'Middle East brought to flashpoint', *People's Democracy*, 14 April 2002, [http://pd.cvim.org/2002/april14/04142002\\_middleeast.htm](http://pd.cvim.org/2002/april14/04142002_middleeast.htm).

<sup>20</sup> CPI (M) leaders thank Arafat', *People's Democracy*, 13 June 2004, [http://pd.cvim.org/2004/0613/06132004\\_arafat\\_cvim.htm](http://pd.cvim.org/2004/0613/06132004_arafat_cvim.htm).

<sup>21</sup> Harkishan Singh Surjeet, 'Arafat dies, his struggle goes on,' *People's Democracy*, 21 November 2004, [http://pd.cvim.org/2004/1121/11212004\\_surjeet.htm](http://pd.cvim.org/2004/1121/11212004_surjeet.htm).

<sup>22</sup> 'Left salutes comrade Arafat', *People's Democracy*, 28 November 2004, [http://pd.cvim.org/2004/1128/11282004\\_arafat%20condolence.htm](http://pd.cvim.org/2004/1128/11282004_arafat%20condolence.htm).

<sup>23</sup> The Left parties, however, boycotted the conference due to the refusal of the government to include caste on the Durban agenda.



Following the September 11 attacks in the US, Prakash Karat found the logic behind the desire of the BJP to intensify cooperation with Israel. According to him, ‘the rationale is evident: Hindutva and Zionism share common ground in their perception of the Muslim threat. Further, the BJP avidly seeks the status Israel has with the US, of a reliable and close ally which acts as the gendarme for the protection of America’s imperial interests.’<sup>24</sup>

Following the assassination of Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin in March 2004, Surjeet offered a long exposition castigating Israel and its ‘terrorist policies.’ The refusal of the Indian government not to go beyond demanding ‘restraint’ by all the parties infuriated him further. Depicting India as the American ‘Man Friday in South Asia’, he lamented that under the NDA rule, India had abandoned the Palestinians.

India, under the BJP, has now adopted a totally contrary foreign policy, even while paying lip service to non-alignment. ... it was the same GOI (Government of India) that gave the marching order to the former PLO ambassador, known as a great friend of India, simply because he was present at a meeting in Hyderabad that was organized to protest the communal violence in Gujarat. Vajpayee was the first prime minister to invite and extend red carpet welcome to an Israeli prime minister—and to whom? —to Sharon, that butcher of the Shatila and Sabra refugees. Moreover, the GOI under Vajpayee has forged closer ties with Israel in military spheres while, during the last six years, it has been conspicuous by its silence of the question on Palestinian struggle for a homeland.

The Vajpayee government’s silence is particularly abhorrent in view of the fact that Yassin’s assassination has intensified the threat to Yasser Arafat’s life. Even the US state department felt compelled to urge Israel to keep its promise of not harming Arafat. But the Vajpayee government is not prepared to issue even such an appeal.

In short, Surjeet was saying that when it came to ‘anti-Palestinian policies’, the BJP-ruled India was worse than the Bush administration in the US.<sup>25</sup>

The controversial Israeli leader Ariel Sharon came in for severe treatment from the Indian Left. His ‘role’ in the Sabra and Shatila massacre of the Palestinians in September 1982 figured prominently in its discourses.<sup>26</sup> When the Belgian court dropped its plans in 2003 to charge the

<sup>24</sup> Prakash Karat, ‘A strategy misfires’, *Frontline*, 29 September– 12 October 2001, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1820/18200130.htm>; See also, Sukumar Muralidharan, ‘Into a crucial phase’, *Frontline*, 27 October– 9 November 2001, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1822/18220150.htm>

<sup>25</sup> Harkishan Singh Surjeet, ‘Hamas leader’s assassination: Israel, US will have to account for misdeeds’, *People’s Democracy*, 28 March 2004, [http://pd.cpim.org/2004/0328/03282004\\_surjeet.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2004/0328/03282004_surjeet.htm).

<sup>26</sup> Among others, see Yohannan Chemarapally, ‘Israel tramples on the peace process’, *People’s Democracy*, 8 April 2001, [http://pd.cpim.org/2001/april08/april8\\_israel.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2001/april08/april8_israel.htm); Harkishan Singh Surjeet, ‘Middle East brought to flashpoint’, *People’s Democracy*, April 14, 2002 [http://pd.cpim.org/2002/april14/04142002\\_middleeast.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2002/april14/04142002_middleeast.htm); and Prakash Karat, ‘A strategy Misfires’, *Frontline*, 29 September –12 October 2001, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1820/18200130.htm>. See

Israeli Prime Minister with war crimes, the Indian Left called it as an ‘unfortunate’ move brought about by ‘intense pressure from the US government.’<sup>27</sup>

The decision of the NDA government to host the Israeli leader in September 2003, therefore, infuriated the Left. By inviting ‘a war criminal’, the party warned, ‘the Indian government has committed a cardinal sin of bestowing honour on a war-criminal, who is deeply detested by the vast majority of global community because of his unsavoury reputation.’<sup>28</sup> They greeted this ‘blot on the Indian nation’ with widespread protests and demonstrations. Some argued that by paying the customary visit to *Rajghat*, the memorial of Mahatma Gandhi, Sharon had ‘defiled’ the site.<sup>29</sup> For the likes of Karat, the US President George W Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Sharon were ‘the ideological soul mates of the BJP.’<sup>30</sup>

