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The Diplomatic Relations Between India And Israel

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Abstract
There has been a steady strengthening of India's relationship with Israel ever since India established full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992, despite Indian attempts to keep this flourishing bilateral relationship out of public view. This bilateral relationship assumed an altogether new dynamic and came under full public scrutiny with the visit of Ariel Sharon to India in September 2003, the first ever by a ruling Israeli prime minister, thereby signalling a sea change in relations between the two states. In sharp contrast to the back-channel security ties that existed even before the normalization of bilateral relations, India now seems more willing to openly carve out a mutually beneficial bilateral relationship with Israel, including deepening military ties and countering the threat posed by terrorism to the two societies.

Keywords*: Foreign Minister, Diplomatic Relation, Arab State, External Affair*

Introduction

The pro-Arab orientation exhibited by India during this period was the result of certain domestic developments in the Indian subcontinent and ofIndia's understanding of the international developments, especially in theMiddle East. A pronouncedly unfriendly attitude toward Israel, however, did not go well in India and the prolonged absence of relations remained one of the most controversial aspects of Indian foreign policy.

Since 1992, both countries have forged strong political, economic, cultural, and strategic relations, indicating their mutual determination to overcome and compensate for past indifference and to vigorously pursue acooperative relationship. In the light of the absence of anti-Semitism in India, one can go to the extent of suggesting that the absence of formal tiesbetween the two countries was an aberration in India's attitude toward theJewish people. An attempt is made here to reconstruct the diplomatic history of Indo-Israeli relations. This however, would be incomplete without an appreciation of India's historic position vis-à-vis Jewish aspirations for a homeland in Palestine.

Jewish National Home and Recognition

Since the early 1920s, or shortly after the Balfour Declaration, Indian nationalists began to support the Arab position on Palestine and were reluctant to endorse Zionist aspirations there. One can identify a numberof explanations for this pro-Arab orientation:

- The presence of a substantial Muslim population in India and the needto accommodate their views on the Palestine question.
- The on-going rivalry between the Congress Party and the Muslim League as to who represented Indian Muslims and the virulent opposition of the League to Jewish political aspirations in Palestine.
- The tiny Jewish presence in India and the Jews' marginal political influence upon the Indian nationalists.
- The prolonged contacts between Arab nationalists, especially between the Mufti of Jerusalem and Indian leaders, in contrast to the Zionist leadership's prolonged neglect of India.

As a result, two prominent Indian leaders, Mahatma Gandhi and JawaharlalNehru were unable to endorse the Zionist aspirations. In their view, Palestine was and should remain an Arab country and a Jewish national home could not be realized "without the consent of the Arabs."

In 1947, against this background, India was elected to the eleven-member United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), which was appointed to determine the future political status of Palestine. While a seven-member majority advocated partition of Palestine as the solution, India articulated an independent position calling for a federal Palestine. From the very beginning, this was a nonstarter since it fell short of the expectations of both sides. The Indian plan offered internal autonomy and civic and religious rights to Jews who were demanding political rights and sovereignty. Likewise, it offered a federal Palestine while the neighboring Arab states were demanding a unitary Arab state. Hence, both the

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Arabs and Jews were unanimous in rejecting the Indian plan. As a result, when the United Nations voted to partition Palestine into Arab and Jewish states on November 29,1947, India joined the Arab and Islamic countries and voted against partition.
The May 1948 Israeli declaration of independence radically altered on the ground realities and India found it difficult to pursue its erstwhile position. After protracted deliberations, internal consultations, political calculations, and Israeli persuasions, on September 18, 1950, India formally recognized the Jewish State.

One can attribute the new Indian position to a number of reasons:
- Israeli admission into the United Nations with the active support of both cold war rivals.
- Israel's ability to function as a sovereign, independent entity committed to undertaking and honoring international commitments and obligations.
- Domestic Indian pressures from various political groups, especially the socialists.
- The pro-Pakistan position adopted by a number of countries in the Middle East.
- Subtle pressure from the West, especially the United States.

