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Open friendship is better than a clandestine affair

P R Kumaraswamy

MEI@ND

Hysteria. This is perhaps the best way to explain the Indian media coverage of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel. The historic nature of the visit is overtaken by the frenzy of reportage, coverage, and 'in-depth' analysis. Both of them highlight that peculiar place Israel enjoys in the political discourses in India.

For decades certain issues were considered taboo and hence even scholars avoided them as plagues. The prolonged Indian understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict has also -- yes also -- been a function of domestic politics. Since the early 20th century, Indian nationalists viewed Jewish nationalist aspirations within the Islamic context.

Until 1947, it was a function of the political rivalry between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League for domestic Muslim support for their respective nationalism; the inclusive one represented by the Congress and an exclusive one championed by the League. After Partition, Palestine became a platform for India-Pakistan rivalry for the support of the Arab and Islamic countries of the Middle East. Yet, prevailing political correctness prevented even the elite to locate such an important foreign policy discourse within the domestic context.

Suggesting that the Muslim population had a role in India's prolonged non-relations with Israel was derided as communal, parochial and even a slur on the moral values championed by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Hence, many became an ostrich and buried their heads in the sand of ignorance. They mixed up diplomatic relations with the approval of that country's domestic or foreign policy. Traces of this became visible in January 1992 when Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao responded to the end of the Cold War and new international political order by establishing diplomatic relations with Israel. While some missed the comforts provided by the Soviet Union, some called normalization an anti-Arab and even anti-Muslim move.

It is essential to recognise that the core Indian position vis-à-vis the Palestinian cause has remained largely intact. India, irrespective of the party in power, supports a two-State solution, namely, a Palestinian State coexisting side by side with Israel with peace and security. It is opposed to any unilateral move on the part of either part Y.

For some time, it expressed its support for a Palestinian State with 'East Jerusalem as its capital.' Gradually the Indian government recognised the complexities of the Jerusalem issue. It is neither Berlin to be divided nor Chandigarh to be shared.

Jerusalem evokes strong historical, political, religious, cultural, social, theological and human emotions and hence has to be resolved through mutual respect, accommodation, and compromise. Hence, during Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's visit in May, India dropped any reference to Jerusalem while expressing its support for a Palestinian State.

This does not mean India has endorsed the Israeli claims over Jerusalem being the 'eternal and undivided' capital of Israel. As Prime Minister Modi told the Hebrew media before his departure for Israel, 'India supports all efforts to find an acceptable solution to all the pending issues, including Jerusalem.'

'I assume the question refers to our embassy in Tel Aviv. We will take a decision on that after both sides have come to an agreement on Jerusalem,' the prime minister added.

The skipping of Ramallah was not a surprise. It is both logical and even inevitable, and the possibility was in the air for quite sometime. This is primarily a function of Palestinian disunity and intra-Palestinian rivalry.

Indeed, for the past decade, the Palestinians have been forcing the international community to choose between the West Bank controlled by the officially recognised Palestine National Authority and the Gaza Strip controlled by the militant Palestinian group Hamas.

Internal unity -- not uniformity -- is the precondition for the success of any national liberation movement. Failure to be united against Israel and its occupation has been costly for the Palestinians, and Modi's snub has to be read in that context. New Delhi de-hyphenating Israel and Palestine should force the latter for self-reflection.

Why is India-Israel normalisation -- which took more than four decades to materialise -- progressing in all aspects while India-Palestinian relations are nose-diving rapidly? Interestingly, when relations were less opaque, the primary focus of attention has been military-security cooperation between India and Israel. Bilateral relations were dominated by Indian procurements

of arms and ammunition from Israel, intelligence sharing and high-value acquisitions like fast patrol boats, anti-missile system, Phalcons AWACS systems.

The prime minister's visit has opened up new areas -- civilian and economic cooperation -- between the two countries. Cyber security is no longer a military-security preoccupation but permeates into the civilian arena like banking, e-commerce, virus attacks, money laundering, etc. With demonetisation and electronic payments, protection of sensitive digital data is as important as protecting borders. The biometric details of Aadhaar, for example, requires higher firewalls if India were to transform into a digital economy.

India-Israeli cooperation in the fields of agriculture and water management is to be located within the context of food security. India's long-term self-sufficiency in food production has to move away from its dependence upon the monsoon and the vagaries of nature. Self-sufficiency and stable production are essential if India were to become a major player in the international agrarian market as an exporter. Interestingly for long, Arab Gulf countries have been looking at India for their food security problems.

Ironic as it might sound, India-Israeli cooperation in agriculture and water management could enable India to export food items to the Gulf countries. Yes, the Middle East is known for its strange bedfellows.

Prime Minister Modi's visit is path breaking in the sense that India has come out of the closet and is prepared to deal with Israel openly and in a host of fields, military as well as civilian. Everyone may not be happy with Modi's visit, the focus on military-security cooperation with Israel or him not visiting Ramallah. But by his willingness to deal with Israel more openly and in a holistic manner, India has conveyed a powerful message: Open friendship is more enduring than clandestine affairs.

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Professor P R Kumaraswamy is Honorary Director of MEI@ND.

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