

INDIA AND ISRAEL: FROM CONFLICT TO CONVERGENCE OF INTERESTS

Dinesh Kumar

India and Israel represent two old civilizations with noteworthy similarities in their cultural values and practices. Both countries won their independence from the same colonial power in parallel circumstances, and then adopted parliamentary democracy and mixed economy as models of their political and economic development. Most significantly, their foreign policy orientations were at first the same. In spite of this striking affinity, the political and diplomatic relations between the two countries, until recently, remained cold and unfriendly.

As a whole, Indians knew little about Jews and were not fully aware of the intensity of their problems in Europe and their connection to the "Land of Israel," though admiring the Jewish contributions to mankind and showing sympathy for their plight. This admiration and sympathy, however, did not translate into political support for the Zionist or Israeli cause. For a long time, Indian leaders persistently felt that the establishment of normal diplomatic relations with Israel would harm India's interests domestically, regionally and globally. This perception, created by a variety of factors, was the main constraint preventing normal relations between India and Israel.

The new world order of the 1990s sharply eroded this Indian perception of conflicting interest with Israel. Instead, a new perception of shared interests has grown between Delhi and Jerusalem. The existing undercurrents in form of socio-cultural and political affinities provided a solid foundation for an India-Israel rapprochement. Consequently, after the normalization of diplomatic relations in January, 1992, the two countries have rapidly developed close relations and are cooperating in many areas of mutual interest: cultural, economic, politico-strategic as well as defense and security. In the light of more than four decades of a history of strained relations, the current phase of warm and special relations reflects the growing convergence of interests between the two countries.

Thus, India's pro-Arab policies and her negative attitude towards the Zionist movement and Israel, in the past, should not be viewed as anti-Semitism or antipathy towards the Jewish state, but rather as the result of clashing national interests. The history of international relations has often demonstrated that national interests can prevail over cultural-political affinities and ideals in shaping relations between two countries.¹ This proposition also holds true in the context of India-Israel relations in the years preceding the new world order of the 1990s.

To understand the complexity and uniqueness of India-Israel relations properly, the study of the historical context is imperative. This paper attempts to analyze the evolution, the development and changing patterns of India's relations with the Zionist movement and Israel. Why did a negative attitude towards the Jewish cause developed among Indian leaders even before their country's own independence? What were the constraints preventing normal relations between them and to what extent were they justified? And what made the two countries come closer in the early 1990s and develop a special relationship over a short time? These are some of the specific questions addressed in this paper.

The focus of the investigation, as is evident from the last paragraph, is more on the question of *why* India followed a particular policy towards Israel and what factors influenced this choice, and generally avoids the question of *how* these choices were reached. The Rational Actor Model² has been preferred as the theoretical tool for this analysis. This simplified model assumes national government as the unified and rational decision-maker. Decisions are taken as a calculated solution to a problem in relations to the goals. Rationality is defined either as the value-maximization choice of the decision-making unit or adaptations within specified constraints. The value-maximization choice is generally conceived in terms of national interest.³

Admittedly, this model of foreign policy analysis suffers from some serious drawbacks, especially as it reduces the organizational details and political complications in decision-making to a unified rational actor. However, these constraints in our research problem appear to have less impact because of the following two features of the Indian decision-making. First, there was not much organizational control on the foreign policy matters in India, especially in the early years of independence. Secondly, the strong hold on foreign policy matters of the charismatic leaders like Nehru and Indira Gandhi reduced the political bargaining in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, without going into the details, the complementary organizational and political variables have been briefly discussed in this paper, wherever necessary.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (1920-1948)

The roots of India's Israel policy can be traced to the political developments in India and Palestine after the World War I. Soon after this War, a major direct confrontation between the Arab and Jewish nationalisms in Palestine emerged. Almost simultaneously, the Palestine issue first surfaced on the Indian sub-continent. During the subsequent years preceding the independence of India (1947), Palestine was the subject of numerous discussions and resolutions by the Indian National Congress (INC). Its stand was influenced chiefly by the political goals of the INC, but also by the attitudes of its leaders towards Zionism and their perceptions of political realities in Palestine.

