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Israel Confronts Iran: Options for India

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Since the end of the Cold War, India's relations with Israel and Iran have improved considerably. The normalisation of relations with Israel in January 1992 was followed by robust political, economic and military security relations between India and Israel. Similarly, the political pragmatism exhibited by the Iranian leadership enabled India to expand its relationship with Iran, with energy security playing a key role. Both these countries are vital for India's economic growth and security and hence, India would have to learn to manage its relations with Israel as well Iran. What are the options for India?

No need to take sides: Both Israel and Iran are important countries in the Middle East and both are vital for India; one is important for its energy security and other plays a crucial role in its military security calculus. India should not feel the need to choose between the two, especially in the wake of the February 2012 terror attack on the Israeli vehicle in New Delhi.

Managing differing pressures: Both Iran and Israel approach their bilateral issues with India rather differently. Iran has been extremely friendly and accommodative of India's bilateral ties with Israel. Except for opposition in the period soon after Indo-Israeli normalisation, Tehran has not flagged Israel in its relations with New Delhi. This however is not true for Israel, which has often flagged Iran in its bilateral ties with New Delhi. India needs to manage these different attitudes of both countries towards its bilateral relations with the other.

Failure to define non-parallel interests: The maturity shown by New Delhi on the Indo-Israeli track has been absent in the Indo-Iranian track. India has managed to handle its relations with Israel better than its relations with Iran. It has carefully delineated its differences with Israel

over the peace process and in the process managed to quarantine the bilateral relations with Israel from it. Thus, despite the differences, both have worked towards the evolution of a matured bilateral cooperation that has become the envy of many countries in the Middle East and beyond. India has failed to evolve a similar model in its relations with Iran. Its energy interests in Iran (despite the technical and price issues) are different from the nuclear controversy and its differences with Tehran over the nuclear question are both strategic as well as political. However, New Delhi has failed to articulate and communicate these differences to Tehran because it has not differentiated the two, something it did with Israel between the bilateral ties and the peace process. As a result, India's differences over the nuclear issue has spilled over and undermined its bilateral ties with Iran. Its failure to recognise the non-parallel nature of the relationship with Iran has clouded and even poisoned its ties with Tehran.

Differing attitude of the US: The attitude of the US towards both the bilateral relations has also been different. While the India-Israel-US alliance is an inaccurate and misleading description, the US role has been critical in the rapid growth of security-related cooperation between India and Israel. Without the support of the US, for example, Israel could not have sold Phalcon AWACS to India when a similar sale to China was vetoed by Washington. At the same time, the US has been exerting considerable pressures on India to reduce its political, economic and energy ties with Iran.

Mishandling the US factor: India's handling of the US factor in both the cases has been different with differing outcomes. Washington continues to have differences with New Delhi over its stand on the Middle East peace process and has been pressing the latter to be more supportive of Israel, especially in international fora such as the UN General Assembly. It sought, for example, India's support for the Goldstone Report that was extremely critical of Israel's Gaza War of 2008-09. Still India differed with the US, conveyed its disagreement and joined others in voting against the US-Israeli position. This was possible because India had defined, articulated and conveyed its disagreements with Israel over the peace process. Similar nuances were lacking in its handling of the US pressures on Iran. Since the September 2005 vote in the IAEA, a number of Indian actions and statements have been directly or indirectly linked to the American pressure. Its dithering on the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline issue, suspension of the payment arrangement for its oil imports from Iran and the termination of export of petroleum products to Iran amply testify that India has not followed a well-thought-out policy when it comes to American pressures on Iran.

Lack of Strategic Clarity: India's mishandling of the US factor vis-à-vis Iran is the result of the lack of strategic clarity. New Delhi needs to recognise, define and communicate to the outside world (not necessarily through public discourses) of its agreements and disagreements with Iran. A clear articulation of its disagreements over the nuclear issue would have

considerably minimised the negative fallouts. The problem is not about nuclear double standards (nuclear India wanting a non-nuclear Iran), rather it is about India fighting shy of saying the obvious: a nuclear Iran is a threat to the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East.

