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THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE WAR: THE POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES OF INDIA

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Abstract:

India's foreign policy has undergone a significant evolution and recognizing Israel to becoming friends, and now balancing relations with different countries, it shows how India adapts and tries to keep things fair in the world. In recent years, however, the India-Israel relationship has begun to change significantly. Although India recognized Israel in 1950, it did not establish diplomatic relations until 1992. In the following years, bilateral ties gradually gained substantial momentum, particularly in agriculture, defense, tourism, and trade. Notably, India has become Israel's top market for defense exports, prompting growing realization long-term strategic interests. India's Balancing Act in Israel-Palestine War.

Keywords: India, Balancing Act, Israel, Palestine, War

INTRODUCTION:

India's diplomatic position on the Israel-Palestine conflict has evolved over the years, reflecting a delicate balance between its historical support for Palestine and its growing relationship with Israel. India's historical position on the Israel-Palestine conflict leaned towards Palestine, driven by factors such as Mahatma Gandhi's opposition to a Jewish state in Palestine, India's large Muslim population, and the need to maintain good relations with Arab countries. India's position with regard to Palestine was also guided by the general consensus in the Arab world, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the United Nations. The partition of Palestine plan was put to vote at the UN, India voted against, along with the Arab countries. India also opposed Israel's admission to the UN. During the Cold War, India aligned itself with the Soviet Union, which supported the Arab states, thus perpetuating its pro-Palestine position.

Historical Background:

India's historical support for Palestinian rights is embedded in its own struggle for independence, which makes its recent angle toward Israel even more evident. In 1947, India voted against the United Nations partition plan for Palestine along religious lines together with Arab states, preferring a federal state instead with a special status for Jerusalem, emphasizing its commitment to the Palestinian cause. This support for Palestinian statehood continued over the decades, with India recognizing the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the sole



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legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in 1974. Solidarity with Palestine was a cornerstone of Indian foreign policy, rooted in its anti-colonial and non-aligned principles, which resonated with the broader aspirations of Arab states and their firmly pro-Palestinian orientation.

India's Establishment of Diplomatic Relations:

In 1992, India established full diplomatic relations with Israel, marking a significant shift. Despite this, India continued to voice support for the Palestinian cause. It was only after the end of the Cold War that Prime Minister Narasimha Rao took the bold step of establishing diplomatic ties with Israel, irrespective of potential fallout with the Arab nations. Balance in National Interest: India's diplomatic decisions are guided by national interest, necessitating a balance between maintaining strong relations with Israel, supporting Palestine, and developing ties with the Arab world.

The Current Policy and Diplomatic Nuances:

1. Relations with Israel as a National Interest: India's relations with Israel have strengthened considerably in recent years, encompassing various sectors like trade, technology, defense, and counter-terrorism cooperation. India's support for Israel is seen as a response to its fight against cross-border terrorism, although the situations in Israel and India differ significantly.

2. Stands With Palestine's Cause: Besides growing relations with Israel, India has reiterated its stand for Palestine's cause. Amid the ongoing tensions, USD 29.53 million has been contributed by India to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian refugees. India also sent nearly 6.5 tonnes of medical aid and 32 tonnes of disaster relief material for the people of Palestine.

India Balancing its position:

In 2017, the Indian Prime Minister for the first time visited Israel and in 2018 he made an official visit to Palestine for the first time. In 2017, India voted against the U.S. and Israel for an attempt to declare unilaterally all of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital. India's policy is clear, they condemn terrorism but do not support indiscriminate reprisal bombings.

A. India's Official Position: India's official position on the Israel-Palestine conflict remains unchanged, advocating for a two-state solution with Israel and Palestine as good neighbors. It was only after the mediation of the US, in the 1991 Madrid Peace conference a two-state solution was agreed to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is evidenced by the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Ramallah in the West Bank in 2018.

B. Defense Deals with Israel: India has a significant defense relationship with Israel, with defense procurement and technology cooperation. The conflict may impact this relationship, as Israel may focus more on its security needs during the conflict. Israel supplies the most military equipment to India, with the military business between the two countries worth around USD 2.1 billion.