At the same time, one cannot ignore the issues that caused delayed recognition. Of the many possibilities, two—namely, the Kashmir problem and apprehensions over domestic Muslim sentiments—significantly delayed India's recognition.

Aliyah and Consular Missions

Even before the formation of the Jewish state, India was functioning as a transit point for the emigration of Jewish refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Europe. Shortly after Indian recognition, an aliyah office opened to facilitate refugee emigration. In December, 1950, the Jewish Agency appointed Aryeh Gance as their representative in Bombay for immigration affairs. A few months later, he was re-designated as Director of the Palestine Office of the Jewish Agency. The establishment of a consular mission in Bombay significantly reduced the importance of the aliyah mission. Immigration was integrated into the consular mission, and the Jewish Agency representative office was closed down.

Meanwhile, Israel was eager to have a formal representation in India. In May, 1950, or nearly five months prior to Indian recognition, Israel appointed an Indian national, F. W. Pollack, as its Trade Commissioner of Southeast Asia. Following India's refusal to be treated as part of Southeast Asia, Israel modified his designation in November 1950, and Pollack became Trade Commissioner for Israel in Southeast Asia, including India, which had recognized Israel by then. Compelled by the delayed Indian response, Israel modified Pollack's designation. On December 28, 1950, the Israeli foreign office informed its Indian counterpart that Pollack would be its Trade Commissioner for India and Southeast Asia. After protracted negotiations and correspondence, India issued an official decree to this effect on March 1, 1951.

Before long, Pollack faced new problems and, this time, they came from the Israeli foreign ministry. If the repatriation of Jewish refugees to Israel reduced the rationale for an aliyah office in Bombay, meager trade possibil- ities made Pollack's continuation as Trade Commissioner unnecessary and economically prohibitive for the new state. Naturally, the economic divi- sion was keen to terminate the mission. However, this did not go well with other sections, especially when—after considerable efforts, persuasions, and accommodation to Indian demands—Pollack's mission was recognized in India. Closing down the only formal Israeli mission in India at that juncture would have been politically unwise.

Thus, Pollack assumed a new avatar. On June 3, 1951, he was concur- rently appointed Israel's Consular Agent in India. Because of past experience, a cable to this effect was sent to Nehru, who also functioned as India's foreign minister. This change of strategy quickly proved extremely useful. Within a week, India replied: "The President of India is pleased to recognize provisionally the appointment of Mr. F. W. Pollack as Consular Agent of Israel at Bombay." A formal gazette notification to this effect was issued on the same day.

Israel viewed Pollack's new role as a temporary measure until the estab- lishment of a formal "legation" in India. His problems however, lingered on. In August, New Delhi wanted to know whether Pollack was "an hon- orary or decarriere officer (sic)." Pollack was not a regular Israeli career diplomat and hence, in October 1952, he was made Honorary Consul for India. In January 1953, the Consular Agency of Israel was upgraded to the Israeli Consulate in India. Pollack continued in this position until June 1953, when career diplomat Gabriel Doron took over as the first Israeli consul in India. Between July 1953 and January 1992, fifteen officials headed the Israeli mission in Bombay (see table 12.1).

Table 12.1 Heads of Israeli Consulate in Bombay
(later Mumbai) (1950–1992)
F. W. Pollack —1951–1953
Gabriel Doron —1953–1956
Avshalom Caspi—1956–1959
Michael Michael—1959–1962
Arieh Ilan—1962–1963

Peretz Gordon—1964–1965
Reuven Dafni—1965–1969
Yacov Morris—1969–1971
Yair Aran—1971–1973
Yehoshua Trigor—1973–1976
Shlomo Armon—1976–1979
Yosef Hassin—1979–1982
Immanuel Seri—1982–1984
Oded Ben-Hur—1985–1987
Amos Radian—1987–1989
Giora Becher —1989–1992

The consular mission in Bombay raised a number of unanswered questions. Primarily, the powers and privileges of the consular mission are restricted and are confined to protecting the interests and well-being of its nationals in the country of accreditation and to maintaining matters relat- ing to trade, shipping, notary responsibilities, registration of births, marriages and death of its nationals, and issuance of passports and visas. In short, consulates perform commercial and functional duties, without much scope for diplomatic activities. Even when the consuls were career diplomats, India treated them merely as consular officials and thereby limited the scope of their activities.

