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Krishna's visit to the Middle East

SM Krishna, the External Affairs Minister of India, went on a four-day trip to the Middle East to hold talks with his counterparts in Israel, Jordan, United Arab Emirates and Palestine. In the first leg of his visit which started from 8 January 2012, Krishna met his Jordanian counterpart Nasser Judeh. Jordan is a key nation in India's Middle East Policy, as it is important for India's food security, along with being a crucial provider of agricultural fertilizers like Potash, Phosphoric acid, etc.¹ India also supports Jordan in its attempts to revive the Middle East peace process. The latest attempt took place on 3 January 2012, in which Amman played host to both Israeli as well as Palestinian negotiators. S M Krishna's visit to Jordan is seen not only as an attempt to forge deep ties with Jordan, but also to understand the latest developments and dynamics in the peace process.²

Nasser Judeh updated Krishna on the situation in the region. They discussed the Jordanian efforts on the peace initiative between Israel and Palestinian Authority and the effects of Arab Spring on the region. Krishna commended the changes Jordan has undertaken recently in its domestic governance to ensure better representation of the people. He also reaffirmed India's support to Palestine. Krishna assured Judeh that there is no problem that dialogue cannot solve, and that India completely supports Jordan in its peace initiative.³ He further discussed several bilateral issues with like further cooperation at business-to-business level. Judeh also expressed interest in having a joint venture with India on supplying fertilizers, as well as to increase bilateral trade. Both emphasized the need to deepen and encourage people to people contact between the two

¹ "Krishna in Israel; focus on trade, security, agriculture", *The Indian Express*, (New Delhi), 9 January 2012, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/krishna-in-israel;-focus-on-trade-security-agriculture/897626/0>

² PTI, "Krishna arrives in Ramallah; to met Palestinian leadership", *The Hindu* (Chennai), 11 January 2012, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article2792617.ece>

³ "Jordan India discuss cooperation", *The Jordan Times*, <http://jordantimes.com/search/result?q=SM+krishna%27s+visit>

nations. Judeh informed Krishna that Jordan is keen to provide visa on arrival facility for Indians.⁴

In the next leg of his trip, Krishna drove down to Israel via the Allenby Bridge border post. He was received by the Indian envoy to Israel Navtej Sarna and officials of the Israeli Foreign Ministry. On 9 January 2012, he began his Israel sojourn by visiting the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial and Museum in Jerusalem and laid a wreath at the memorial in memory of the Holocaust victims.⁵ He then called on the Israeli President Shimon Peres who indicated Israel's support for India's inclusion as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. However, he clarified that this may not be the official position of his country given "India's unwavering support for the Palestinian cause." Peres stressed on the historical ties that both the countries share. He lavishly praised the leaders of India's liberation struggle and depicted Mahatma Gandhi as a "prophet."⁶

Later in the day, Krishna met the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman at a reception hosted by the Ambassador of India. The ministers launched the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Krishna, in his speech to commemorate this event, emphasized the historical and cultural bonds the two countries share, that have made it possible to achieve so much in the last 20 years of relations. He further emphasized the need for more people-to-people interaction through tourism and culture to usher in a comprehensive and long-term partnership for mutual growth and benefit.⁷ Members of the Parliament, government, corporate sector, media, academia and the Indian community graced this occasion.

The next day, Krishna met the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for a breakfast meeting in the Prime Minister's office. They discussed issues of mutual interest like international terrorism and Iran's nuclear programme. They further discussed other potential avenues to enhance cooperation between the two countries including energy, trade, agriculture and human resource development.⁸ They also had the opportunity to review regional and international developments of mutual interest.