The Moslem Factor

The Moslem minority assumed a crucial role during the Indian struggle for freedom. The leaders of the INC regarded its participation as vital. However at the same time, the British colonial administration tried to project the Moslem minority as a counter political force to the growing influence of the INC. Comprehending this, the Congress leaders made efforts to check the increasing Moslem loyalty to the British and draw them into the mainstream of the Indian national movement.⁴

Gandhi gave topmost priority to Hindu-Moslem unity as a prerequisite to achieving the ultimate goal of independence. In 1920, he was successful in turning scattered Moslem resentment on the issue of removing the Caliphate from Constantine, the temporal seat of the Moslem world, into a nationwide movement against the colonial power in India. Incorporation of this issue into the INC's political program proved to be a strong, though temporary, bridge to the Moslem community.⁵ In the context of India-Israel relations, the Caliphate campaign clearly indicated, as early as the 1920s, that Moslem sensitivities would influence INC policies, especially in West Asia.⁶

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the INC tried to appease Moslem opinion. Since communal and religious issues motivated the Moslem League's political offensive for separation, the INC shifted its focus to the secular issue of self-determination in West Asia.⁷ It passed a number of resolutions expressing sympathy with Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Iraq in their struggle against the imperial powers. On September 27, 1936, Congress observed 'Palestine Day,' holding meetings and demonstrations throughout the country in support of the Arab cause. But despite the sensitivity of Congress to Moslem feelings, the secular nationalism of the Hindu-majority INC clashed with the political aspirations of the Moslem minority. This led to frequent communal riots and increased support for the Moslem League, which in 1930 adopted a resolution to partition the country into Hindu and Moslem states.

Interestingly, during the same period, similar communal trends had emerged in Palestine, where the Arabs were the majority and the Jews, a minority. Arabs wanted to establish an Arab state in the entire mandatory Palestine. The Zionist leaders, on the other hand, were determined to fulfill the dream of a "national home" as promised to them under the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Such a clash of nationalist aspirations often resulted into violent riots between the two communities.

Finding the Arab-Jewish conflict in Palestine intractable, the British-appointed Peel Commission (1937) recommended the partition of Palestine into separate Arab and Jewish states.⁸ The Arab Higher Committee rejected the report outright and demanded an independent Arab state in the whole of Palestine. The Jewish leaders, after some hesitation, accepted the 'principle of partition' as the only workable solution to the irreconcilable conflict with Arabs.

The INC strongly denounced any move towards the partition of Palestine, fearing it would constitute a precedent for helping the separatist Moslems in India. It invariably argued that the Jews in Palestine were a religious minority and the solution to their problems should be found in the framework of a 'pluralist Arab state.' The Moslem League of India condemned the report as a threat to the desires of all Moslems. It warned the British Government of India that allowing Jewish immigration into Palestine would have disastrous repercussions throughout the Islamic world, including India.⁹

Thus, since the late 1930s, the Jewish nationalists in Palestine and the Moslem nationalists in India were committed to independent statehood for remarkably similar reasons. The dialectic communal and political realities of the Indian national movement and the Zionist movement led the INC to side with Arabs and oppose the Jewish position in Palestine. Moreover, there was some affinity with the Arabs due to the long history of cultural links with them and the existence of a significant Moslem minority in India. On the other hand, the Jewish population in India, largely isolated from the mainstream of the Jewish Diaspora, was too small to influence the INC's decision-making.

Zionism and Imperialism

Another major factor that contributed to the INC's attitude towards the Palestine issue was its strong opposition to colonialism and imperialism, and Zionism's identification with them. A year after the Brussels Congress (1927), the INC became an associate member of the 'League Against Imperialism' and proclaimed its own national struggle as the part of worldwide struggle against imperialism and colonialism. The INC extended its full support to the Arab national movement for Palestine's independence from British imperialism.¹⁰ But, it did not consider the Zionist movement, whose ultimate aim was to achieve nationhood for Jews in Palestine, a national liberation movement.

Instead, many Indian leaders shared the Arab position that the Zionist movement was a manifestation of Western imperialism. The European background of the Zionist leaders, their close collaboration with the British imperial power, and the large scale, mostly white, Jewish immigration into Palestine created such a negative image of the Zionist movement among Indian leaders. However, for the Zionist leaders, close cooperation with the British was vital, more a necessity than a choice.¹¹

Conversely, the Zionist leaders' dependence on the mandatory power constrained them from supporting the Indian freedom movement. They also ignored or failed to cultivate Indians for their cause in Palestine. There were virtually no formal links between Zionist and Indian leaders until the first quarter of the twentieth century. The belated efforts of the Zionists to present Indian leaders with the Jewish viewpoint on the Palestine issue failed to cut much ice and produced little of any significance.

