

India's Israel Policy: The Merits of a Pragmatic Approach

By Joshua Falk

This article examines the history of the relationship between two strategically important democracies, India and Israel. The focus is on India's relationship to Israel over the two countries' shared period of independence, and by extension its relationship with the Arab World. Noting the importance of the Cold War to the relationship, the essay focuses on the nature of bilateral relations at independence in 1948, through the Cold War, and then the significant growth in an open alliance following the Cold War. The essay explores the place of pragmatism in Indian foreign policy towards the Middle East and Israel in particular, the benefits this has yielded India, and the model this might serve to other countries. The paper also analyzes the effect of growing Islamic militancy in both countries and the effect this might have on their relations in the future, thereby reflecting not only on the history of the relationship but the potential for the relationship in the future.



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Muhammad Ali Bogra, Prime Minister of Pakistan and Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India meet in 1953. India's has treaded the fine line in its negotiations with Isreal and other Middle Eastern countries for decades.

In a 1949 letter to his Chief Ministers, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru articulated the philosophy that would guide India's approach to Israel and the Arabs ever after:

Any action that we may take must be guided not only by idealistic considerations but also a realistic appraisal of the situation. Our general policy in the past has been favourable to the Arabs and, at the same time, not hostile to the Jews. That policy continues. For the present, we have said that we are not recognising Israel. But this is not an irrevocable decision and the matter will no doubt be considered afresh in view of subsequent developments...¹

Prime Minister Nehru wrote of an Israel policy that was rooted in *realpolitik*. Throughout India's history, its policy towards Israel has been determined by trade interests in the Middle East, not ideology. Although India recognized Israel in 1950, full diplomatic relations were not established until 1992, when it was economically advantageous and diplomatically realistic to do so.² Since 1992, India's relationship with Israel has blossomed while its relationship with the Arab states has remained strong. India has always taken an even-handed approach to the Israel issue, and thus has been able to maintain a fair image in the Arab World even while cooperating and working with Israel. Instead of forming permanent alliances rooted in ideological similarity, India has collaborated with many states due to common interests. Because India's Israel policy has generally been pragmatic and flexible, India has been able to pursue military, economic, and diplomatic interests in Israel without damaging its image in the Arab World.

Before examining the Arab response to India's Israel policy, it is necessary to examine the factors that have guided India's position on Israel since 1948. In 1948, trade with the Arabs, the position of India's Muslims, Pakistan's attempt to create a Pan-Islamic bloc, and anti-colonial sentiment/involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement prevented India from siding with newly created Israel. During the 1960's, India's need for Israeli weapons began a series of military exchanges which brought the two countries closer. After the end of the Cold War, however, post-colonial era roadblocks

that prohibited India from recognizing Israel in 1948 progressively faded.

1948: INDIA CHOOSES PALESTINE

By 1948, the year of Israeli independence, India and the Arab World had been trading partners for centuries. In ancient times, India served as a large market for the Arab World and the West selling coffee, tea, spices, and other goods.³ In 1948, India's trade with the Arab World included engineering goods, gems, jewelry, ready-made garments, chemicals, and petrol.⁴ According to Nair, "this emerging trade relationship and mutual economic dependency led to the increasing economic and technological cooperation between India and the Arab World in the subsequent periods."⁵ Regarding India's policy on Israel, Indian government official M.C. Chagla said, "Even our material interest dictated the very same policy which we were preserving. There was a large volume of trade between India and Arab countries and this would be jeopardized if we adopt a pro-Israeli policy."⁶ India's trade relationship prohibited it from recognizing Israel at the time of her independence. Doing so would have had a significant impact on the Indian economy. As Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in a 1950 letter to his Chief Ministers, "We refrained [from recognizing Israel] because of our desire not to offend the sentiments of our friends in the Arab countries."⁷ Thus, in 1948, it was unthinkable for India to recognize Israel due to its economic commitment to and symbiosis with the Arab World.

Just as India's trade relationship with the Arab World prohibited it from recognizing Israel, so did the position of India's significant Muslim minority on the Palestine-Israel issue. After partition, some 40 million Muslims remained in secular India instead of crossing the border to Islamic Pakistan.⁸ For the sake of national unity, India pursued a pro-Arab/Palestinian policy in order to appeal to Indian Muslims' affinity for their West-Asian Muslim brethren.

A Muslim member of the Indian Parliament made the following statement: 'Will the Honorable Prime Minister keep in mind the fact [that] there are a large number of people living in the Indian Dominion whose wishes and sentiments in this regard should be kept in view regarding the recognition of the State of Israel as they are definitely opposed to it?'