*d. Closer ties with Israel undermined India's international standing*

The political resolution adopted by the 17<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPI-M in March 2002 charged that by establishing ‘closer ties with Israel, including military and security cooperation’, the BJP had brought shame upon the country and downgraded India’s ‘status as an independent and major non-aligned country.’<sup>31</sup> For senior leaders like Surjeet, by forging closer military ties with Israel, the BJP had ‘lowered’ India’s prestige in the eyes of the world.<sup>32</sup>

The willingness of the Left to characterize India’s Israel policy as a continuation of BJP’s domestic policies had its repercussions upon the Congress party. While in opposition, the party leaders were critical of the Israel policy pursued by the BJP. In July 2000, even before the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa intifada, Congress leader and former junior foreign minister Eduardo Faleiro had criticized the ‘hype’ regarding Indo-Israeli ties and the desire of the BJP to cooperate

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also, John Cherian, ‘Talking Tulkarm’, *Frontline*, 2–15 February 2002 and Aijaz Ahmad, ‘Israel’s colonial war’, *Frontline*, 16 February–1 March 2002, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1904/19040560.htm>

<sup>27</sup> N D Jayaprakash, ‘Bestowing honour on a war criminal’, *People’s Democracy*, 3 August 2003, [http://pd.cpim.org/2003/0803/08032003\\_sharon%20visit.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2003/0803/08032003_sharon%20visit.htm).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>29</sup> Mahendra Singh, ‘Hutatma chowk reverberates with anti-Sharon slogans’, *People’s Democracy*, 28 September 2003, [http://pd.cpim.org/2003/0928/09282003\\_mumbai.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2003/0928/09282003_mumbai.htm). Interestingly, during his state visit to India in January 2006, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia refused to visit Rajghat because veneration of graves runs contrary to the Wahhabi Islam and is proscribed in Saudi Arabia.

<sup>30</sup> Prakash Karat, ‘Bush backs Sharon’s illegal plan against Palestinians’, *People’s Democracy*, 25, April 2004, [http://pd.cpim.org/2004/0425/04252004\\_prakash.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2004/0425/04252004_prakash.htm).

<sup>31</sup> *Political Resolution adopted at the 17<sup>th</sup> Congress, Hyderabad, 19–24 March 2002*, [http://www.cpim.org/documents/2002\\_17Cong\\_pol\\_resl.pdf](http://www.cpim.org/documents/2002_17Cong_pol_resl.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> Harkishan Singh Surjeet, ‘Two years of NDA rule’, *The Hindu*, 29 October 2001.

with Israel against 'Islamic fundamentalism.'<sup>33</sup> A few years later, party spokesperson Jaipal Reddy ruled out a 'strategic partnership' with Israel.<sup>34</sup> Elaborating on this, he observed:

In our view, there is no need for India to get involved with Israel at all. There is this outdated notion about Israel being a model anti-terrorist state. Israel as a state is more vulnerable to terrorism than any other state. In that sense, even in terms of a model, it doesn't work.<sup>35</sup>

Reflecting similar sentiments, the Congress Party's spokesperson on foreign affairs (and later India's Foreign Minister) Natwar Singh accused the NDA government of 'abandoning' the Palestinians.<sup>36</sup> During the 2004 campaign for the Lok Sabha elections, A K Antony, the then Chief Minister of the southern state of Kerala demanded that India should initiate an economic blockade against Israel for 'unleashing' unjust violence against the Palestinians. However, as would be discussed afterwards, a couple of years later, as India's Defence Minister, he sang a different tune and facilitated the largest defence cooperation with Israel.<sup>37</sup>

The ideological underpinnings of the Left parties vis-à-vis Israel had a strong resonance in the pages of *The Hindu*, a highly-respected daily from Chennai. Not only has it given widespread publicity to the anti-Israeli rhetoric and demands of the leaders and functionaries of the CPI-M, the daily has also taken a strong editorial stand against closer military ties with Israel. In January 2002, the paper cautioned Prime Minister Vajpayee against joining hands with Israel in fighting terrorism because, 'India ought to be wary of trapping itself in some untenable position in the name of creative diplomacy.'<sup>38</sup> In a similar vein, a few years later, *The Hindu* faulted the UPA government for its failure to introduce a 'course correction' in India's Middle East policy. Welcoming the May 2005 visit of Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas, the paper felt that India should have condemned the Israeli occupation, especially when the Palestinian leader 'was gracious enough to acknowledge that India's ties with Israel were its sovereign affair.'<sup>39</sup> Reflecting the mood of the Left parties, the editorial criticized the government for its failure 'to resolve' and 'to restore balance' in India's Middle East policy. In its assessment, the UPA government 'should realize that any soft-peddling of opposition to Israel on the ground that it is a major supplier of military equipment will seriously damage India's standing in the developing world.'<sup>40</sup>

Such a critical and unambiguous interpretation of the relations with Israel during the tenure of the BJP rule, however, came to haunt the Left following the 2004 Lok Sabha elections.

<sup>33</sup> 'Hype over Israeli ties unwarranted: Faleiro', *The Hindu*, 10 July 2000.

<sup>34</sup> 'Cong. opposes move for strategic ties with Israel', *The Hindu*, 11 May 2003.

