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INDIA ISRAEL STRATEGIC COOPERATION AND INDIA'S LONG-TERM INTEREST

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Abstract - India should have strategic cooperation with countries that can play a role in achieving our goals. I have tried to analyse what should India do and how should this be done while maintaining a fine balance between our relations with Israel and those with Arab Nations. India's diversity, the principles that we believe in and the need for a pragmatic approach has to be kept in mind. This study not only evaluates Indo-Israel historical and current relationship but also aims to define the broad contours of a future relationship, the challenges that are posed and how they can be overcome. India wants to realize its potential and fulfil the aspirations of its people. This study elaborates on why India-Israel strategic cooperation is important to meet this objective. Existing literature was extensively studied to get a holistic understanding. However, most of this was either from Israel's perspective or an Arab-Palestine perspective. This study attempts to analyse from India's prism, the benefits that can be achieved from a finely calibrated approach. A de-hyphenated relationship with Israel and Palestine and independent dealings are in India's best interest. Several measures have been outlined to achieve this.

Key Words: De-hyphenated relationship, Energy Security, Geo-political, National Interest, Strategic Cooperation, Supply Guarantees, Internal Security

1. INTRODUCTION

The possibility of strategic cooperation between two countries emerges when they can complement each other in moving towards their respective goals. The goals generally are to prosper, enhance the nation's security and protect & promote the collective ideology that the nation believes in.

India continues to face multiple challenges - the prominent ones which require a sound and favourable foreign policy are listed below:

- Disputes with Pakistan and China and the strategic arrangement that is in place between them.
- Terror threats from state-sponsored and non-state terror groups and our internal security.
- Access to defence equipment and related technology.
- Energy Security.
- Economic Development.

Besides leveraging international organizations like the UN, WTO etc., India also needs bilateral strategic cooperation with countries which complement us in meeting our goals.

Since the early 1950s and up to 1992, India did not have formal ties with Israel even though a covert relationship between the two countries existed and there was cooperation, especially from Israel's side. (Blarel N. 2014) Relations started improving after 1992, picked up pace in 1998 and continued well till 2014 and the trajectory is very good thereafter.

This study aims at evaluating our current relationship with Israel, the geopolitical changes that are happening in the past 5 years, especially around India and the Middle East, the US-Russia-China dynamics because of the Ukraine War & situation in the South China Sea and our own changing needs. The study aims to find out whether India-Israel strategic cooperation is in our long-term national interest and then to find the appropriate way forward.

2. OBJECTIVE

The study aims to achieve the following:

- Find out whether India-Israel strategic cooperation is in our long-term national interest.
- What are the challenges in having a strategic relationship.
- What is the way forward for India.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. A historical perspective of Israel's unique position at a global level:

Jews believe that due to the persecution that began in the 1st century CE and the large-scale migrations thereafter, their population in the Palestinian region dwindled. By the 12th century, Jews became an insignificant minority in the region. Settled all across the world, the prosperous and influential Jews had always aspired to re-establish a Jewish Nation in the Palestinian region. After the 1st World War, when the region of Palestine came under British control, prosperous Jews the world over who had sided with the British started buying land and migrating back. This migration happened from Eastern Europe because of Nazi persecution. ([UN. 2022, September](#)) By 1947 the Jewish population increased to 35%. ([Halevi, N. n.d.](#))

The Arabs, who are predominantly Muslim, had also settled in the region for more than a thousand years. They saw the growing Jewish numbers & influence as a threat, as they believed the land to be “rightfully only theirs”. ([Beauchamp, Z. 2018](#))

Israel came into being in 1948 based on the UN resolution for the creation of independent Arab and Jewish states and an internationalized Jerusalem as it is important for all three Abrahamic religions- Judaism, Christianity and Islam. ([Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. 1997](#))

While the Jews reluctantly agreed, the Arabs rejected it as they saw it as a conspiracy against them. ([Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. 1997](#)) The Arab states led by Egypt declared war on Israel in 1948 and lost. Israel took control of a lot of Arab territories. Jews' belief of having been persecuted for centuries and then losing millions of lives in the 2nd World War, had made them determined to secure Israel. They refused to give back conquered territories. As their right to defend themselves, Israel adopted a policy of:

- No tolerance towards aggression by countries and non-state players.
- Eliminating perceived threats.
- Disproportionately high response to aggression.
- Extreme measures against internal revolt.

They also opened the doors for migration for Jews settled anywhere in the world.

Decisive Israeli victory in the “six-day-war” of 1967 resulted in the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip which had a predominantly Arab Muslim population. Israel has imposed security restrictions on Palestinian movement and activities in these areas. ([Hinnebusch, R. 2017](#))

The policy adopted by Israel may be right from their perspective, but the consequences of their actions have not been fair to Arab Muslim inhabitants of Palestine. Israel's action is like a corrective action and a punishment being given to people today for perceived historical wrongdoing that happened over a thousand-year period.