Gandhi: Zionism and Moral Nationalism

Gandhi often showed concern about the miserable plight of Jews in Europe and considered that they were treated worse than the untouchables of India. But he strongly criticized Zionist leaders' connections with the British and the violent methods adopted by some Zionist groups. He explicitly challenged Jewish geographical and national claims in Palestine, when he wrote,

The Palestine of the Biblical conception is not a geographical track. It is in their hearts. But if they must look at the Palestine of geography as their national yoke, it is wrong to enter it under the shadow of the British gun. A religious act cannot be performed with the aid of the bayonet or the bomb.¹²

Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French... Surely it would be a crime against humanity to reduce the proud Arabs so that Palestine could be restored to Jews partly or wholly, as their national home. The nobler cause would be to insist on a just treatment of the Jews, wherever they are born and bred. The Jews born in France are French in precisely the same sense that Christians born in France are French. If the Jews have no home but Palestine, will they relish the idea of being forced to leave the other parts of the world in which they have settled? Or do they want a double home where they can remain at will? This cry for the national home affords a colorable justification for the German expulsion of the Jews.¹³

Gandhi's statement about Jews on November 29, 1938, was a blow to the Zionist leaders. They were expecting support for their cause in Palestine from him, especially in view of increasing Nazi atrocities against Jews in Europe. Gandhi's moral nationalism was, to a large extent, favorable to the Arabs. Nevertheless, the Zionist leaders tried to influence Gandhi and other prominent Indians to moderate their pro-Arab stand on the Palestine issue.¹⁴ Efforts were also made to counter Gandhi's views in the Indian and the Jewish press. However, a considerable damage to the Zionist cause in Palestine had already been done.

Gandhi, basically a moralist and a religious man, never questioned the Jewish longing for Jerusalem but mainly opposed the Zionists' resort to violence and their dependence on the British. From the very outset, his position was that religion could not be a criterion for the creation of states. But after the Holocaust, when the creation of Pakistan already seemed inevitable, Gandhi moderated some of his views on the Palestine issue.¹⁵

Nehru: Zionism as Imperialism

Jawaharlal Nehru, the main architect of the INC's foreign policy, took a special interest in getting Congress to pass resolutions on international issues. Like Gandhi, he also admired and sympathized with the Jews. In May, 1933 he wrote,

They (the Jews) had no home or nation, and everywhere they went they were treated as unwelcomed and undesirable strangers. They were humiliated, reviled, tortured and massacred; the very word "Jew" became a word of abuse, a synonym for a miser and grasping money-lender. And yet these amazing people not only survived all this but managed to keep their racial and cultural characteristics, and prospered and produced a host of great men... Most of them, of course, are far from prosperous; they crowd in the cities of Eastern Europe and, from time to time, suffer 'pogroms' or massacres. These people without home or country have never ceased to dream of Old Jerusalem which appears to their imaginations greater and more magnificent than it ever was in fact.¹⁶

Yet, Nehru did not see the Palestine issue as communal, but only as nationalist. He regarded the Arabs as fighters against imperialist control and alleged that instead of joining hands with them to end the colonial rule in Palestine, the Jews took sides with the foreign ruling power.¹⁷ In his view, nobody could support the Zionist movement if it was aiming to establish a "Jewish National Home" under the protection of British imperialism. He also drew a parallel between the Palestinian and Indian freedom struggles in the sense that in both countries the British were playing their traditional policy of divide and rule.¹⁸ Nehru's solution to the Palestine problem was close to the Arab solution (based on the concept of *Dhimma*), providing for an Arab state in Palestine and the protection of Jewish minority rights.¹⁹ He openly took the stand that Palestine was essentially an Arab country and must remain so.

Nehru viewed the complex reality in Palestine by judging all events in relation to the paradigm of imperialism. He did not moderate his political support for the Arabs, though he continued to sympathize with the miseries of Jews. It seems that besides his preoccupation with the ideology of anti-imperialism, Nehru envisioned that friendly relations with the Arab world would serve India's interests in the long term.

