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Modi Ends ‘Balancing Act’ Vis-a-Vis Israel

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“**H**e could have balanced his visit to the Western Wall by also visiting the Al-Aqsa mosque,” observed a learned colleague. This was in reference to the recent visit of Home Minister Rajnath Singh to Israel and his decision to pray at the Western Wall, the only remains of the Second Temple destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. Since the normalization of relations in January 1992, various Indian governments have been courting Israel without antagonizing the Palestinians. And in his unique ways, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is ending this ‘balancing act’ for good.

Non-relation with Israel was one of the hotly contested issues of the Nehruvian foreign policy. Having recognized the Jewish State on 17 September 1950, (incidentally also the day Modi was born), Jawaharlal Nehru was unable to proceed with normal diplomatic relations. When senior Israeli diplomat Walter Eytan met him in New Delhi in early March 1952, the Indian leader promised normalization including resident missions after the first Lok Sabha elections then under way. This did not happen. By all accounts, both Indian and foreign Education Minister Maulana Abul Kalam Azad felt that such normalization would be traumatic to the post-partition Indian Muslims and would also be exploited by Pakistan for anti-Indian propaganda in the Arab world. Nehru was convinced of Azad’s arguments and normalization had to wait until P V Narasimha Rao’s move in January 1992.

Given the historical baggage dating back to the early 1920s, when the Indian nationalist firmly identified with their Arab counterparts, normalization of relations did not mean New Delhi has abandoned its traditional pro-Palestinian stand. Hence, days prior to announcing his decision to normalize ties with Israel, Prime Minister Rao hosted Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Since then, many Indian moves vis-à-vis Israel were accompanied by high-profile meetings with Arafat or pro-Palestinian statements. Visits by Indian leaders to Israel invariably included visits to the territories controlled by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). This balancing was considered critical for the success of the newly found friendship with Israel and Indian leaders visited Israel as well as the PNA. This was true for Congress leaders like Arjun Singh (June 1994) and S M Krishna (January 2012) as well as BJP Ministers like L K Advani (June 2000) and Jaswant Singh (July 2000). In the initial years, Gaza hosted Indian ministers but as things began to deteriorate in the Hamas-dominated Gaza Strip, Arafat moved his headquarters to the West Bank and hosted foreign leaders, including those from India, in his Ramallah compound.

The manner in which Indian leaders ‘balanced’ their engagement with the Israeli and Palestinian leaders has an interesting pattern. While moves towards Israel were accompanied by similar engagements with the Palestinian leadership, the converse was not always true; that is, Indian leaders could not visit Israel without going to the PNA-controlled areas but they could engage with the Palestinian leadership without having to ‘balance’ their acts by engaging with Israel. This was more clearly exemplified by leader of the Indian Union Muslim League E. Ahamed who served as Minister of State of External Affairs under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. In September 2004, weeks before Arafat’s death Ahamed met the Palestinian leader in Ramallah but carefully skipped Israel. In his three subsequent visits to Ramallah, the Minister met Mahmoud Abbas but did not meet any Israeli leaders. Moreover, during his prolonged tenure as junior External Affairs Minister under the UPA, Ahamed looked after the Middle East but avoided any meetings or engagements with the Israeli officials or its representatives in New Delhi. None advised Ahamed to pursue a ‘balanced’ policy vis-à-vis Israel. Similar imbalance was noticeable when the Lok Sabha adopted a unanimous but highly partisan resolution over the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006. Likewise, India’s efforts to shore up regional support for the UN Security Council Resolution 1701 that brought the war to a closure was not accompanied by high level engagements with Israel. Not surprisingly no one complained against this ‘imbalance’.

Furthermore, the Palestinians have an unpleasant history vis-à-vis Modi. In January 2003, when Atal Behari Vajpayee was the Prime Minister, Palestinian ambassador Khalid al- Shaikh

attended a political meeting organized by the Left parties that was highly critical of anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat. Not prepared to tolerate this “interference” in the Indian domestic affairs, the NDA government quietly but firmly requested that Arafat recall his emissary in India and the Palestinian leader was quick to comply. Those in the know choose not to publicize the blatant Palestinian interference in India’s domestic affairs.

If this unpleasant track record was not enough, Palestinian President Abbas failed to recognize the electoral defeat of the UPA. Indeed most the leaders in the Middle East, like some within the country, needed time to come to terms with the regime change in India. As they say, ignorance is also a fundamental right but for some, this is proving to be a costly one!

In contrast, within hours after the BJP victory became clearer, Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pre-empted many world leaders, including President Barack Obama, in telephoning Prime Minister-elect Modi and expressed his willingness to work with his government. This was followed by a high-visible meeting between the two leaders on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly sessions in September. There are indications that the Arabists in the External Affairs Ministry sought to scuttle the meeting by harping on the need to ‘balance’ but were overruled by the Prime Minister.

Indeed, demands for ‘balancing’ have increased since May. The absence of any reference to the Middle East in President Pranab Mukerjee’s address to the joint session of the parliament in June did not go unnoticed. The absence of any reference to the Palestinians shocked many. The demand for ‘balancing’ reached a feverish pitch during the recent Gaza crisis, especially after the initial reluctance of the government for a parliamentary debate over this new wave of violence. Now comes Home Minister’s visit to Western Wall, especially when he did not make the hitherto mandatory ‘balancing’ visit to Ramallah.

Back to the basics. Could Rajnath Singh have visited Al-Aqsa mosque? While the Western Wall is accessible to Jews and non-Jews alike, this is not the case for the Muslim holy sites located in the old city. For decades, especially after the first intifada, non-Muslims are denied entry into the Al-Aqsa mosque or to the adjunct Dome of Rock. Those seeking to enter the mosque are explicitly asked if they are Muslims and when in doubt, the visitors are asked to recite verses in the Quran. The entry into the Harem al-Sharif area, beneath which the remains of the Second Temple are to be found, is highly restricted and non-Muslims can access the area only through the entrance located next to the Western Wall. Even this is not available on Fridays, Muslim

holidays or during prayer times. Hence, Rajnath Singh or any non-Muslim leader would not be permitted to enter the Al-Aqsa mosque to establish an Indian 'balance' vis-à-vis Israel and the PNA.

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