<sup>35</sup> Interview to *Frontline*, 24 May–6 June 2003, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2011/stories/20030606006101400.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> Interview to *Frontline*, 3–16 August 2002, <http://www.Frontlineonnet.com/fl1916/19160430.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> 'India should initiate action against Israel: Antony', *The Hindu*, 27 April 2004.

<sup>38</sup> 'The new 'equation with Israel'', editorial, *The Hindu*, 11 January 2002.

<sup>39</sup> 'Firm up support to Palestine', editorial, *The Hindu*, 26 May 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.,

## UPA Government and Israel, 2004–08

The depiction of India's relations with Israel as a nexus between the domestic and foreign policies of the BJP became problematic when the NDA lost the 2004 Lok Sabha elections. The formation of the Congress-led UPA government in May 2004 marked a significant shift in the power equation of the Left parties. The Manmohan Singh-led government's continuance in power was possible only with the 'outside support' of the Left parties which won about 60 seats in the 545-member Lok Sabha. Aware of the coalition compulsions, the Congress party was prepared to accept some of the demands of the Left regarding Israel.

### Concessions

**H**aving come to power with their support and backing, the Congress-led UPA government could not ignore the demands of the Left parties. Wherever possible, the government was willing and able to accommodate. Conceding to the Left, the Common Minimum Programme of the UPA declared:

Traditional ties with West Asia will be given a fresh thrust. The UPA government reiterates India's decades-old commitment to the cause of the Palestinian people for a homeland of their own.<sup>41</sup>

At least in the initial months, there were no major political contacts with Israel.

The most visible manifestation of the influence of the Left on the Middle East policy could be noticed in India's handling of the Lebanese war in the summer of 2006. On 13 July, within hours after the crisis broke, India expressed its condemnation of 'the abduction of the two Israeli soldiers on 12 July 2006 by Lebanese militants and calls for their immediate release.' It also condemned the 'excessive and disproportionate' Israeli military response.<sup>42</sup> This 'balanced' approach did not go down well with the Left. While much of the Middle East was still critical of the 'recklessness' of the Hezbollah for its kidnapping, on 14 July, the Polit Bureau of the CPI-M demanded that the Indian government 'should not only deplore the attack on Lebanon, but demand that international sanctions be applied on Israel for its brazen violation of international

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<sup>41</sup> *National Common Minimum Programme of the Government of India*, May 2004, Prime Minister's Office, New Delhi, <http://pmindia.nic.in/cmp.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> *Statement of Official Spokesperson on the tension at the Israel-Lebanon border*, 13 July 2006, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, <http://meaindia.nic.in/pressrelease/2006/07/13pr01.htm>.

law. At a first step, India should suspend buying arms from Israel.’<sup>43</sup> According to the party, ‘mere condemnation or issuing statement will not suffice.’<sup>44</sup>

The pressures from the Left manifested in two distinct ways. On 31 July, the government backed a unanimous resolution in the Lok Sabha that was highly critical of Israel. Deviating from its initial caution and criticisms of the Hezbollah for kidnapping the two Israeli soldiers and thereby precipitating the crisis, the resolution unreservedly backed Lebanon. Without making any reference to the kidnapping, it ‘unequivocally condemns the large-scale and indiscriminate Israeli bombing of Lebanon’ and ‘killing and suffering of large number of innocent civilians, including women and children.’<sup>45</sup> The 246-worded resolution did not refer to Hezbollah rockets against Israeli civilians and pretended that the civilian deaths and destruction were happening *only in* and *not from* Lebanon.

This approach continued after Israel and Hezbollah accepted the UN-brokered ceasefire and the unanimous adoption of Security Council Resolution 1701 on 12 August. A few days later, the Prime Minister’s special envoy for the region Chinmaya Gharekhan went to the region to shore up support for the fragile ceasefire. He visited and met leaders of Syria, Lebanon and Jordan and while in Amman, he also met Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas. Interacting with the media, he made public statements that were critical of Israel for attacking the Lebanese civilians. Speaking from Amman, he declared that his visit to the region was aimed at expressing ‘solidarity with the Lebanese and Palestinian masses in their hour of crisis and also to form first hand impression and assessment of the situation.’<sup>46</sup> He did not visit Israel, apparently due to ‘logistical’ problems.<sup>47</sup> By skipping Israel, the special envoy perhaps avoided a potential confrontation between the UPA government and its allies on the Left over Israel.

The government also tolerated some of its leaders and officials making statements that were critical of Israel. Junior Minister in the Foreign Ministry E Ahamed was one such example. As a member of the small Muslim League, he had to cater to his support base and hence following his meeting with Arafat in his Ramallah headquarters in September 2004, Ahamed warned Israel against harming the Palestinian leader.<sup>48</sup> In February 2006, Congress spokesperson Jayanthi

<sup>43</sup> ‘Aggression by Israel condemned’, *People’s Democracy*, 23 July 2006, [http://pd.cpim.org/2006/0723/07232006\\_pb%20statement.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2006/0723/07232006_pb%20statement.htm).

<sup>44</sup> ‘Left mobilizes MPs against Israel’, *People’s Democracy*, 6 August 2006, [http://pd.cpim.org/2006/0806/08062006\\_left%20mobilises%20pms%20against%20isreal.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2006/0806/08062006_left%20mobilises%20pms%20against%20isreal.htm).