The Asian Relations Conference, 1947

In March, 1947, a few months before India attained independence, Nehru, her future Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, convened the first Asian Relations Conference (ARC) in the hope that it would help the understanding of Asia's problems and promote cooperation among Asian people. A ten-member Jewish delegation²⁰ from Palestine was also invited to the conference. During the conference, the Zionist delegation tried to argue that the people it represented belonged to the family of Asian nations. As in the past, Nehru expressed his deep sympathy for the Jews, but reaffirmed his political stand that Palestine was essentially an Arab country and that no decision should be made without the consent of the Arabs.²¹

The conference yielded no concrete political mileage to the Jewish delegation, but it gave them the rare opportunity to present their case to the Asian leaders while sitting on an equal level with them. During their stay in India, they were also able to cultivate connections with some Indian leaders and persuade them to support the Jewish cause.

The United Nations Special Commission on Palestine, 1947

Meanwhile, in the same year, the struggle between Arabs and Jews in Palestine had reached a stage of deadlock. Having failed to reconcile the conflicting interests in Palestine, the new Labor Government in London transferred the Palestine issue to the United Nations. India, though not yet independent, was included as one of the eleven neutral representatives in the United Nations Special Commission on Palestine (UNSCOP).²²

While the UNSCOP was still conducting its investigations, India achieved independence on August 15, 1947, and was simultaneously partitioned into the dominions of India and Pakistan. The report of UNSCOP was released in September, 1947. India, Iran and Yugoslavia recommended a federated Arab-Jewish state, known as the 'minority plan.' The 'majority plan' recommended the partition of Palestine into independent Arab and Jewish states with an international regime for Jerusalem. The Indian representative Abdur Rehman explained that the minority plan was based on the belief that partition based on religion was undesirable and impractical.²³

Knowing India's attitude, the Zionist leaders focused increased diplomatic efforts on dissuading India from leading the anti-partition campaign when the UNSCOP report was put to vote in the General Assembly of the United Nations. Despite their efforts, India voted against the majority plan, which was passed by a vote of 33-13 with ten abstentions on November 27, 1947. Except for the Philippines Republic, a former colony of the United States, no Asian country²⁴ supported the partition plan. Nehru reaffirmed India's stand in the Constituent Assembly that the federal plan was the only real solution to the Palestine problem,²⁵ a stand to which India adhered throughout the Arab-Jewish war of 1948-49.

RELATIONS AFTER THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL

After it attained independence, the State of Israel tried to cultivate friendly relations with India, despite Congress' negative attitude towards the Zionist movement. Israel hoped that close diplomatic ties with India would help the newly born Jewish state gain acceptance in the family of Asian nations and would further legitimize its existence on the world map. Israel also saw India as a potential great power, expecting it to play an important political and economic role in world affairs.

There was some optimism among Israeli leaders about relations with India. They hoped that the emergence of new realities in both countries would replace past ideological prejudices with pragmatic cooperation in areas of mutual interests. Looking at the striking similarities between the two countries strengthened these feelings.²⁶ Nehru's invitation to the Jewish delegation to the ARC was interpreted as a prelude to better ties. However, contrary to Israeli expectations, there was no positive change in India's West Asia policy, though India's continual involvement in the Palestine issue before 1948 was replaced by a preference for keeping a low profile. India did not react when the State of Israel was born. Similarly, Nehru found himself constrained from heeding Israel's request for recognition. The following factors delayed it for 16 months:

1) The Moslem Minority

After independence, new realities reinforced India's reasons for its negative attitude towards the Zionist cause in the past. The partition of India was a painful experience and the presence of a large Moslem minority with many apprehensions about its safety, future, and loyalty to the Hindu-dominated secular Indian government assumed additional significance. Moslem leaders and intellectuals from time to time reminded the Indian government not to ignore the sentiments of the Moslem population and made it clear that the recognition of Israel would hurt them.²⁷ Acknowledging the importance of Moslem concerns about Indian leadership, Eliahu Elath wrote in October, 1949,

...Pakistan, however, became a theocratic state preventing the national assimilation of Moslems (in) India. Hence, the Indian government must treat its thirty million Moslems most carefully. Palestine was a source (of) constant agitation and made a deep impression (on) Moslems everywhere...²⁸

In a similar vein, India's Ministry of External Affairs said that the recognition of Israel would come sooner or later, but added that the sentiments of the large Moslem minority could not be completely ignored.²⁹ Some scholars, however, hold a different view, claiming that the average Moslem in India was not interested in the Palestine issue.³⁰ Notwithstanding the differences among scholars, the sensitivities of the traumatized Moslem minority were an important concern for the Indian leadership, and constrained it from recognizing Israel.

