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### **Mr. Prime Minister, Do We Still Need Paper Visas to Israel?**

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**C***landestine*. This has become a common nomenclature while discussing political and diplomatic engagements with Israel and reflects an inherent duality of public hostility and private warmth. This ‘mistress syndrome’ is common not only to governments and nations but also to growing number of groups and learned individuals. The prolonged absence of formal relations has not prevented many countries to seek and secure military support and supplies from Israel. The January 1992 Sino-Israeli normalization for example, was preceded by two-decades of close military relations. Likewise, Sri Lanka forged military-intelligence cooperation with Israel in the late 1980s despite the absence of formal political ties.

For decades India was not an exception to this pattern. New Delhi took the lead in a number of international moves and resolutions against Israel. The absence of relations for over four decades, however, did not inhibit India and its leaders from seeking Israeli help and assistance during national crises. For example, his reluctance and gradually refusal to normalize relations did not inhibit Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru from seeking Israeli expertise in times of national emergency. During the Sino-Indian war of 1962, he personally wrote to his Israeli counterpart David Ben-Gurion and sought and obtained limited quantities of arms and ammunition. Lal Bahadur Shastri followed this example during the Indo-Pakistani conflict of 1965. Despite their public postures Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi did not deviate from this practice and as when situations demanded they sought critical assistance from Israel. At the same time, due to political compulsions, these contacts and cooperation were kept

away from public knowledge and were rarely acknowledged by the Indian government.

Since Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao normalized relations in January 1992, there were dramatic improvements. While the political, economic and military engagements have been significant, Indian citizens have been coy about visiting Israel. Even those who are involved in professions such as academia and business have been visiting Israel ‘clandestinely’, that is, with Israeli visas being issued not on their passports but on a separate piece of paper.

The practice of paper visas is different from the stapled visas issued by the Chinese government to Indian citizens of Arunachal Pradesh. Beijing explains and justifies this unusual practice as a ‘compromise’ regarding its territorial dispute with India. In the Israeli case, it is not the state that demands such a paper visa but the Indian visa applicants.

There is logic to this strange practice. In line with their boycott policy, most of the Arab countries do not recognize Israel and have eschewed formal political or diplomatic relations with the Jewish State. Integral to this boycott policy, a number of Arab and Islamic countries do not entertain passports that are stamped with Israeli visas. This has led many Indians especially the elite whose profession involves dealing with Israel preferring the clandestine route. Issuing of paper visas do not guarantee that the person would eventually visit and in recent years there were a few cases of high profiled political cancellations. However, for Israel paper visa is a small compromise in engaging with the outside world.

This practice was necessary and unavoidable when India did not have relations with Israel and visiting that country was seen with suspicion. Indeed at one point of time, the government even declared Indian passports to be invalid for travels to Israel. These were part of the bygone era. Over the past two decades, there are a number of high level political, economic and military exchanges between the two countries. The relations have flourished both under Congress as well as the BJP and Chief Ministers belonging to various regional parties have been engaging with Israel economically. At one point, even communists were less inhibitive and the last foreign visit of West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu took him to Israel in 2000. If the media reports are accurate the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a likely visit Israel later this year.

Furthermore, the region is no longer static and some Arab countries have changed their positions vis-à-vis Israel. Following the establishment of diplomatic relations, Egypt, Jordan and Turkey have direct flights to Israel and hence, Israel-stamped passports are no longer an issue. Despite the absence of formal relations with Qatar, hordes of Israeli tourists travelling to Kathmandu in

the summer transit through Doha. For sometime such an arrangement worked vis-à-vis the UAE as well. Things have become turbulent after the suspected Israeli involvement in the assassination of Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, the co-founder of Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, the military wing of Hamas, in Dubai January 2010. Morocco has been receptive and this writer attended a conference in Marrakesh in the summer of 2013 without facing any issue over the Indian passport with Israeli visas.

Like many advanced countries, Israel has dispensed with the practice of immigration forms and even if the visa is issued in passports, emigration stamping is done in as a separate receipt. So, visa in the passport is the only indication that the person in question had visited Israel. Despite these changes in the region, many Indian citizens continue to be cagey about their visits to or their contacts with Israel. This is partly due to their own inhibitions in facing the harsh reality. Public rhetoric and private duplicity is not the hallmark of the political class but is sadly true for the Indian elite as well.

Indeed, Jawaharlal Nehru University sent me to Israel in July 1988 for field research and since then I have been visiting that country frequently; but always with the Israel visa stamped in my passport. Persons who hold sensitive official positions might consider disclosing their trips to Israel to be compromising but what's the need for the elite to be so sensitive and secretive? Threats and intimidations work only against the weak and the willing. Before demanding propriety and honesty in others, the elite should practice what they preach: no clandestine visits to Israel and no more paper visas.

Mr. Prime Minister, with your visit to that country very much on the cards, do the Indian citizens still need paper visas to visit Israel?

**Note:** This article was earlier published in *The Uday India* on 25 January 2015. **Web Link:** [http://www.udayindia.in/english/content\\_31jan2015/viewpoint.html](http://www.udayindia.in/english/content_31jan2015/viewpoint.html)

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