⁴ "Krishna in Israel; focus on trade, security, agriculture", *The Indian Express*, 9 January 2012,

<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/krishna-in-israel;-focus-on-trade-security-agriculture/897626/0>

⁵ "Visit of External Minister of India Shri SM Krishna to the state of Israel (January 9-10, 2012)", *The Embassy of India, Tel Aviv, Israel*. <http://www.indembassy.co.il/EAM%20Visit.htm>

⁶ PTI, "Krishna's visit to Israel marks new high in ties", *Hindustan Times*, 12 January 2012,

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/News-Feed/World/Krishna-s-visit-to-Israel-marks-new-high-in-ties/Article1-796040.aspx>

⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, India, "Remarks by EAM at the reception to commemorate the 20th Anniversary of Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between India and Israel", 10 January 2012, <http://mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=530118883>

⁸ Barak Ravid, "India FM visits Israel: A lot of tennis, not a word on Palestinians", *Ha'aretz*, 12 January 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/diplomania/india-fm-visits-israel-a-lot-of-tennis-not-a-word-on-palestinians-1.406936>

A lunch was hosted by Avigdor Lieberman in Krishna's honour, during which both discussed recent developments in the Middle East and South Asia. They signed an Agreement for Reciprocal Extradition of each other's nationals, and an Agreement for transfer of sentenced persons. A joint media interaction followed their meeting. Krishna reiterated the strong ties both countries share and the support each will give to the other in times of threat. He further clarified India's stand vis-à-vis Iran's nuclear programme saying that India respected every country's right to pursue a peaceful nuclear energy programme subjected to the IAEA parameters. He further stated that India would continue to increasingly cooperate with Israel on issues of mutual interest like international terrorism. He added that India will not come in the way should Pakistan decide to cultivate ties with Israel, as each bilateral relationship stands on its own merit.⁹

Dr. Yuval Steinitz, Israeli Minister of Finance, called on Krishna, and both reviewed commercial cooperation between the two nations including the status of the Free Trade Agreement, the proposal for a Joint R&D Fund and other initiatives. They also worked out a plan which aims to double trade between the states within five years, from US\$ 5 billion to US\$ 10 billion. Further, they agreed that Israel's universities will host 100 Indian post-doctoral researchers, and Israel will also host 20 Indian scientists who will come each year for a specific period for professional enrichment work.¹⁰

Later, Krishna visited the Indian Hospice in Jerusalem and announced a special grant of US\$25,000 by the Government of India for setting up a Baba Farid Heritage Centre at the Indian Hospice. He wrapped up his visit by visiting the Cemetery for Indian Soldiers in Jerusalem. This cemetery was used from July 1918 to June 1920, and contains the graves of 79 Indian servicemen who were killed during the First World War. The Minister laid wreaths at the memorial and signed the Visitor's Book.¹¹

The next day, Krishna drove down to Ramallah from Jerusalem through the Beitunya checkpoint. He and his team had to shift to the vehicles with Palestinian number plates, leaving behind the Israeli cars. He met top Palestinian leadership including Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. He also held bilateral talks with his Palestinian counterpart Riyad al-Malki, in which he assured Indian support to the cause of Palestinian state.¹² He also stated that India held its bilateral relation with the Palestinian

⁹ TNN, "Iran should work within IAEA's parameters: SM Krishna", *The Times of India*, 11 January 2012, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-01-11/india/30615972_1_india-and-israel-sm-krishna-nuclear-weapons-programme

¹⁰ Barak Ravid, "India FM visits Israel: A lot of tennis, not a word on Palestinians", *Ha'aretz*, 12 January 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/diplomania/india-fm-visits-israel-a-lot-of-tennis-not-a-word-on-palestinians-1.406936>

¹¹ "Visit of External Minister of India Shri. SM Krishna to the state of Israel (January 9-10, 2012)", *The Embassy of India*, Tel Aviv, Israel. <http://www.indembassy.co.il/EAM%20Visit.htm>

¹² "SM Krishna arrives in Ramallah to meet Palestinian leadership", *The Indian Express*, 11 January 2012, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/s-m-krishna-arrives-in-ramallah-to-meet-palestinian-leadership/898488/>

Authority in high esteem. He ended his visit by attending a wreath-laying ceremony on the Mausoleum of Yasser Arafat.

In the last leg of his Middle East sojourn, he drove down to Amman from Ramallah and took a flight to United Arab Emirates (UAE). He had a stopover of a few hours during which met his counterpart and assured the continuous support of India to the Kingdom. Bilateral issues like energy security were also discussed.

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