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C. Energy Security: India is dependent on oil imports from the Middle East, and any escalation in the region could affect energy prices and, subsequently, India's economy. Since all the world economies are interconnected therefore, if countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran get involved in ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict then definitely there will be direct consequences over India's energy supply, economy and investment.

D. Impact on India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor: The conflict has the potential to affect the stability of the Middle East, a region of strategic importance to India. An escalation of hostilities could have implications for India's interests and engagements in the region. India recently signed the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) as an ambitious infrastructure project aimed at connecting India, the Middle East, and Europe through various transportation modes, including shipping and rail networks. Instability in the region can create security challenges, and affect the smooth operation of the IMEC.

Transform and continuity in India's relations with Israel and Palestine

India's response to the Oct. 7 terrorist attack on Israel and the ensuing Israel-Hamas war have underscored the notable shift in India-Israel bilateral relations that has taken place under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Prime Minister Modi tweeted on Oct. 7, "Deeply shocked by the news of terrorist attacks in Israel. Our thoughts and prayers are with the innocent victims and their families. We stand in solidarity with Israel at this difficult hour." The speed and firmness of the statement are uncharacteristic for India, and it highlights a deeper reorientation in its foreign policy regarding the ongoing regional crisis. Although the Ministry of External Affairs has emphasized New Delhi's longstanding support for a two-state solution, this departure of siding resolutely with Israel and without referencing the Palestine question exemplifies India's elevation of strategic interests over principled positions. This shift toward Israel is best understood by examining the confluence of two factors: structural imperatives and ideological underpinnings. Before delving into the details of how this shift has played out, it is helpful to first examine India's historical stance on Palestine and Israel to better understand the Modi government's current approach.

In recent years, however, the India-Israel relationship has begun to change significantly. Although India recognized Israel in 1950, it did not establish diplomatic relations until 1992. In the following years, bilateral ties gradually gained substantial momentum, particularly in agriculture, defense, tourism, and trade. Notably, India has become Israel's top market for defense exports, prompting a growing realization in New Delhi that Tel Aviv is vital for India's long-term strategic interests. Against the backdrop of burgeoning ties, the political glue that cemented India's policy shift occurred when Modi became the first Indian prime minister to visit Israel in 2017. The following year, in January 2018, Modi hosted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in New Delhi, accompanied by a 130-strong trade delegation to boost commercial and diplomatic ties.

As these visits gained increasing salience, Modi also made a historic visit to Palestine a month after hosting Netanyahu, making him the first Indian prime minister to do so. Modi's visit to Ramallah served the purpose of reiterating India's enduring support for the realization of a "sovereign, independent Palestine living in an



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environment of peace.” It also showcased New Delhi’s balanced approach, aimed at reassuring its Arab partners that India’s closer ties with Israel would not change its principled position on Palestine. In a similar vein, India had strongly opposed the Trump administration’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital in 2017, voting in favor of the U.N. General Assembly resolution that denounced the move.

India’s historical solidarity with the Palestinian cause, shaped by its anti-colonial principles, has witnessed a transformation in recent years. While maintaining support for Palestinian statehood, India has strategically deepened ties with Israel, especially in defense and trade. Prime Minister Modi’s vision for a Middle East founded on open political, economic, and defense relations between Israel and the Gulf countries would benefit India but is at risk if the Israel-Hamas conflict escalates across the region. For Modi, a shift toward Israel makes sense, as a protracted war could imperil India’s strategic interests and undo the groundwork it has laid to benefit from the region.

Ideological traits bolstering India-Israel relations

Indian foreign policy is increasingly demonstrating three traits that exemplify the structural imperatives of its national interests: a strongly independent foreign policy, ambitious strategic goals, and a consistent stand against terrorism. New Delhi is walking multiple tight ropes on the foreign policy front, including refusing to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, negotiating discounted oil purchases from Russia and Iran despite the global sanctions regime targeting them, and maintaining strategic relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE while still doing business with their regional rival, Iran. India’s refusal to park itself in any camp, particularly the U.S.-led Western one, has burnished its reputation as a power able to withstand political pressure to take sides. Where this matters is in India’s relations with Israel, as New Delhi’s increasing confidence shows that it is moving closer to Tel Aviv without the fear of a blowback in its relations with Arab and Muslim-majority states.

