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## India, Israel and the flotilla Row, June 2010

By

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On 31 May Israeli commandoes raided Mavi Marmara which was part of the flotilla of ships that were carrying humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip. The convoy was ferrying 10,000 tonnes of humanitarian relief supplies to the Palestinian residents who were reeling a blockade imposed by Israel following the Gaza war that ended in January 2009. At least nine were killed in this incident triggering a wave of outrage across the globe. *Insani Yardim Vakfi* (Humanitarian Aid Association), a Turkish, non-governmental organisation coordinated the relief mission which involved activists from a number of other countries.

Taking a strong view on this issue, the UN Security Council demanded a "full explanation" from Israel, impartial investigations into the incident and lifting the Gaza blockade (in line with UNSCR 1860 (2009)<sup>1</sup> and the release of the ships and allowing detained civilians access to their consulates.<sup>2</sup> The issue was widely commented upon by the international media.<sup>3</sup>

A controversy arose over a statement issued by the Israeli Foreign Ministry when Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman (also the Deputy Prime Minister of Israel and founder of the Yisrael Beiteinu party) "reminded" the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon that while the international community remained silent during the past month when "500 people were killed in various

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<sup>1</sup>UNSCR 1860 (2009), <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N09/204/32/PDF/N0920432.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>2</sup> 'UNSC condemns Israeli Attack on Gaza Flotilla', Betwa Sharma, *Outlook*, 1 June 2010, <http://news.outlookindia.com/item.aspx?683884>

<sup>3</sup> For a survey of editorial in the international media see Alvite N, "MEI Media Watch, no.2, 18 June 2010, <http://mei.org.in/media/MW%2002.pdf>.

incidents in Thailand, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and *India*,” Israel “was condemned for taking a clear defensive action.”<sup>4</sup> Reference to India, evoked a storm of controversy. This is the first time that Israel has dragged India into a controversy. By then New Delhi had already condemned the Israeli attack on the aid flotilla to the Gaza Strip and according to Vishnu Prakash, spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs “there can be no justification for such indiscriminate use of force, which we condemn”.<sup>5</sup>

Israel was quick to make amends and recognizing India’s importance as “a close friend”, Mark Sofer, Israel's Ambassador to India, clarified that the reference to India in the Foreign Ministry statement was a “regrettable error.” He added that his country “does not see India in the same light as it sees its enemies.” Israel held that the mention of India was a mistake which was “totally unintentional.” Likewise, Tzachi Moshe, the Media Advisor of Lieberman, reiterated that, “India was mentioned in the press release by mistake. It was totally unintentional...The moment it came to our notice, the release was corrected and reference to India was dropped.” The reference to India was subsequently dropped from the statement put out by the Foreign Ministry on the subject. Ambassador Sofer clarified “we are taking this up to make sure that any misunderstanding risen out of this error of this nature will no longer be there.” He also said: “Israel stands hook, line and sinker behind India in its struggle in South Asia.”<sup>6</sup>

The placing of India in the same league as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq caused a flutter in South Block. It was believed that the reference to India was due to New Delhi’s strong statement soon after the incident that irritated the embattled Israeli government. David Goldfarb, the spokesperson for the Israeli Embassy in New Delhi, dubbed it a “human mistake” and said, “India had nothing to do with all this.”<sup>7</sup>

Since the normalization of relations in January 1992, ties between the two nations have flourished. Israel is one of India's largest defence and economic partners and the latter among Israel's top 10 economic partner countries.<sup>8</sup> As of 2009, the military business between the two nations is worth around US\$9 billion.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> ‘Condemned for unmistakably defensive actions: Israel’, PTI, *The Hindu*, 2 June 2010, <http://beta.thehindu.com/news/international/article444334.ece>

<sup>5</sup> ‘Israel cries foul over flotilla attack; drags India into row’, Harinder Mishra, *India Report*, 2 June 2010, <http://www.indiareport.com/India-usa-uk-news/latest-news/837041/International/2/20/2>