<sup>45</sup> *Resolution adopted by the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Indian Parliament) on 31<sup>st</sup> July on Situation in West Asia*, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, <http://meaindia.nic.in/pressrelease/2006/07/31pr02.htm>.

<sup>46</sup> Harinder Mishra, ‘Mideast peace does not exist anymore: India’, PTI Features, 24 August 2006, [http://www.outlookindia.com/pti\\_news.asp?id=409483](http://www.outlookindia.com/pti_news.asp?id=409483).

<sup>47</sup> Personal communication of Ambassador Chinmaya R Gharekhan on 23 September 2006.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Indian minister warns Israel against removing Arafat’, *The Daily Star* (Beirut), 18 September 2004.

Natarajan was critical of the ‘secret’ meeting between UP Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav and the Israeli Ambassador in India David Danielle.<sup>49</sup>

Some senior officials took part in a conference on ‘War, Imperialism and Resistance’ organized by the Left parties in New Delhi in March 2007. The three-day gathering of scholars and activists was highly critical of Israel and its policies regarding the Palestinians and Lebanon. Among others, it was attended by Prime Minister’s Special Envoy Gharekhan.<sup>50</sup> Coinciding with the fourth anniversary of the US-led invasion of Iraq, it also attracted Ali Fayyad, a spokesperson for the Hezbollah. This was the first known presence of an official from the Hezbollah in India.<sup>51</sup>

In 2005, the government included CPI-M Polit Bureau member Sitaram Yechury as part of the official delegation to the annual session of the UN General Assembly. Speaking on behalf of India, he underscored the basic objection to the security fence/wall that Israel had been constructing. According to him as India had ‘stated in the past, no one could have objections to the construction of the wall in areas coinciding with the Green Line. However, its encroachment on Palestinian land and interests creates great hardship for the people affected by its construction and exacerbates the situation.’<sup>52</sup> Likewise, in November 2004, Yechury represented the Left parties when Foreign Minister Natwar Singh led the Indian delegation to the funeral of Arafat held in Cairo.

As a ‘concession’ to the Left, the government cancelled a joint military exercise with Israel that was planned for late 2004.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, since the UPA came to power, the Prime Minister’s national security advisors (J N Dixit, M K Narayanan or Shivshankar Menon) have avoided visiting Israel. However, on more substantial issues, the UPA did not depart from the earlier Indian position.

### .... But no U-turn

Within weeks after the formation of the UPA government, Foreign Minister Natwar Singh ruled out ‘any review’ of diplomatic relations with Israel. Assuring that India’s approach would be ‘pragmatic and empirical’ he declared: ‘... there will be no U-

<sup>49</sup> ‘Mulayam’s meeting with Israeli envoy draws flak, *The Hindu*, 15 February 2006. See also, ‘Now Congress turns Iran stick on SP’, *Indian Express* (New Delhi), 16 February 2006.

<sup>50</sup> Amit Baruah, ‘Prevent political holocaust in West Asia’, *The Hindu*, 13 March 2007.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Hezbollah man lauds India ahead of anti-terror meet’, *Indian Express*, 14 March 2007; and ‘India can help resist US influence in West Asia’, *Indian Express*, 14 March 2007.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Concern over Israeli violations of Palestinian rights’, *People’s Democracy*, 20 November 2005.

<sup>53</sup> John Cherian, ‘A breach of trust’, *Frontline*, 4–17 December 2004, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2125/stories/20041217000405900.htm>.



turn.<sup>54</sup> A few days later, partly to alleviate any misgivings on the direction of foreign policy, in his address to the joint session of the parliament, President A P J Abdul Kalam outlined the policy of the new government.

Our relations with Israel, which have developed on the basis of mutually beneficial cooperation, are important, but this in no way dilutes our principled support for the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people.<sup>55</sup>

This assurance of the continuity did not go down well with the Left. In a hard-hitting editorial, *People's Democracy*, the official organ of the CPI-M, declared:

Equally objectionable is the way the relations with Israel have been introduced and described as "mutually beneficial cooperation" which are "important". After stating this as the main feature, there is a ham-handed attempt to state that these relations will in no way dilute our principled support to the Palestinian people. The Indian people have expressed their outrage at the way the criminal Sharon regime is perpetuating a colonial oppression of the Palestinian people. Hundreds of Palestinians are being killed in the continuing military operations in the West Bank and the Gaza. Palestinian leaders are being assassinated through a program of State terrorism. It is highly regrettable that the President's address seeks to carry on with the same India-US-Israel axis flaunted by the Vajpayee regime.<sup>56</sup>

In other words, the Left wanted an Israel policy that would differentiate the UPA from the BJP.

After some initiation hesitation, the UPA government began putting the bilateral relations back on track. Beginning with the first Foreign Ministry level consultations in November 2005, a host of meetings and contacts with Israel was resumed. As one commentator wearily observed, as the Palestinian leader was struggling for his life in the Percy military hospital in Paris, 'the Indian government was busy preparing for the high-level political consultations with Israel.'<sup>57</sup> Beginning with the visit of the then Industry Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in December 2004, political contacts between the two countries have continued.<sup>58</sup>

As the Left parties were demanding an end to military cooperation with Israel, in May 2007, for the first time, the government disclosed the quantum of defence procurement from Israel. The Defence Minister told the Rajya Sabha that the defence purchases from Israel during 2002–07

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<sup>54</sup> Interview to *India Today*, quoted in *The Dawn*, 6 June 2004

<sup>55</sup> President Abdul Kalam's address to the Joint Session of Parliament, 7 June 2004, Office of the President of India, New Delhi, <http://presidentofindia.nic.in/scripts/palatest1.jsp?id=6>.