Furthermore, the territorial jurisdiction of the consulate was rather vague and uneven. While Israel felt that the heads of missions were accred- ited to the Government of India, the latter, especially during political differences and tension, sought to underline their residency in Bombay.

Meanwhile, in August 1953, the Indian government decided to modify regulations concerning Consular missions in India. Accordingly

The Government of India have . . . decided that, with effect from the 15th September 1953, officers stationed elsewhere than at the headquarters of the Government of India will not be deemed to be members of a Diplomatic mission, and will no longer be included in the Diplomatic List.

This stand consolidated the Indian position of not recognizing the Israeli consuls as diplomats.
In April 1964, when the Israeli Consul wanted to organize national day celebrations in New Delhi, Nehru was firm and argued that such celebra- tions should be restricted to Bombay. In the absence of a response from the Israeli Consul, the government got the reservation arrangements at the state-run Ashok Hotel cancelled and declared that such a function would not be permitted anywhere in the capital. Indeed, amidst the controversy, an opposition member asked: “Is it a fact that the Consul General of Israel is accredited to the entire territory of the Republic of India?

This went unanswered and the issue was not clarified until normal rela- tions were established in 1992. According to Israeli diplomats who served in India, the atmosphere was liberal and friendly until the early 1970s. Despite their lower official status, Israeli Consuls had direct access to the foreign minister and often met the prime minister. They had unrestricted freedom of movement, except in sensitive border areas.

Things began to change after the mid-1970s when India’s attitude toward Israel generally deteriorated. The movements of the Israeli Consul then were restricted to the state of Maharashtra, of which Bombay is the capital. He could travel other parts of the country only as an ordinary foreign national devoid of any other privileges. As the Israeli mission languished in Bombay, often called “India’s diplomatic Siberia,” the fortunes of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) soared. In March 1980, the PLO office in New Delhi was accorded full diplomatic status. Even the limited Israeli presence in Bombay was curtailed in 1982, when Yosef Hassin was declared persona non grata following a controversial media interview. Only in the late 1980s did India formally extend Israel’s consular jurisdiction to the southern state of Kerala, which had strong historic connections with the Jewish people.

Recognition without Normalization

While Israel was enthusiastic about normalization of relations, India was less than forthcoming. In examining the Indian posture, it is essential to remember that establishment of diplomatic relations between states is customary and not mandatory. It is neither possible nor necessary that a state establishes diplomatic relations with all the states it has recognized. With the sole exception of the United States, most states do not have diplomatic representation in all corners of the globe. If so, why are India’s non-relations with Israel so controversial?

The answer can be found in India’s basic posture vis-à-vis normalization. At the time of recognition, India was not opposed to the idea of establish- ing formal diplomatic ties with Israel. Indeed, the Indian government gave sufficient indications both to its domestic critics and to the Israeli inter- locutors that formal ties would be established. In April

1951, even before the establishment of the Israeli Consul in Bombay, New Delhi turned down an offer from Victory Grunwald, a Tel Aviv-based notary public, to act as India's Honorary Consul in Israel. In its view: "In order to ensure that we (that is, the Government of India) obtain a clear picture of the Middle East, it is necessary for us to open a mission in Israel."

The initial Indian delay in moving toward normalization was attributed to a number of administrative and financial considerations including lack of qualified personnel to staff missions abroad and financial constraints that inhibited India from opening new missions unless driven by strong, immedi- ate compulsions. As early as in December 1950, India felt: "Owing to reasons of financial stringency, the case of Israel has presumably to wait for more propitious times." Indeed, at the time of independence, the resident mis- sion in Cairo was India's only diplomatic mission in the entire Arab world. The ministry was keen to reduce its budget through various administrative measures, such as concurrent accreditation. As a result, until the mid-1950s, the Indian ambassador in Cairo, for example, was also functioning as an Indian emissary to Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. Taking cognizance of this Indian practice, Israel unsuccessfully suggested that the Indian emissary in Ankara be concurrently accredited to Israel.20 Moreover, some within the Israeli foreign ministry suggested that Israel should unilaterally open a mission in New Delhi.