<sup>6</sup> ‘Israel apologizes again for uncharitable reference to India, PTI, *The Statesman*, 3 June 2010, [http://www.thestatesman.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=329950:israel-apologises-again-for-uncharitable-reference-to-india&catid=35:page-one&from\\_page=search](http://www.thestatesman.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=329950:israel-apologises-again-for-uncharitable-reference-to-india&catid=35:page-one&from_page=search)

<sup>7</sup> ‘Israel “regrets” dragging India into controversy’, Seema Guha, *DNA-Read the World*, 2 June 2010, [http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report\\_israel-regrets-dragging-india-into-controversy\\_1391145](http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_israel-regrets-dragging-india-into-controversy_1391145)

<sup>8</sup> ‘Israel removes India reference from foreign minister’s speech’, Indo-Asian News Service, *Hindustan Times*, 2 June 2010, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Israel-removes-India-from-FM-s-speech/Article1-552268.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> ‘India to hold wide-ranging strategic talks with US, Israel, TNN, *The Times of India*, 19 Jan 2010, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-to-hold-wide-ranging-strategic-talks-with-US-Israel/articleshow/5474033.cms>

In a statement issued on 31 May, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)] criticised 'the complete contempt that Israel has for international law' and called on the Indian Govt 'to condemn this dastardly attack. India must also work actively with other countries from the non-aligned nations in the UN and other bodies to force Israel to lift the illegal siege of Gaza.'<sup>10</sup> The CPI (M) demanded that India should sever all ties with Israel in view of the commando raid. Addressing a protest rally in New Delhi on 2 June 2010 the party Polit Bureau member Sitaram Yechury observed: "We condemn this brutal attack by Israel and demand action against Israel under international laws. The government of India must immediately suspend all pacts with Israel." He also demanded that India must stop negotiating on the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Israel and cease buying military equipment from it. He also expressed extreme disappointment that the statement issued by the Ministry of External Affairs condemning the attack did not directly refer to Israel.<sup>11</sup>

A protest rally organised by the Committee for Solidarity with Palestine was held in New Delhi on 2 June and the speakers demanded the severing of relations with Israel and bringing in the focus on the larger Israeli-Palestinian issue.<sup>12</sup> A section of the Indian media reported that many Arab diplomats in New Delhi were critical of the Ministry's soft stance in which no formal condemnation was made.<sup>13</sup>

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**Editor, MEI India Digest: P R Kumaraswamy**

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<sup>10</sup> *People's Democracy*, 6 June 2010, [http://pd.cpim.org/2010/0606\\_pd/06062010\\_2.html](http://pd.cpim.org/2010/0606_pd/06062010_2.html).

<sup>11</sup> 'Suspend all ties with Israel: CPI (M), Staff', *Press Trust of India*, 2 June 2010, [http://www.ptinews.com/news/686928\\_Suspend-all-ties-with-Israel--CPI-M-](http://www.ptinews.com/news/686928_Suspend-all-ties-with-Israel--CPI-M-)

<sup>12</sup> 'Protest against Israeli attack on Gaza bound aid', *People's Democracy*, 6 June 2010, [http://pd.cpim.org/2010/0606\\_pd/06062010\\_3.html](http://pd.cpim.org/2010/0606_pd/06062010_3.html). See also, Prabir, Purkayastha, 'Massacre at sea: Israel as a rogue state', *People's Democracy*, 6 June 2010, [http://pd.cpim.org/2010/0606\\_pd/06062010\\_21.html](http://pd.cpim.org/2010/0606_pd/06062010_21.html).

<sup>13</sup> 'Indians protest Israeli attack on Gaza-bound ships', Ibtihal Ahmed, *Examiner* ([www.examiner.com](http://www.examiner.com)), 3 June 2010, <http://www.examiner.com/x-45802-India-Headlines-Examiner~y2010m6d3-Indians-protest-Israeli-attacks-on-Gazabound-ships>