Indian Muslims, who comprised a large minority, felt affinity for their Muslim brothers in Palestine and did

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not wish to see the Indian government recognize Israel. It would have been unwise for the Indian government to ignore the sentiments of such a large voting bloc.

Internationally, Pakistan's efforts to create a Pan-Islamic bloc prevented India from siding with Israel. According to Rao, "There was not only the problem of considering the reactions of Indian Muslims...but also the problem of not antagonizing the Arab states at a time when Pakistan was making vigorous efforts to promote a Pan-Islamic bloc."¹⁰ Recognizing Israel in 1948 would have given the Arab countries a reason to side with Pakistan. Because of India's significant trade relationship with the Arab World, a Pan-Islamic bloc involving Pakistan would have done serious economic damage to India. In addition, it would have diplomatically isolated India from the Arab World.

India's role in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) also prevented it from siding with Israel. India was a founding member of the NAM and remained non-aligned throughout the Cold War. The NAM supported colonial struggles around the world, including the struggle in Palestine. Although Gandhi sympathized with Europe's Jews, his sympathy could not override his view that Palestine belonged to the Arabs. Gandhi believed that "it [was] wrong and inhuman to impose the Jews on the Arabs."¹¹

Even before the non-alignment movement, Indians and Arabs felt solidarity in their shared struggle against colonialism. In 1938, ten years before Israel was created, Iraqi statesman Kamil El-Chadirchi expressed solidarity for India's struggle to Jawaharlal Nehru:

We wholeheartedly appreciate your struggle, and wish we had the opportunity to share in it though in a small measure, for we both are in the same boat. True endeavour in the campaign against imperialism and exploitation must not be considered in separate units, but rather that neither geographical frontiers nor political obstacles can suppress it.¹²

India and Palestine's shared history of European colonialism made India dubious of a Jewish state comprised of European immigrants and founded in the midst of Arabs. To India, the United Nations effort to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine looked like a last hurrah for British colonialism in the Middle East. India objected to the creation of Israel not out of anti-Semitism, but out of anti-colonialism, for nationalist, anti-colonial, anti-Western spirit was particularly strong following India's independence. According to K.R. Singh, "the Arabs and the Indians sought to

gain strength from each other's struggle against the common enemy."¹³ Even after independence, India took positions that "[were] in line with its old policy of supporting the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggle in the Third World."¹⁴

Although anti-colonial ideology did influence India's initial decision to side with the Arabs in 1948, Prime Minister Nehru articulated a policy that was flexible and non-hostile toward Israel. As the struggle for independence faded from the forefront of Indian politics and public memory, anti-colonial sentiment became a decreasingly important ingredient in India's foreign policy. Pragmatic considerations have driven India's approach to Israel since the 1960s.

COLLABORATION WITH ISRAEL DURING THE COLD WAR

Between 1948 and the end of the Cold War in 1992, India's ideological opposition to Israel eroded. By the 1960s, India and Israel were exchanging military aid. The first sign of collaboration came with the Sino-Indian war (1962), when Israel provided India with military aid. Israel also gave aid to India during her two wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971. India reciprocated during the Six-Day War in 1967 by providing Israel with spare parts for Mystere and Ouragan aircraft, as well as AX-13 tanks.¹⁵

The pragmatic military cooperation that occurred between Israel and India during the 1960s was proof that India's need to collaborate with Israel outweighed any ideological opposition. India's support for the Palestinians remained, however. As India's relations with Israel continued to warm, the task of balancing cooperation with Israel with other interests in the Arab World became increasingly difficult.

WARMING INDO-ISRAELI RELATIONS IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

Although Indian leaders did show ideological opposition to the creation of Israel in 1948, the ideological concerns that initially influenced policy decisions mattered little by 1992. Over time, the anti-colonial sentiment that had caused India to side with Palestine had disappeared from the forefront of Indian politics. Furthermore, by 1992 the Indian government was no longer concerned about maintaining unity between Hindus and Muslims since India was no longer in its infancy as a nation-state.

In addition, political factors that had previously prohibited India from recognizing Israel, such as the non-alignment agreement, had eroded since the 1940s. China's recognition of Israel gave India an incentive to establish diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. Although Indian Muslims have remained largely opposed to an Indo-Israeli alliance, the strategic, economic, and political benefits of the Indo-Israeli relationship have outweighed the possible effects on India's relationship with its Muslims.