This, however, did not find favor with Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett. Concerned over the delays in establishing diplomatic links, Israeli

Foreign Ministry Director-General Walter Eytan came to India in early 1952. Following his detailed discussion with Prime Minister Nehru and other political figures and Indian foreign ministry officials, Eytan was convinced of India's intentions to forge normal ties with Israel.

According to Nehru's official biographer, S. Gopal, in March 1952, Nehru informed the Israeli government (through Eytan) that India had no major objection to the exchange of diplomatic representatives, but that it might be better to wait for the formation of a new government after the elections. With the sole exception of R. K. Nehru, the entire Indian bureaucracy was in favor of normalization. Indeed, following this visit, an official in the Indian foreign office was asked to prepare the budget and other financial details for a resident Indian mission in Tel Aviv.

The Suez crisis and Sinai campaign of 1956 brought about the first negative attitude toward normalization. Nehru was infuriated by the Israeli action. Israel not only invaded a fellow member of the emerging Afro-Asian alliance, but also collaborated with the former colonial powers, Britain and France. On November 11, 1956, he told the Lok Sabha (Lower House of the Indian parliament), "in view of the existing passions" over the Suez crisis, diplomatic relations with Israel were not possible. After that, time-is-not-right became the standard Indian refrain vis-à-vis normalization.

Later on, a host of other reasons and rationale were added. In September 1963, Foreign Minister Dinesh Singh told the Indian parliament, "There is not enough consular work" to justify an Indian mission in Israel. Following the June war, he added two more reasons for non-normalization:

- Israel was following "wrong" policies against the Arabs and Palestinians.
- India could not accept that religion could become the basis for nationality.

Following normalization, a senior Indian diplomat reiterated in his memoirs: "We had kept back from establishing diplomatic relations only because of Israel's aggressive and discriminatory attitude towards the Palestinians."

At the same time, one can look for more interesting reasons for India's cautious approach toward Israel. After partition, India was preoccupied with Pakistan and it sought to minimize and neutralize the latter's influence in the Middle East. Pakistan's desire for a leadership role in the Islamic world compelled it to exploit its Islamic credentials. With the Kashmir dispute dominating its foreign policy agenda, India was wary of Arab and Islamic countries siding with Pakistan. India was apprehensive that the Arabs might view ties with Israel as an "unfriendly" act and felt that resolution of the Kashmir dispute could be a pre-condition for better ties with Israel.

Likewise, perceived opposition from the Indian Muslim population was a significant factor in non-relations, although Indian leaders have been wary of admitting this in public. In June 2000, when Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh attributed the non-relations to feelings of Indian Muslims, many eyebrows were raised in India. In the words of veteran diplomat J. N. Dixit, "There was also the domestic political concern that our Muslim population would object to this decision (that is, normalization of relations with Israel) and their resentment may have domestic political and electoral ramifications for the ruling party, which took such a positive decision about Israel." He further added that when the Indian Cabinet discussed the question of normalization in January 1992, senior minister Arjun Singh, "felt that this decision might affect the Muslim support for the Congress [party]."

Diplomatic Contacts

The absence of diplomatic relations did not inhibit both countries, especially India from interacting with Israel. Indian and Israeli diplomats regularly met in a number of other countries. A host of places such as Washington, New York, and Ottawa in North America, London in Europe, Ankara in the Middle East and Rangoon in Asia often witnessed intense diplomatic dialogue between the two countries. Regular visits between the two countries continued. Besides Eytan, a host of Israeli leaders, including former foreign ministers Moshe Sharett (1956) and Yigol Allon (1959 and 1964) visited India. Indian Education Minister Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, a close confidant of Nehru, met Israeli diplomat Eliahu Sasson in Ankara in June 1951 during his state visit to Turkey. Indian and Israeli diplomats attended functions hosted by one another and, at times, such occasions even provided a useful setting for meetings between Israeli and Pakistani diplomats.