Factoring the Arab concerns: Over the years, India's relations with Israel ceased to be a controversy in the Middle East. With occasional exceptions (especially Egypt under President Hosni Mubarak), most have come to terms with the Indo-Israel ties, which are no longer an agenda in their dealings with New Delhi. This however, is not true of the Indo-Iranian track. Even if one were to leave Israel aside, there are other countries in the region who are equally worried over Iran and hence its perceived proximity with India. Fears over India's growing ties with Tehran are not confined to the US and the West but also to the Arab neighbours of Iran. Lack of public articulation of this concern by the Arab countries should not be seen as their acceptance of the growing Indo-Iranian ties; their concerns vis-à-vis the US highlighted by the WikiLeaks cables are equally valid for India. Hence, New Delhi cannot afford to pursue an Iran policy disregarding the Arab concerns and fears but it will have to accommodate them. This is especially so since its political, economic, energy and expatriate interests lie not in Iran but in the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf.

Fight Terrorism Irrespective of Energy Security: The February 2012 attack on the Israeli diplomatic vehicle has brought the Israel-Iran tension on to the Indian soil. After considerable hesitation, a Delhi court issued warrants against Iranian nationals for their suspected involvement in the blast. A few days later, the Interpol issued a worldwide red alert for their arrest. This has put India in a tight corner. During the initial phase of the probe, it was reluctant to join the chorus that suspected Iranian involvement in the attack. Its support for the UNSC statement against terrorist attacks on Israeli diplomats was conditioned upon Iran or any other country not being named. Protecting foreign diplomats and their institutions are the responsibility of the government and India would have to rise to that challenge. However, once evidence linking the terror attacks and Iranian nationals became available, it had no option but to act. The involvement of the Iranian state or its agencies is still in the realm of speculations but India would not be able to remain silent. The Delhi attack was not a 26/11 Mumbai terror act and Iran is not Pakistan where political consideration played a heavy role in curtailing Indian responses. Political correctness towards the Delhi blast would have disastrous consequences for India's diplomacy and foreign policy. Professed friendship with India apparently did not prevent some citizens of Iran from violating its sovereign territory for a terrorist attack. There is no reason for India to consider Iran's strategic importance while pursuing the Delhi blast. Its fight against terrorism should not be subjected to energy security or other concerns.

Israel is just part of the larger Iranian problem with the US: The mounting tensions between the Islamic Republic and Israel are a part of Iran's larger problem with the US. Both

countries have a large baggage that dates back to the early days of the Islamic revolution. Many Iranians have not forgotten the role played by the CIA in the overthrow of the popular government of Muhammad Mossadegh in 1953 and thereby undermining democracy in Iran. So long as the differences are not resolved to the mutual satisfaction of Tehran and Washington and a modicum of normalcy does not return, India will not be able to delink the US from its relations with Iran. Hence, it will have to be watchful of every step, big or small, it takes towards Tehran.

Cannot ignore security issues over Iran: The defence establishment in India will have to move away from its diplomatic blinkers and start looking at Iran through the security prism. Since the end of the long war with Iraq, Tehran has rebuilt its military capabilities and has made strident progress, especially in the missile delivery systems. Through indigenous efforts or with external assistance, it has developed an array of medium and long-range missiles. They are partly developed with Israel in mind but there are no reasons why Iran would not deploy them against others in the Gulf and beyond. American weapons were supplied to Pakistan to fight the Soviet Union but were used against India. The world is yet to witness a technology that is country-specific. The Iranian missiles can carry conventional as well as non-conventional warheads and a vast number of India's strategic assets on the western coast are within the striking range of these Iranian missiles. Hence, the strategic survey published by the Ministry of Defence in its annual report will have to reflect Iranian military capabilities and not its political intentions. Let the generals focus only on hardcore security issues and leave the intricacies of diplomacy and niceties to the Ministry of External Affairs.

Note: This is forms a part of the monograph on *Israel Confronts Iran: Rationale, Responses and Fallouts* published by IDSA in November 2012. The full text can be accessed at: http://www.idsa.in/monograph/IsraelConfrontsIran_PRKumaraswamy

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