In the post-Cold War era, India and Israel have collaborated in myriad ways. For example, Israel is now India's second largest weapons supplier.¹⁶ "Israel has provided India with sea-to-sea missile radar and other similar systems, border monitoring equipment, and night vision devices. It has also upgraded India's Soviet-era aircraft."¹⁷ Additionally, Israel is drawn to the Indian middle class, a market for Israeli consumer goods.¹⁸

India and Israel have also supported each other's nuclear policies. In 1998, Israel did not respond to an Indian nuclear test that drew sanctions from the United States. In addition, neither India nor Israel signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and each has supported the other's decision not to do so.

The rise of Islamic terrorism has also brought the two countries together. Both India and Israel have significant Muslim minorities, and both are plagued by Islamic terror attacks. In India, the rise of fundamentalism has swayed public opinion in Israel's favor. Islamic terrorism has plagued India and Israel since the 1990s, and both are working to eradicate it. In the case of Israel, terror threatens its very existence, since many terror groups "pledge to fight jihad against Israel until it is wiped off the map."²⁰ Terror attacks in India have resulted from anti-Muslim riots, as well as tensions with Pakistan. In July 2006, an attack on the Bombay commuter trains that killed 200 was blamed on Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Toiba, but was allegedly planned by Pakistan's intelligence agency.²¹

INDO-ISRAELI COLLABORATION AND INDIA'S STANDING IN THE ARAB WORLD

According to Kanchan Gupta, director of consular affairs and communications at the Indian Embassy in Cairo, "India's relations with Israel are not being cultivated at the cost of India's relations with countries in the Arab region...it is true that during

the same corresponding period, India's relations with Arab countries have also blossomed."²² In 2003, Indo-Arab trade exceeded \$10 billion, compared with the \$1.2 billion trade relationship India has with Israel. In addition, approximately 4 million Indians lived and worked in the Gulf at that time. In the same year, India spent \$17-18 billion on Arab oil.²³

Despite significant Indo-Arab trade and Gupta's claim that Indo-Arab relations have blossomed, many believe that the Indo-Arab relationship has been waning since the end of the Cold War. Mustafa el-Feki laments this decline:

We have lost India so far for no good reason, I should say. We have failed to stay close to an industrially advanced state, one with nuclear and space capabilities. We have failed to do so although there is a clear ethnic resemblance between the Indian subcontinent, including Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the people in our Arab world. It is time we mend this error. It is time to bring Arab countries closer to both India and Pakistan, rather than take one side or keep our distance altogether. I believe the Arabs have only themselves to blame for India's change of heart on the Palestinian question.²⁴

PR Kumaraswamy, on the other hand, believes that India is attempting to juggle its relations with Israel and the Arab countries. He told *Al-Ahram Weekly*, "Prior to 1992 India believed that in order to have good relations with Arabs and Palestinians, it had to adopt an anti-Israeli position. That is no longer the case. Today India believes it is possible to have good relations with Israel and Arab countries at the same time."²⁵ While el-Feki claims that India's standing in the Arab World has declined since 1992, PR Kumaraswamy contends that the relationship between India and Israel has merely made the Indo-Arab relationship more complex.

Whatever the change in Indo-Arab relations, it is clear that India's policy regarding Israel is not seen as an ideological shift in the Arab World. In addition, India's newfound close relationship with Israel has not caused the negative Arab backlash that the United States' Israel policy has. In his article, "The Tragedy of Arab-American Relations," Fawaz A. Gerges writes that on a visit to Yemen he spoke with young Yemeni boys who "expressed a genuine desire to 'kill' Americans for supporting Israel's oppression of the Palestinians."²⁶ While many in the Arab World claim that the United States' unconditional support of Israel has legitimized violence against Palestinians, few see the Indo-Israeli

relationship the same way. While el-Feki laments the Arab World's loss of a strategic partner, he blames the Arabs, not India, for the change in policy. Kumaraswamy, too, acknowledges the fluidity of India's policy, not a new ideological alignment with Israel. It is clear that India's relationship with Israel has caused little resentment toward India in the Arab World.