At the multilateral level, India's position vis-à-vis Israel often reflected the vicissitudes of bilateral relations. In March 1947, on the eve of its independence, India hosted the first Asian Relations Conference. Nehru, who was heading the Interim government, invited a ten-member Jewish delegation from Palestine. This invitation was seen as an official recognition of "Jewish Palestine as part of the Asian continent and as a member of the family of the nations of Asia." This provided an opportunity for the yishuv to establish formal and often maiden contacts with various Indian and Asian personalities who were to become the future leaders of their respective countries. The outcome, however, was less fruitful. Hugo Bergman, the leader of the delegation, felt that Nehru, "was not very keen to greet us or meet us in the Hall or Lounge, the Dining Room or wherever he hap- pened to meet us in public." Likewise, the Israeli delegation's meeting with Mahatma Gandhi was an unmitigated disaster.

The Bandung conference of 1955 was entirely different. Bowing to Arab pressures, India went along with other countries in the region and opted to exclude Israel from the first Afro-Asian conference. This conference legiti- mized the exclusion of Israel from all subsequent Afro-Asian and third world gatherings. Furthermore, it also acknowledged the veto power of the Arab countries in excluding Israel from various regional gatherings. Commenting on the Indian stand, Gopal observed that Nehru, "agreed with reluctance that an invitation to Israel (for the Bandung Conference) should be extended only if the Arab countries agreed to it." Thus, when the first summit meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement took place in Belgrade in September 1961, no one thought of including Israel.

This growing third world solidarity proved extremely detrimental to Israel, especially when such forums began to adopt a host of anti-Israeli resolutions and measures. At the height of this trend, on November 10, 1975, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the resolution equat- ing Zionism with racism. The exclusion of Israel spread to the arena of sports and in 1983, it was officially excluded from the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA), the supreme sport body of the continent.

Even the formation of the first non-Congress government in India, in 1977 under Morarji Desai, did not improve the situation. The presence in the ruling coalition of the erstwhile Jana Sangh, which had traditionally adopted pro-Israeli positions, did raise some hopes, especially because its leader Atal Behari Vajpayee, a vocal supporter of Israel, took over as foreign minister. Despite public speculations, there were no significant changes. Taking his cue from the new developments, in August 1977, Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan paid an incognito visit to India to explore the possibilities of normalization. Other than raising political controversies during the 1980 parliamentary elections, the visit did not modify the Nehruvian legacy. And when Indira Gandhi was returned to power in 1980, the Palestinian mission in India was upgraded and accorded the status of a full embassy.

Prelude to Normalization

In October 1984, Rajiv Gandhi took over as prime minister following his mother's brutal assassination. Without any ideological baggage, he signaled a fresh Indian approach toward Israel. Though unable to reverse traditional policy completely, he initiated a number of moves, which subsequently facilitated normalization. Breaking from his immediate predecessors, he openly met Israeli officials and pro-Israeli leaders in the United States. The question of normalization figured prominently in his discussions with American officials, even though, domestic constraints inhibited him from committing "full diplomatic relations within a specified time-frame" as demanded by American friends of Israel. However, he took a number of small but significant steps vis-à-vis Israel, including:

- In 1985, he met his Israeli counterpart Shimon Peres during the fortieth annual session of the United Nations.
- He gradually restored the status of Israeli Consul to the pre-1982 position when Yosef Hassin was expelled following a media interview. As a result, Oded Ben-Hur was stationed in Bombay in 1985 with the rank of vice-consul, and his position was upgraded to consul in August 1988.
- He allowed the Indo-Israeli Davis Cup tennis match in New Delhi in July 1987. A few years earlier, India had refused to permit Israeli participation in two world cup table tennis tournaments held in Calcutta and New Delhi.
- On June 8, 1988, he held high profile meeting with leaders of U.S.-based pro-Israeli groups in New York, including Democratic Congressman Stephen Solarz.
- In January 1989, a three-member delegation from the Anti- Defamation League (ADL) visited India and held a meeting with senior Indian officials including Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao.

