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Jerusalem is No Chandigarh

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Jerusalem is back with a bang. Speaking at the annual session of the UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh lamented at the ‘unresolved’ nature of the Palestinian question and reiterated India’s ‘steadfast’ support for ‘a sovereign, independent, viable and united state of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital, living within secure and recognizable borders side by side and at peace with Israel.’ While this is in tune with the traditional Indian position regarding the Palestinians, an increasingly unambiguous position on the question of Jerusalem is raising many eyebrows.

Historically, Indian had never recognized the Israeli capture of East Jerusalem during the June 1967 war and its efforts towards making the united Jerusalem an ‘eternal and undivided capital’ of the Jewish State. However, following the establishment of diplomatic relations in January 1992, Indian leaders have accommodated Israeli concerns and sensitivities and have remained vague in expressing their position on Jerusalem.

The issue came to forefront during the visit of Arjun Singh, a senior Minister under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, to Israel in June 1994. The occasion was the signing of the first bilateral agreement that visualised periodic consultations. While Israel wanted the capitals be identified as the alternate venues, India was not prepared to explicitly recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. At the same time, identifying Tel Aviv was equally problematic. Hence, both reached an innovative compromise and agreed not to mention capitals, instead saying that meetings would be held alternatively in India and Israel.

This compromise formula was largely intact, at least until August 2005 when Rajiv Sikri, Secretary East in the External Affairs Ministry headed an official delegation to Israel. According

to official US documents released by WikiLeaks “Sikri insisted that the draft joint statement should be datelined Tel Aviv (vice Jerusalem)”, and as a result no joint communication was issued at the end of the visit. Quoting Israeli officials the document went on to state “Indian Ambassador to Tel Aviv Arun K. Singh seemed shocked by Sikri's unreformed positions on issues like disengagement, adding that the Indian delegation appeared completely unmoved by changes sparked by Arafat's death, the Gaza withdrawal and strengthened India-Israel ties.”

In recent years, a number of official statements explicitly indicate Indian support for a Palestinian state ‘with East Jerusalem as its capital.’ In December 2009, India told the UN of its support for the Arab Plan that called for the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. This was reiterated when President Mahmoud Abbas visited India in February 2010. A few days later, on the eve of his state visit to Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told the media that support for the Palestinians is ‘article of faith’ for India and added that peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli problem would mean “a sovereign, independent, viable and united State of Palestine living within secure and recognized borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, side by side at peace with Israel.” However, speaking at the *Majlis al-Shura* on 1 March, the Prime Minister was rather vague and merely reiterated India’s support for “a sovereign, independent and viable Palestinian state.”

The East Jerusalem formulation soon returned and began figuring prominently in India’s statement in the NAM meeting in New York in September 2010 as well as in the speeches of President Pratibha Patil during her visit to Syria in November 2010. Jerusalem was conspicuously absent in her public statements in the UAE only a few days earlier. The Prime Minister’s UN speech is yet another addition.

The issue of capital has been problematic. Israel is the only country whose capital is not recognized by a vast majority of the countries. While it wants recognition to its claims to the Eastern part of the city, the international community had not recognized even West Jerusalem as its capital. This is ironic because Israel had been in control of West Jerusalem since 1948! Embassies of countries which have normal relations with Israel, including India, are located in Tel Aviv and not in Jerusalem. Even the handful of Christian countries of Latin America which had their embassies in Jerusalem in the past have gradually joined others and moved out of the city. Hence, it is Washington, Beijing, Moscow, London, Paris but Tel Aviv.

At the same time, all the principal institutions of the state such as the office of the President, Supreme Court, Knesset and various ministries are located in Jerusalem. All important meetings and negotiations take place in that city. Above all, the ceremonial presentation of credentials, including by ambassadors of Egypt, Jordan and Turkey, take place in the president’s residence located in Jerusalem.

If the UN does not recognize Jerusalem to be Israel's capital, the same holds true for the Palestinians. The UN partition plan of November 1947, which is the basis for the two-state solution endorsed by India, recognizes Jerusalem as *corpus separatum* or international city. The first round of the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1948 resulted in the city being divided between Israel and the Arabs; the former taking control over the western part while the Eastern part, including the walled city, came under Jordanian control. Through the armistice agreement signed on 3 April 1949, Israel and Jordan not only divided the city but had recognized the *de facto* control of the other. During the June 1967 war, Israel captured the Eastern part of Jerusalem as well as the West Bank from the Jordanian control and shortly thereafter annexed it. Since then, Jerusalem as the united and undivided capital of the Jewish State remains one of the corner stone of Israeli policy. The international community, however, does not recognize the claims of Israel or the Arabs over Jerusalem.

Moreover, East Jerusalem was an occupied territory even before 1967 and during this period even non-Israeli Jews were not allowed to pray at the Western Wall when the old city was under the Arab Jordanian control. A number of synagogues in the old city were destroyed and vandalized. This is in contrast to the Israeli practice since June 1967. By and large, Israel has ensured freedom of worship since June 1967.

Let there be no mistake. Jerusalem is no Chandigarh. The contested claims of Punjab and Haryana can be resolved easily by building a new city. The moment New Delhi announces the construction of a new city both states would relinquish their claims and go after the new capital. But you can't build a New Jerusalem nor can you divide. Jerusalem is a city of history, geography, theology, archaeology and above all of intense emotions of Jews, Muslims and Christians. Not sure if our mandarins understand the complexities of the Holy city.

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