<sup>56</sup> 'President's address: Adhere to CMP framework, Editorial, *People's Democracy*, June 13, 2004, [http://pd.cpim.org/2004/0613/06132004\\_edit.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2004/0613/06132004_edit.htm).

<sup>57</sup> Cherian, 'A breach of trust', *Frontline*, 4–17 December 2004, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2125/stories/20041217000405900.htm>.

<sup>58</sup> The planned visit of Finance Minister and former Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu a few days later was cancelled due to problems with budget preparations.

‘have been over US\$ 5 billion.’<sup>59</sup> In July, the Cabinet Committee on Security chaired by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh approved a US\$ 2.5 billion proposal to jointly develop a missile defence system with Israel.<sup>60</sup> Capable of intercepting aircraft and other aerial objects at a range of 70 kilometres, this was the largest single defence deal with Israel. Furthermore, it marked a new phase in Indo-Israeli defence ties; from the erstwhile cash-and-carry mode, both countries have entered joint defence research and development.

Such close defence cooperation did not imply ‘ideological’ convergence, argued Defence Minister Antony. In his assessment, ‘Successive governments since 1992 have had defence ties with Israel. This is not new. And the relation is not ideological, but purely based on our security requirements.’<sup>61</sup> Only a few years earlier, Antony had been seeking economic sanctions against Israel over its policy towards the Palestinians!

These developments indicate that contrary to the demands of the Left, the UPA government was not prepared to modify the direction of the Indo-Israeli relations. Much to the annoyance of the Left and its supporters, it even upgraded the ties by seeking joint defence research. The Left parties which were hoping that the Congress-led UPA government would be radically different from the BJP-led coalition were disappointed at the turn of events. At regular intervals, especially when the violence in the Middle East increases, the communist leaders as well as their sympathizers criticize the government Manmohan Singh for its refusal to rectify ‘mistakes’ of the previous BJP government.

When the BJP was in power, the Left parties demanded an end to diplomatic ties with the Jewish State. In April 2002, for example, the CPI-M demanded that the government recall its ambassador from Tel Aviv in view of ‘the Israeli aggression and continuing slaughter of the Palestinian people.’<sup>62</sup> In the same month, Party General Secretary Surjeet suggested that the least that the NDA government could do was ‘to recall its envoy from Tel Aviv till Israel mends its ways and pays heed to the world public opinion.’<sup>63</sup>

During the tenure of the UPA, however, the Left diluted its demands. It recognized that the government would not go that far to recall its envoy and precipitate a major foreign policy crisis. It modified its position accordingly and was satisfied with demanding an end to military-security

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<sup>59</sup> *Rajya Sabha*, Unstarred Questions 4481, 16 May 2007, <http://164.100.24.219/rsq/quest.asp?qref=126094>.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Nod for missile venture with Israel’, *The Hindu*, 13 July 2007.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Relation with Israel based on our security requirements, says Antony’, *Financial Express*, 23 July 2007.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Recall envoy from Tel Aviv, says CPI (M)’, *The Hindu*, 8 April 2002.

<sup>63</sup> Harkishan Singh Surjeet, ‘Middle East brought to flashpoint’, *People’s Democracy*, 14 April, 2002, [http://pd.cpim.org/2002/april14/04142002\\_middleeast.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2002/april14/04142002_middleeast.htm).

cooperation with Israel. At a condolence meeting for Arafat held in late November 2004, the Left parties demanded that the government sever the military ties with Israel that were ‘forged by the previous NDA government.’<sup>64</sup> Ending of defence cooperation with Israel was one of the principal foreign policy demands of the 18<sup>th</sup> party conference of the CPI-M held in April 2005. The party warned that the government of Manmohan Singh ‘should not allow its ties with Israel to affect’ long-standing commitments of ‘secular forces in India’ to the Palestinians.<sup>65</sup>

Accusing the Congress party of betraying their leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, Yechury was astonished that:

the present dispensation ... sees only virtue in cozying up to the United States and its most favoured protégé, Israel. Just as the strategic alliance and subordination of India to the United States is meeting with strong resistance from the Indian people, the pro-Israeli stance of the Indian establishment will also incur popular disapproval.<sup>66</sup>

During the Lebanese conflict of 2006, the CPI-M launched a campaign whereby a large number of MPs belonging to different political parties called on the government ‘to suspend’ all military purchases from Israel.<sup>67</sup> The party warned that the campaign over Lebanon would also demand that India ‘disentangle’ from strategic and defence ties with Israel.<sup>68</sup>

The refusal of the UPA government to comply with such demands was not appreciated by the Left parties and their supporters. Describing the ties with Israel as ‘harmful’ which would ‘have to be reviewed’, Karat warned that if the UPA government ‘does not stick to its Common Minimum Programme, we will take it to the people.’<sup>69</sup> That there was no difference between the ‘progressive’ UPA and the ‘communal’ NDA governments disturbed many. Speaking at a public function organized by the Left, veteran historian Irfan Habib remarked: ‘On the matter of foreign policy too the new government continues to tow the pro-imperialist tone of the NDA. The defence minister (Pranab Kumar Mukerjee) called for closer ties with Israel.’<sup>70</sup> Likewise, within weeks after the formation of the new government, another commentator complained that while

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<sup>64</sup> ‘Sever military ties with Israel: Left’, *The Hindu*, 24 November 2004.