Although India has a close strategic, military, and economic relationship with Israel, there has been a careful effort to balance interests in Israel with India's image in the Arab World. Although Indo-Israeli cooperation has been extensive, "India does not want to appear too close with Israel at risk of alienating Syria and Iran."²⁷ In fact, India has done its best to stay on good terms with the rest of the Muslim Middle East as well. India has even established a "structured dialogue' with the Arab League to explain the India-Israel relationship."²⁸

Indo-Israeli collaboration has generated relatively little backlash from the Arab World. Regarding India and Israel's growing relationship, Syrian minister of expatriates Bouthaina Shaaban said, "We are aware of the growing ties between India and Israel, particularly in the military and strategic areas. But we are not worried about that."²⁹ Instead, the Syrian minister hoped that India would "play a much bigger role in West Asia and use its influence over Israel to bring durable peace in the region."³⁰ Because of the pragmatic, flexible nature of India's foreign policy, the Arab response to Indo-Israeli cooperation has not been hostile.

THE RISE OF ANTI-MUSLIM SENTIMENT AND IDEOLOGICAL ALIGNMENT

"I am seeing that there is some natural affinity being developed between India and Israel and Jewish people," said Mr. Agnihotri, 48, who owns technology and consulting companies. "Because both these countries and people have been affected by this kind of terror — killing of civilians, something despicable that is happening year after year."³²

There is no doubt that Islamic terrorism has deepened ties between India and Israel. In both countries, however, the rise of Islamic terror has also increased the popularity of rightwing, nationalist, Islamophobic political parties. In India, the Bharatiya

Janata Party (BJP), a right-wing Hindu nationalist party, leads a coalition—National Democratic Alliance—that is a strong contender in the April/May 2009 election. In 2003, the BJP proposed an alliance against terrorism comprised of India, Israel, and the United States. The Indian National Security Adviser at the time, Brajesh Mishra, advocated the need for "a core, consisting of democratic societies"... "which can take on international terrorism in a holistic and focused manner."³³ According to Bidwai, The BJP is an "ardent supporter of Israel and is fascinated by the highly militarised, tough-as-nails nature of Israeli society and by its state's willingness to use massive force against the Palestinians whom it treats as terrorists and sub-human vermin."³⁴

While the BJP's focus on combating Islamic terror may not be cause for concern, its anti-Muslim rhetoric and ideological partiality for Israel are. If the BJP's National Democratic Alliance coalition should gain control of the government in the upcoming election, it is possible that India's relationship with Israel will take on ideological dimensions that would harm India's credibility in the Arab World and erode the balance of power between India, Israel and the Arab World. In order to maintain its reputation in the Arab World, India would be wise to maintain its balanced, pragmatic approach to Israel and the Greater Middle East.

DIPLOMATIC POSSIBILITIES FOR INDIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Because India's newfound relationship with Israel has not significantly harmed its public image in the Arab World, India has gained diplomatic credibility with Israel without losing standing with the Arabs. Since neither party sees India as ideologically aligned, the country can look to expand its role in the Middle East peace process, acting as an unbiased broker. According to el-Feki, India is "highly regarded across the Arab World" in spite of her close relationship with Israel. The United States—which has previously attempted to serve as an honest broker in the peace process—is not held in such regard in the Arab World today. In fact, American partiality toward Israel during the Oslo Accords contributed to the collapse of the peace process.³¹

Although India has acted pragmatically with regard to Israel, Islamic terrorism in India has the potential to turn India's strategic relationship with

Israel into a permanent coalition united against the Arab-Islamic world. Anti-Islamic political groups are already budding in both countries. How might heightened Islamophobia in India and Israel affect the nature of Indo-Israeli relations? What will happen to India's standing in the Arab World?

CONCLUSION

Over the past 60 years, India's Israel policy has been rooted in pragmatism. Although India initially opposed the creation of Israel, strategic cooperation caused Indo-Israeli relations to warm from the 1960s onward without alienating the Arab World. Today India maintains close relationships with both Israel and Arab nations. Due to its close ties with both parties, India has the potential to play a major role in the peace process between Palestinians and Israelis. India is in a position to serve as an honest, unbiased broker, a role that the United States has struggled to fill.

The rise of Islamic terror in India and Israel, however, has the potential to alter the way India approaches its Middle East foreign policy. Islamic terrorism has shifted politics in both countries to the right, and conservative parties in both countries are looking toward permanent ideological alliances through which to combat terror. In light of India's success with a pragmatic Israel policy, such alliances are inadvisable and could tip India's balance too far in favor of Israel, thus alienating the Arabs. This would not only be detrimental economically for India, but it could also jeopardize India's status as an impartial player in the Middle East.

The India-Israel relationship provides a valuable lesson in international politics, especially for states whose ideological alliances prevent them from forging solely pragmatic ties. India has shown that the even-handed pursuit of diplomatic, military, and economic interests is the way to garner diplomatic credibility and popular good will without damaging other strategic relationships. §

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