India’s ambitious strategic goals showcase that it is a major player in global affairs and has the vision, political will, and economic weight to project its ideas. Announced at the G20 summit in New Delhi in September, the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) provides an alternative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Although IMEC is still very much a concept one that is not immune to geopolitical shifts its strategic rationale is to counter China’s increasing influence in the Middle East. Given Beijing’s growing assertiveness and its revisionist territorial claims against India, New Delhi is confronted with the cold reality that it needs powerful friends to push back against China, even if this comes at the cost of its principles. Consequently, this makes New Delhi’s embrace of Israel easier to understand.

On the terrorism front, given its history of dealing with cross-border attacks from Pakistan-sponsored terrorist groups, India looks to Israel as a model. So when the 2008 Mumbai attacks killed more than 175 people, including a targeted attack on the Jewish Chabad House, India was determined to change the calculus in its favor so that it could hit back against terrorist groups. Under Modi, New Delhi has demonstrated it has the political will to strike terrorist groups in Pakistan, which it did in 2016 and 2019. So when Hamas broke through the Gaza



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security fence and attacked numerous military and civilians targets on Oct. 7, killing over 1,200 people, Modi's response to Israel was, we get you.

The second layer that explains India's close ties with Israel is the ideological underpinnings of their bilateral relationship. The ideological confluence between Modi's Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party is their shared hostility toward minorities: Indian Muslims for the BJP and Arab citizens in Israel for Likud. Both parties' ideologues privilege majoritarianism over constitutional rights that safeguard minority rights, play the victim card to justify their discrimination, and draw on their countries' democratic histories to exemplify their commitment to the preservation of minority rights while simultaneously dismantling them.

Indian politics have changed dramatically since Modi's BJP won elections in 2014, repeating its success in 2019. The BJP's leadership overtly articulates a doctrine of "Hindutva," which unapologetically champions a Hindu majority strain and dominance over India, disregarding the country's ethnic, linguistic, or religious diversity. The BJP's Hindutva political ideology means that it does not regard India's 200-plus million Muslims in its electoral calculations, preferring instead to whip up Hindu nationalist sentiments to expand its voter base and drive up turnout among Hindus. This gives Modi and the BJP increasing political mileage to pursue the party's majoritarian agenda at home. India's passage of the Citizens Amendment Act, which discriminates against Muslims, and state-led enforcement actions that make interfaith marriage between Hindus and Muslims dangerous are examples of changes in India's political switchboard. Similarly, under Netanyahu, Israel passed a "basic law" in July 2018 declaring it the "Nation-State of the Jewish People," leaving out any mention of the country's Arab minority and further marginalizing them. Moreover, increasing settler violence against Palestinians, ramping up of settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank, and legislative reforms that would severely curtail the power of the judiciary are all emblematic of a systemic assault on Israeli democracy have taken place under Netanyahu's watch. In sum, Modi's and Netanyahu's ideological confluence and stewardship of their democracies to serve select ethnic groups along exclusionary religious lines has undoubtedly helped draw India and Israel closer.

Suggestions:

- Maintaining a status quo in the Israel-Palestine conflict is a challenging endeavor, and India can play a constructive role by promoting a peaceful resolution based on a two-nation theory.
- India should continue its diplomatic efforts and use its international influence to encourage both Israel and Palestine to return to the negotiating table.
- India must continue to act as a mediator and provide humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people to address the immediate needs and alleviate suffering in conflict-affected areas.
- Encourage dialogues and exchanges between Israeli and Palestinian civil society groups, academics, and youth to promote mutual understanding and trust.



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Conclusion:

India and Israel's alignment has intensified on the back of their strategic imperatives and shared ideological underpinnings. Although India sent humanitarian aid to Palestine on Oct. 22 and Modi tweeted his shock at the loss of lives during the bombing of al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza, Indian foreign policy has demonstrated that it will privilege national interests over principled positions. If there was any doubt, India abstained from the U.N. General Assembly vote in late October calling for a humanitarian truce. This is unsurprising, and to expect a different approach would be risible. But what is different is India's boldness and the uncharacteristic firmness with which it has moved toward Israel; these underscore its confidence that its geopolitical context and emergence as a major player in global affairs, particularly checking China, means it is an indispensable and strategic partner. We should get used to seeing India play by its terms even if it dilutes its position and rhetoric in support of the Palestinian cause.

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