<sup>65</sup> “On solidarity with Palestinian people”, *People’s Democracy*, 14 May 2006, [http://pd.cpim.org/2006/0514/05142006\\_pb.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2006/0514/05142006_pb.htm).

<sup>66</sup> ‘Aggression by Israel condemned’, *People’s Democracy*, 23 July 2006, [http://pd.cpim.org/2006/0723/07232006\\_pb%20statement.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2006/0723/07232006_pb%20statement.htm).

<sup>67</sup> ‘Suspend arms purchase from Israel: MPs’, *The Hindu*, 29 July 2006.

<sup>68</sup> Prakash Karat, ‘Israel’s horrific war crimes in Lebanon’, *People’s Democracy*, 6 August 2006, [http://pd.cpim.org/2006/0806/08062006\\_prakash.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2006/0806/08062006_prakash.htm).

<sup>69</sup> ‘India must review ties with Israel: Karat’, *The Times of India* (New Delhi), March 16, 2007.

<sup>70</sup> Arjun Ghosh, ‘Wage war against imperialism’, *People’s Democracy*, 5 December 2004, [http://pd.cpim.org/2004/1205/12052004\\_leftword-safdar.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2004/1205/12052004_leftword-safdar.htm).

promising to ‘correct course’, the UPA government ‘has diluted its commitment to it over the past month.’<sup>71</sup>

## Limitations of the Ideological Understanding

The continued military-security cooperation with Israel highlights the limited political leverage of the Indian Left. Their demands for a reappraisal were often met by new announcements or defence purchases. Some critics have accused the Left of practicing political double standards. While harping on the visits of Advani and Jaswant Singh, the CPI-M, for example, never discussed the visit of Basu as a pro-Israeli move. A simpler explanation could be that the CPI-M was hypocritical about Israel. As the critics of the Left highlighted, even while demanding international sanctions against Israel, the government of West Bengal ruled by the CPI-M-led coalition, was not ready to abandon its economic cooperation with Israel.<sup>72</sup> Its failure also exposed the limitations of the Left in bringing about far-reaching changes in Indian foreign policy. Its refusal to shoulder the responsibility as a full member of the ruling coalition also underscored its limited political leverage.

However, a far more serious problem lay in its ideological understanding of the Indo-Israeli relations. Its depiction of the bilateral relations as an anti-Muslim, anti-Arab and pro-US exercise of the BJP was popular when the NDA was in power during 1998–2004. By establishing a nexus between the domestic and foreign policies of the BJP, the Left, especially the CPI-M, rode on populism. The undercurrent of this was so popular that even some Congress leaders chose to join the bandwagon of the anti-BJP rhetoric of the Left.

This ideological understanding became counter-productive when the Left-backed UPA was not prepared to abandon closer ties with Israel. By not acceding to the demands for a course correction, the government headed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh challenged the three premises of the Left regarding Indo-Israeli relations.

### *a. It was anti-Muslim*

Driven by ideological rhetoric, the Left looked for a simple explanation for the policies of the NDA towards Israel. While the anti-Muslim bias of the BJP has been reasonably well established, explaining India’s Israel policy merely as an anti-Muslim conspiracy begs logic. Having in the past depicted Indo-Israeli ties as a conspiracy against Muslims, the Left became a prisoner of its own perception. Yechury aptly summed up this dilemma of the Left. He and

<sup>71</sup> Praful Bidwai, ‘Sharon’s insane plan’, *Frontline*, 3–16 July 2004, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2114/stories/20040716004211800.htm>.

<sup>72</sup> Subrata Nagchoudhury, ‘Delhi comrades want sanctions against Israel, in Bengal they work on farming tie-up’, 2 August 2006. See also, ‘India first, editorial, *Indian Express*, 14 March 2007.

others could ‘understand’ the previous NDA government seeking closer ties with Israel because the BJP shares

... the common hatred for Muslims and Arab world. It is a great pity that the Congress and the UPA government are not conscious of the need to differentiate from this pro-Israeli stance.<sup>73</sup>

In other words, if closer ties with Israel symbolize a hatred for Muslims and Arabs, then Congress would be an anti-Muslim and anti-Arab party. While the BJP had often accused the oldest Indian party of ‘Muslim appeasement’, the Congress could not be blamed of being hostile to the Muslims.

If the Congress, a party considered to be friendly towards the Muslims, could pursue political and military ties with Israel, then it becomes difficult to explain the bilateral relations primarily through the anti-Muslim paradigm as the Left was trying to do during the NDA rule. Alternatively, if the Congress could explain its defence ties within the ‘national interest’ calculations, then nothing would prevent the BJP or any other party from using a similar rationale. The Left linked its criticisms of the domestic policy of the BJP to the Israeli policy of the NDA government. This linkage boomeranged when the Congress party, which survived on its support, did not accept the ‘course correction’ demanded by the Left parties.

