

## *DATELINE MEI*

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### **Delhi Terror attack on Israel**

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**T**he bombing of an Israeli diplomat's car in New Delhi poses some harsh and delicate challenges for the Indian government. Fortunately the damage was limited and no life was lost. That the incident happened in broad daylight, in a highly sensitive area close to the residence of the prime minister, is a serious warning. What happened in the capital on Monday afternoon was much more than terrorism as India is heading for a major diplomatic battle over the incident.

Led by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel was quick to blame the Islamic Republic of Iran for the attack. For its part Tehran has denied any involvement and its spokesperson even blamed the Jewish State for carrying out the attack on its own diplomatic personnel. Given the adversarial relation between the two countries, such trading of charges is natural and inevitable. In recent months each accused the other of complicity, if not involvement, in a number of terror-related incidents. The war of words between the two, especially over Iran's nuclear ambition, is escalating. As the investigation into the bombing progresses, the decibel and intensity will only intensify. There are suggestions that Israel would not respond harshly and immediately to the Delhi attack. But this could change should there be other attempts elsewhere.

In the words of India's Home minister P Chidambaram, "a very well-trained person" carried out the attack. The target selection and damage caused, however, indicate that either the execution was amateurish or it was just a trial run for something bigger. The former should give vital clues during the investigation but the latter means greater cause for concern.

The attack has serious diplomatic implications. It should not be dismissed merely as an attack on Israel, because it raises safety concerns about every diplomat posted in India. The world is watching as to how the Indian government handles the probe as well as the diplomatic fallout. That an Israeli diplomatic vehicle was targeted only adds to the problem.

Israel sees a pattern between the Delhi bombing and similar other attempts in recent days in Tbilisi and Bangkok. Some in the region and elsewhere see these attacks as a retaliation for suspected Israeli involvement in the killing of Hezbollah commander Imad Mugniyah four years ago this month. There was also a spate of violence against Iranian nuclear scientists for which Tehran blames the United States and Israel.

*Who could have done it?* Nations do not behave rationally and only upon a detached cost-benefit analysis. Moreover, there are always elements in countries which seek to further a particular course. Sometimes they are backed by a section within the government, but often such groups are autonomous. For all practical purposes the Delhi attack might have been the handwork of some domestic element within India hostile to growing ties with Israel; it might be acting without any external support or backing.

Moreover, unlike individuals, governments do not have the luxury of hasty conclusions if they were to avoid diplomatic embarrassments and disasters. Iran cannot be held responsible merely because of Israeli suspicions and accusations. At the same time, giving a clean chit to any group, organisation or country before a conclusive probe would equally be incorrect. Investigation has to be open-minded, not open-ended. Or as they say, *Nobody is ruled in, Nobody is ruled out.*

New Delhi will not be able to accuse Iran or any other country without evidence. At the same time, it will not be able to dismiss Israel's claims lightly. Either way the blast poses a tough diplomatic challenge for India. Under these circumstances, any sensible Indian response will have to be based upon one single criterion: *Evidence.*

There is where the real challenge lays. Terror-related investigations in India have a dynamics of their own. Probes drag indefinitely, most rarely reach prosecution stage and conviction rate is equally abysmal. Indeed, more the anti-terrorism laws, lesser the conviction. Even security issues have not altered the general lethargy, indifference and unprofessionalism that have permeated many Indian institutions. This time around, however, indefinite and inconclusive investigation is not an option. Given the high-profiled nature of the blast, it does not have the luxury of laxity. Nor can such a probe be subjected to political correctness or 'wider' national interest calculations. Unlike the Mumbai blast, India would not be able to remain passive if external involvement is discovered.

Even if they are not sufficient for a successful prosecution, India would have to come up with substantial evidence before holding anyone or any country responsible. Will it be able to identify the perpetrator, motive and potential logistical support for this sticky bomb? Honestly, this would be a big 'if'.

Following the recent blast, media reports suggest that Israeli counter-terrorism experts are already assisting the Indian probe. This should not be surprising. Since the normalisation of relations in January 1992, India has been cooperating with Israel on counter-terrorism. In June 2000 as Union Home minister L K Advani visited Israel and was accompanied by the top brass of India's security establishment and this drew considerable media attention. However, over the years and without much publicity intelligence agencies of both the countries have been interacting and exchanging notes. These have continued and intensified since Chidambaram became the Union Home minister. Since his days as Commerce Minister under Prime Minister P

V Narasimha Rao in the 1990s, he has been interacting with Israel. This should have given him a grasp of their concerns about security. There are indications that inputs from Israel and its experience in fighting terrorism have gone into the formation of the new National Counter-Terrorism Centre (NCTC) that comes into force on March 1.

The attack definitely poses serious diplomatic challenge to India and its Middle East policy. Despite bilateral tensions between these two countries, India seeks good relations with Israel as well as Iran. Its desire to keep off from their bilateral tensions is natural, logical and sensible. But its ability to maintain equilibrium would rest on the investigation coming up with some definite answers to the attack on the Israel diplomat.

Yes, it is a problem for India's Ministry of External Affairs but the key to the puzzle is with the Union Home Minister. *Will he deliver?*

**Note:** This was originally published in *New Indian Express* (Chennai) on 17 February 2012.

Web link: <http://expressbuzz.com/opinion/columnists/probe-blast-with-open-mind/364156.html>

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