2) India's Need for the Arab Support

Since ancient times, India had many interests in the Arab world, but after World War II, it assumed greater economic and political importance. Economically, the Arab states were attractive potential markets for India, while Arab oil was regarded as crucial to India's ambitious industrial

development. Moreover, free passage through the Suez canal, the route carrying two-third of India's total trade, has always been a concern of Indian leaders.

Politically, the Indian Government was very eager to secure Arab support in the Kashmir dispute with Pakistan. It did not want to antagonize the Arabs by making any hasty move towards the Jewish state. Arabs were pressuring India, wherever and whenever they could, not to recognize Israel. Nehru himself admitted the importance of the Arab factor as regards this issue when he said, "We refrain because of our desire not to offend the sentiments of our friends in the Arab countries."³¹

Pakistan's attempts to create a pan-Islamic alliance also predisposed Delhi to forge stronger ties with the Arab world. Nehru saw the pan-Islamic movement as a reactionary force. He feared that it would divide the Asian movement against the colonial powers and might stimulate separatist tendencies among Indian Moslems. He tried to check pan-Islamic trends by asserting India's position in Asian affairs and promoting pan-Arabism. In these circumstances, any conciliatory move towards Israel was perceived as detrimental to Indian interests.

3) The Dream of Third World Leadership

Nehru always had a vision of India's big role in world affairs. The concept of non-alignment, his brainchild, was gaining popularity among the newly independent states. His ambition to make India the leading power of the third world necessitated the support of the Arab states and they demanded reciprocity from India. A cold attitude or an antagonistic policy towards Israel was an inexpensive price for India to pay in order to solicit Arab support. This explains why Nehru, at the last moment, asked the Indian delegation to cooperate with the Islamic states and vote against Israel's admission to the United Nations, though his earlier instructions were to abstain.³² The motive behind India's negative vote at the United Nations was more to demonstrate support for the Arabs than to keep Israel out of the family of nations.

The Recognition of Israel

India followed a very cautious approach towards the recognition of Israel. On the personal level, Nehru seemed convinced that the State of Israel was a living entity and would remain so on the world map.³³ But in his capacity as head of the Government of India, he preferred a 'realpolitik' approach to ensure that Indian interests would not suffer in the process of recognizing Israel. He expressed his dilemma in the Indian Parliament as follows,

Any action that we may take must be guided not only by idealistic considerations but also by a realistic appraisal of the situation. Our general policy in the past has been favorable to the Arabs and, at the same, not hostile to the Jews. This

policy continues. For the present we are not recognizing Israel. But this is not an irrevocable decision and the matter will no doubt be considered afresh in view of subsequent developments, including the final decision of the United Nations.³⁴

From time to time, Nehru tested the reactions of the Arab states and Indian Moslems by hinting that India might recognize Israel in the near future. Finally, after Israel had existed for sixteen months, India decided to accord recognition to the *Government of Israel* on September 20, 1950. This decision can be attributed to the following factors:³⁵

- Israel had become a *fait accompli* and had become a full-fledged member of the United Nations. It had been recognized by a large number of states, including Moslem Iran and Turkey, as well as by Yugoslavia, the co-sponsor of the United Nations Federal Plan.
- India's recognition of the People's Republic of China justified a similar move towards Israel to avoid criticism for adopting double standards.
- There was some support for this decision in certain sections of the Indian population.
- Israeli and Zionist leaders lobbied skillfully for this cause.
- Increasing close relations between Pakistan and Arab states and, in particular, the vote of Farouk's Egypt against India on the issue of Hyderabad in the United Nations, made India feel less restrained.

However, to salve Arab feelings and prevent any possible Moslem backlash at home, the government of India decided not to establish normal diplomatic relations with Israel. Immediately after the recognition, Nehru assured the Arab world that India's recognition of Israel means no particular change in the policy. The government, it seemed, was working under considerable pressures and constraints in this regard, and any subsequent step favoring Israel was viewed with apprehensions.

The Reactions

By and large, India's fear of harming its national interest by recognizing Israel proved unfounded. At home, no major political party, including the ruling Congress, which had a long history of pro-Arab resolutions, opposed this step. Except for a few mild protests by some Moslem leaders and Arab diplomats, there was no Moslem outcry and no Arab state severed its ties with India. Some scholars interpreted this reaction as an illustration of India's excessive concern for Moslem and Arab sensitivities, and its imaginary fears in dealing with Israel. However, it can also be argued that the low key reaction