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India Warms up to Israel

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The two-day visit of External Affairs Minister S M Krishna to Israel and the Palestinian territories has been receiving widespread attention both within and outside the country. Nearly two decades after normalization, Israel continues to make news in India. More importantly, Krishna's visit comes against the backdrop of the absence of such high-level contacts since UPA came to power in 2004. Following the establishment of relations in January 1992, this was the second visit of an Indian Foreign Minister; the earlier one was by Jaswant Singh in July 2000.

While there are periodic foreign ministry level contacts, ministerial contacts are few and far between. Principal Indian functionaries have refrained from visiting Israel. On a couple of occasions, planned visits by Defence Ministers did not materialize because of the rapidly changing political landscape in the Middle East and the cycle of violence. Even those who visited Israel in the past could not do so as Ministers. The last Foreign Minister level contact took place in February 2004 when Silvan Shalom came to India. This was shortly before BJP-led NDA was swept out of power.

Official contacts were kept to the barest minimum. Indeed, when Israel hosted its national day in May last year, no senior government official was present. The spokesperson of the Congress Party Abhishek Singhvi made a brief appearance but he made sure to leave the venue before the main event started. Indeed, it was Congress party under Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao which normalized relations; yet under the UPA India has been rather coy towards Israel. A number of junior ministers have been visiting Israel but senior Indian leaders carefully skipped Israel. In November 2010, for example, President Pratibha Patil made a state visit to neighbouring Syria and reiterated the official Indian policy towards the Palestinians.

The absence of high-level political contacts with Israel is in contrast to India's interactions with other countries of the region. Indeed since 1992, Syria had three state visits; one by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in November 2003 and another by President Pratibha Patil last November. New Delhi hosted President Bashar Assad in June 2008. Similarly since 1991 there were five state visits between India and Iran, including a brief stopover by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in April 2008.

President Ezer Weizmann made a state visit in December 1995 and a reciprocal Indian visit has been on the cards since then. Even A P J Kalam, who visited Israel both before and after his presidency, could not change this pattern.

By comparison, Narasimha Rao's government was far more forthcoming in seeking political contacts with Israel. Despite the prolonged absence of relations or because of it, senior cabinet ministers including Messrs Arjun Singh and Chidambaram went to Israel. It was true that Rao was reluctant to host Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin soon after normalization. Even Islamic countries like Morocco, Bahrain and Indonesia were happy to host the Israeli leader following the historic handshake in September 1993; Rao however was reluctant to upset the delicate balance. Yet, his Finance Minister Manmohan Singh represented India at Rabin's funeral in November 1995.

The UPA has played it differently. Some coalition partners were constantly pressing for a 'course correction' on Israel. Furthermore, the visit of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in September 2003 gave an impression, especially within the Indian Left and a section of the Congress Party, that the bilateral relations were taking a BJP-Likud tinge.

The political pattern of limited ties with Israel was maintained by the senior officials of the government. Since 2004, the UPA had three National Security Advisers; J N Dixit, M K Narayanan and Shivshankar Menon. While the first announced the normalization of relations in January 1992, Menon served as India's ambassador in Tel Aviv in the mid-1990s. Yet none of them have visited Israel. Hence the considerable interest in Krishna's visit to Israel.

Interestingly, the absence high-level political contacts have not hampered the bilateral relations. Indeed, Israel continues draw considerable political, academic and media attention. With the sole exception of his American counter counterparts, the Israel ambassadors, including the incumbent Alon Ushpiz, are the most sought after diplomats in New Delhi.

Contrary to conventional perception, there is a perceptible shift in attitude of the Indian Muslim community towards Israel. It is not blindly and rabidly anti-Israeli. There is a generational change. Younger Muslims are eager to understand and learn from Israel and to engage with Israeli scholars. Not that they have turned into Zionists but unlike their parents and grandparents, younger Muslims who are willing to pursue a dialogue with Israel, despite the differences. This a far cry from the Three NOs enunciated by the Arab League in Khartoum in September 1967: *No Recognition, No Negotiation and No Peace with Israel.*

Though important, political contacts are no longer a pre-condition for furthering Indo-Israeli relations. Various state governments, including those ruled by parties traditionally unfriendly towards Israel, have been interacting with the Jewish State. Their agenda is economic and non-political. Through bilateral interactions and cooperation with Israel in the fields of agriculture, horticulture, water management and infrastructure they seek economic benefits for their respective populations. Unlike the Union Government, they could afford to be indifferent towards political controversies surrounding Israel. Hence, since 1992 the bilateral relations immensely benefited from the decentralized nature of India as well as from the globalization of the Indian economy.

In his interactions with the Israeli and Palestinian officials, Krishna would be parroting traditional Indian positions on the Middle East peace process, Palestinian statehood and negotiated settlements. But one can go to the extent of arguing that when it comes to Israel, the Ministry of External Affairs is not the prime mover. That task is left to less political and more professional ministers such as Ministry of Defence, Agriculture and of late Infrastructure. Driven by tangible benefits, they are in the forefront of promoting bilateral relations. Both the Defence Ministers have not visited one another; but their service chiefs have been periodically interacting. As a result, while the South Block makes politically correct noises, North Block and *Krishna Bhavan* (which houses the Ministry of Agriculture) have been adopting professional and non-political approach towards Israel. Therein lays the irony of Krishna's visit.

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