- The jurisdiction of the Israeli Consular was formally extended to the southern Indian state of Kerala, which has a significant Jewish population.
- The federal government in New Delhi asked the government of Maharashtra to invite the Israeli consul to all state functions.
- India relaxed the visa procedures for Israelis of Indian origin and gradually liberalized the visa procedures for individuals and tourist groups from Israel.

Rajiv Gandhi, however, was unable to surmount a number of impedi- ments and effect a complete reversal. Israeli isolation following the outbreak of the intifada in 1987 severely curtailed his freedom of action. Israeli involve- ment in the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, especially its military-intelligence cooperation, generated suspicion and anger in India. Above all, the rapid erosion of Gandhi's own popularity and a string of electoral reverses suf- fered by his Congress party limited his ability to initiate a dramatic improvement in India's relations with Israel.

Normalization

When Narasimha Rao became prime minister in June 1991, he capitalized on the initiatives taken when he was Rajiv Gandhi's foreign minister. A few days after Rao assumed office, a group of Israeli tourists were kid- napped in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, thereby bringing Israel to the forefront of Indian policy makers' attention. Rao facilitated the visit of a senior Israeli diplomat to "coordinate" the release of an Israeli kidnapped by Kashmiri militants. In a well- publicized move, on December 16, 1991, India joined the U.N. majority in repealing the earlier ignominious resolu- tion that equated Zionism with racism. Since India was one of the sponsors of the 1975 resolution, this was a significant departure.

A host of regional and international developments enabled Rao to carefully reexamine and reverse the traditional Indian policy toward Israel. Since these factors are widely discussed and debated, one can briefly note them as follows:

- The end of the cold war eliminated the ideological basis for India's pro-Arab orientation.
- The end of the East-West ideological divide significantly weakened the Non-Aligned Movement, which had a strong influence upon Indian foreign policy.
- The new economic liberalization initiated by Rao meant friendly relation vis-à-vis the West, especially the United States.
- The inauguration of the Middle East peace process in Madrid in October 1991 enhanced Israel's international position and normaliza- tion ceased to be a controversial issue.
- The willingness of Arab states and Palestinians to seek a negotiated political settlement with Israel eliminated the need for India to maintain a distance from Israel.
- The pro-Pakistani position adopted by key Arab states significantly weakened their leverage vis-à-vis India's policy toward Israel. As Dixit informed Arab ambassadors following normalization: "we have been unfailingly and consistently supportive of Arab causes and the Palestinian movement for nearly four decades. . . . [But] despite India's continuing friendship and support to the Arabs, they have been singularly insensitive to India's concerns on Kashmir and to the trends of subversion and secessionism generated against India by Pakistan."

A number of potential incentives favored a change of policy vis-à-vis Israel. According to Dixit, such a move, "could counter moves by those Muslim countries which were inclined to act against Indian interests if instigated by Pakistan." India was quick to recognize the changed international situation. In the words of Dixit, Prime Minister Rao said that he would take, first, senior ministers of his own party and, then, leaders of the Opposition parties into his confidence about the rationale of establishing relations with Israel. He observed that after ensuring a general consensus in domestic and polit- ical terms, he would hold discussions with (Palestinian leader) Yasser Arafat to gauge his reaction and only then finalize the decision.

Despite some minor disagreements, the overall atmosphere was in favor of normalization. As a result, on January 29, 1992, more than four decades after recognition, India announced the establishment of full diplomatic relations with Israel. Within weeks, Giora Becher, the Israeli Consul in Bombay, moved to New Delhi and opened the Israeli embassy. Moving quickly on May 15, India opened its embassy in Tel Aviv.

Conclusion

Post-1992 developments are beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is sufficient to mention that since 1992, political, economic, cultural, and strategic ties between India and Israel have progressed and expanded con- siderably. Hosts of leaders, officials, and businesspersons have been visiting one another and, in 1999, bilateral trade crossed the one billion-dollar mark. Both countries have signed a number of agreements pertaining to agriculture, trade, investments, and scientific cooperation and are actively cooperating against terrorism. Of late, Israel has emerged as India's second largest military supplier (after Russia) and India has emerged as Israel's largest market for military exports.

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