#### *b. It was anti-Arab*

This explanation exposed the distance between the Left parties in India and the Middle Eastern realities. Driven by ideology and political dogmatism, they were unable to view the Arab-Israeli conflict without the traditional blinkers. Their interactions with likeminded Israeli and Palestinian groups were important, but they conveyed only a twisted picture.<sup>74</sup> This was exposed by the gulf between the Indian communists and the Palestinians over the Indo-Israeli relations. In April 2005, during the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPI-M, West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee moved a resolution that condemned Israel for its brutal occupation of Palestinian territories and declared:

It is essential to review and end the strategic military and security cooperation with Israel, which is one of the most lawless states in the world and which continues to defend its occupation of Palestinian and Arab lands. The CPI (M)

<sup>73</sup> ‘Aggression by Israel condemned’, *People’s Democracy*, 23 July 2006, [http://pd.cpim.org/2006/0723/07232006\\_pb%20statement.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2006/0723/07232006_pb%20statement.htm).

<sup>74</sup> For example, in June 2007, Yechury attended the 25<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Israeli Communist party in Haifa and Nazareth. However, conscious of the negative political fallout, his travelogue in the party weekly harped on the Palestinian dimension of the trip without any reference of Israeli leaders and personalities he would have met. Sitaram Yechury, ‘Visit to Palestinian territories: Feeling the deep anger, anguish and pathos’, *People’s Democracy*, 8 July 2007, [http://pd.cpim.org/2007/0708/07082007\\_sitaram.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2007/0708/07082007_sitaram.htm). See also, V J K Nair, ‘Jerusalem initiative’, *People’s Democracy*, 24 June, 2007, [http://pd.cpim.org/2007/0624/06242007\\_jerusalem.htm](http://pd.cpim.org/2007/0624/06242007_jerusalem.htm)

will endeavour to see that the harmful legacy of the Vajpayee government's foreign policy is removed.<sup>75</sup>

In other words, India should terminate all its military ties with Israel.

The party congress was also attended by a Palestinian delegation. A day after the resolution was adopted, Ahmed Soboh, Deputy Information Minister in the Palestinian National Authority and a delegate at the meeting publicly distanced himself from the decision of the CPI-M. Speaking to the Indian media, he observed:

It is completely an internal issue of India. It is not a Palestinian demand, it is not a Palestinian concern and it is not a Palestinian request... We are not asking our friends to cut relations with Israel. What is important for us is the full support of India toward peace, toward the legality, toward the international resolution of the Palestine dispute... We are asking our friends to use this relation to persuade, encourage Israel to go for peace, return to the negotiating table and not to impose a military solution. I'm sure that the Indian government is using its relations with Israel in this direction....The support Israel enjoys in military actions is mainly from United States. We don't believe that any kind of relations between Israel and other countries are being used against us.... Any kind of relations between India and Israel is part of the internal issue of India. As friends, we are talking and communicating with each other to use all of India's relations in the Middle East toward the peace process, toward the end of the occupation, toward the peaceful settlement of all conflict. I'm sure the Indian government is totally in favour of this position.....<sup>76</sup>

In short, the Palestinians would benefit more by India using its leverage vis-à-vis Israel rather than by completely disengaging from the Jewish State. This incident not only highlighted the variance between the Indian Left and the ground realities in the Middle East, but also their more-catholic-than-the pope attitude towards Israel.

Furthermore, contrary to the claims of the Left, ties with Israel have not hampered India's ability to forge closer political and economic ties with the Arab and Islamic countries of the Middle East. Since the normalization of relations in 1992, Israel has not figured adversely in India's relations with the Middle East. With the sole exception of Egypt, no Arab country has made Israel a factor in their bilateral ties with India.<sup>77</sup> Countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia have

<sup>75</sup> Political Resolution adopted at the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPI (M) held in New Delhi during 6–11 April 2005, [http://www.cpim.org/documents/2005\\_april\\_18cong\\_pol\\_res.htm](http://www.cpim.org/documents/2005_april_18cong_pol_res.htm).

<sup>76</sup> G Ananthakrishnan, 'CPM wants Delhi to boycott Israel, its Palestinian guests say we want NO such thing', *Indian Express*, 9 April 2005.

<sup>77</sup> The Egyptian unhappiness towards India was manifested by the prolonged refusal of President Hosni Mubarak to visit India and receive the Nehru Award for International Understanding originally announced in July 1997.



been pursuing closer economic ties with India despite the Israel factor. While in power, the BJP increased India's political interactions with the Arab and Islamic countries of the region.<sup>78</sup> Much of the energy-related cooperation with Iran, for example, began when Prime Minister Vajpayee hosted President Mohammed Khatami in January 2003. Even the subsequent Indo-Iranian differences over the nuclear question were linked to Indo-US and not Indo-Israeli relations. Therefore, the argument of the Left that relations with Israel dented India's image and affected its interests in the Middle East was not borne out by facts.

Driven by the Cold War paradigm, the communists were not prepared to see the improvements in Israel's diplomatic fortunes. With the notable exception of the Islamic countries, the rest of the world normalized relations with it. Israel has been interacting with all the major powers of the world, including communist China. Even the Islamic countries are less hostile than before. Most of the Arab countries have removed secondary boycotts against Israel. In November 2005, as part of its WTO membership, Saudi Arabia even agreed to lift its economic embargo against Israel.<sup>79</sup> The Saudi peace plan, endorsed by the Beirut Arab summit in March 2002, underscored the willingness of the Arab world to recognize and normalize relations with the Jewish State if certain conditions were met. Unfortunately, the Left parties in India have been unable to read the complex Middle East reality. While Israel's policies and postures often complicate peacemaking, the wider Middle East seeks a political and not military solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. By seeking to distance India from Israel, the Left exposed its distance from the Middle East.

### *c. Part of the pro-imperialist foreign policy*

Since the end of the Cold War, various Indian governments have recognized the pre-eminence of the US and the need to make necessary changes in India's foreign policy. Despite their reservations while out of office, both the Congress and the BJP have recognized the importance of forging closer ties with Washington. This recognition is reflected in India's Israel policy. The US factor was one of the calculations of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao when he normalized relations in 1992. The decision was announced hours before Rao left for New York to attend the summit meeting of the UN Security Council. Since 1992, Israel has emerged as an important area of convergence between India and the US. As highlighted by the then National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra in his address to the American Jewish Congress in May 2003, India recognizes 'fundamental similarities' among the three countries.<sup>80</sup> Such an understanding enabled India to secure the American backing for the supply of Phalcon advanced airborne early

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<sup>79</sup> Haim Bior, 'Saudi Arabia to lift trade embargo on Israel', *Ha'aretz*, (Tel Aviv), (English edition), 16 November 2005.

<sup>80</sup> Text of Brajesh Mishra's speech, 8 May 2003, Ministry of External Affairs, <http://meaindia.nic.in/speech/2003/05/08spc01.htm>

warning systems from Israel, something the latter could not supply to China due to pressures from Washington. Seen in this context, closer ties with Israel send a positive message to the US. Unfortunately for the Left, it was not just the BJP, but also the Congress party that has been pursuing closer ties with the US. If Rao sought American cooperation for economic liberalization, Prime Minister Singh has been seeking energy security through the civilian nuclear cooperation with Washington. The Left parties had opposed both the processes and eventually withdrew their support for the UPA government in July 2008 over the nuclear deal.

It is in this anti-American rhetoric one that can place the criticisms of the Left of Indo-Israeli relations. Since both the mainstream parties are committed to, especially while in office, the strengthening of relations with the US, the criticisms of the Left of Indo-Israeli relations anchored on anti-US rhetoric is popular, but ineffective.

At the same time, as highlighted by the controversy surrounding its Iran policy, India has serious differences with the US.<sup>81</sup> Its willingness to go along with Washington on the nuclear question was accompanied by an Indian determination for an independent course on the energy front. This was independent of any demands from the Left and even pre-dates the formation of the UPA government. It was during the visit of President Khatami in January 2003 that both countries embarked upon energy security. Prime Minister Vajpayee hosted the Iranian leader *after* and not before the 'Axis of Evil' speech of President George W Bush. Hence, if India's desire to pursue closer ties with Israel was a pro-US gesture, its aspiration for energy security through Iran could be called an anti-US gesture.

It is essential to dispel a widely-held view regarding Israel's role in the improvements in the Indo-US relations. Normalization of relations *per se* would not have resulted in fundamental transformations in the Indo-US relations. The end of the Cold War brought some far-reaching changes in the thinking of both countries; India was orphaned by the disappearance of the USSR and its newly-found aspirations for great power status led to Indian elites, seeped in a pro-Soviet worldview, to view Washington in friendlier terms. In their own ways, economic liberalization and nuclear ambitions pursued by India galvanized the US to look at the South Asian power differently. Without contributing to any of these developments, Indo-Israeli relations benefited from the growing Indo-US partnership. Blinded by ideological rhetoric, the Indian Left was not prepared to see the nuances.

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<sup>81</sup> C Christine Fair, 'India and Iran: New Delhi's balancing act', *The Washington Quarterly*, vol.30, no. 3, summer 2007, pp.145-59. See also, P R Kumaraswamy, "Delhi: Between Tehran and Washington", *Middle East Quarterly*, vol.15, no.1, winter 2008, <http://www.meforum.org/1821/delhi-between-tehran-and-washington>

## Conclusion

**B**ilateral relations with Israel do affect India's relations with other countries. In some cases, Indo-Israeli relations have a positive outcome (the US) and in some, they have a negative impact (Egypt). But in most cases, they do not have a direct impact. By painting the Israel policy of the BJP government as an anti-Muslim conspiracy, the Left in India has painted itself into a tight corner. By failing to bring about any 'course correction,' let alone abandonment of military-security ties with Israel, the Left has exposed not only its limited influence upon the foreign policy of the UPA, but also the fallacy of its arguments of closer ties with Israel being an anti-Muslim and anti-Arab endeavour. By increasing its anti-relations antic when the BJP was in power, the Left in India heightened the expectations of 'course correction.' Its failure to influence the policy of the UPA also underscores the fallacy of the 'anti-Muslim and anti-Arab and pro-US' arguments of the Indian Left. Hence, even while its parliamentary support was critical for the survival of the government, the Left parties were unable to bring about any shifts in Indo-Israeli relations. This was both a reflection of their limited political influences as well as their inability to view events without the ideological blinkers.

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