3.2. India's Position From 1947 to 1992:

India did not vote in favour of the UN Partition Plan for Mandatory Palestine. India did recognize Israel in 1950 but did not establish diplomatic relations till 1992. ([What is India's stand on Israel and Palestine? \(2017.\)](#)) The Indian policy of supporting the Palestinian Arabs, Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and not Israel, continued due to the following reasons:

- **Significant Muslim population.** India supporting the creation of Israel by partitioning Palestine, would not have gone well with Indian Muslims who had chosen to stay in a secular India after partition. ([Mosaic. 2017](#))
- **India is against the principle of correcting perceived historical wrong:** Punishing, acting against or reducing the rights of people based on the belief that their ancestors had done something wrong, was against our principles.
- **Principle of not supporting aggression and occupation:** Israel, in our view, was an aggressor occupying the land which was to be under the control of Palestinian Arabs as per the UN agreement.
- **Support on Kashmir:** Need for support from the Arab world and other Muslim-majority countries.
- **Need for Russia's support:** We needed Russian support on defence and in the UN. We did not want to be seen supporting Israel which was the closest ally of the US.

- **Non-Aligned Movement (NAM):** In 1961, Prime Minister Nehru, Yugoslav President Tito, Egyptian President Nasser and Indonesia's first President, Sukarno established NAM. ([What is the Non-Aligned Movement \(NAM\)? 2020](#)) Many Arab Countries were a part of NAM.
- **Close ties with Egypt:** Israel, in 1956 and 1967, attacked Egypt to get the blockade put by Egypt for Israeli ships to use the Suez Canal removed. We considered this as an act of aggression on a friendly nation and hence supported Egypt. ([Kumaraswamy P.R. 1998](#))
- **Support for secularism:** Israel, though multi-ethnic, was moving towards becoming a Jewish state.
- **Energy Security:** Dependence on the Middle East for our energy needs.

3.3. Facts not give due weightage in Policymaking

Formal policy formulation from the 1950s to the 1980s should have considered the following:

- **Israel's Support:**
 - Supply of arms and ammunition in the wake of the 1962 Chinese aggression when we badly needed them. ([Kumaraswamy P.R. 1998](#))
 - Intelligence input from Mossad to RAW, specifically on anything anti-India since 1968. ([Daily Defence. 2021](#))
 - Arms supply in the 1971 war. ([PTI. 2013](#))
 - Training our defence personnel in counter-terrorism operations. ([PTI. 2019.](#))
 - Implementing security systems for the security of our Prime Ministers. ([Kumaraswamy P.R. 1998](#))
- **Position taken by Arab nations:**
 - Syria, Iraq and Egypt did not take a clear pro-India stand in the 1962 Chinese aggression.
 - Jordan supported Pakistan in the 1965 war. Saudi Arabia demanded collective Arab condemnation of the Indian position at the September 1965 Casablanca Conference.
 - All Arab states took a pro-Pakistan stand in the 1971 war against Pakistan.
- **Egypt's change in strategy:** Egypt established full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1980. ([The Facts App. n.d.](#))
- **Losing Support from Britain and France on Kashmir:** Our pro-Arab stand in 1956 on the Suez issue antagonised both Britain & France and they shifted from their earlier neutral stand on Kashmir to a pro-Pakistan stand.

3.4. India's policy shift since the early 1990s:

India redefined its approach towards the West and especially towards Israel due to the changing geopolitical landscape and our own security and economic needs. Full diplomatic relations were established with Israel due to the following reasons:

- **End of Cold War:** In a unipolar world, being perceived against the only superpower, the US, was not in India's interest.
- **Opening up of the Indian economy:** It was logical to have better ties with all open economies including the US and Israel.
- **Need to improve India-US relations:** Israel, through the US-based Jews, has a lot of influence on the US establishment and on both Republicans and Democrats.

3.4.1. Improvement between 1992 and 1998:

The relationship improved from just recognition to having significant trade & business agreements and also the 1st defence deal.

3.4.2. Accelerated Pace after 1998:

This was due to the following reasons:

- **BJP-led coalition coming to power:** BJP had a different approach to secularism, foreign relations and way of dealing with countries which are not aligned with India's interests.
- **Support during the 1999 Kargil war:** Israel's prompt supply of weapons played a very significant role in winning the war. ([Madan, T. 2019](#))
- **Significant rise in fundamentalism and terrorism in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan:** The biggest threat was to India and Israel and both now had a direct common enemy. The same groups were a threat to the US and the West and hence the circumstances were right for a partnership.

During the Congress-led government from 2004 to 2014, the relationship with Israel continued to grow and by the end of 2014, Israel's imports from and exports to India reached around 2.3 to 2.4 billion dollars annually. ([Naha, Alik. 2020](#)).

3.4.3. Trajectory of India-Israel relations post-2014:

India got a majority BJP-led government in 2014 after a period of 30 years. BJP's approach and response to the geo-political situation being more similar to that of Israel and the excellent personal equation between PMs Modi and Netanyahu, paved the way for this fast trajectory. India began to deal with Israel and Palestine taking into account India's geo-political, security and economic concerns. PM Modi's visit to Israel was the first by any Indian PM. Trade with Israel has increased to 4.14 billion dollars in 2021 with the balance of trade being in India's favour. ([India- Israel Bilateral Relations. n.d.](#)) India is the largest buyer of military equipment from Israel. Israel is the second-largest defence supplier to India, after Russia. ([Essa, A. \(2022\)](#))

The position of the Arab World on Israel has changed significantly as they have now started to understand Israel's position and have also realised that the threat from terrorism and non-state players is affecting them too. The Abraham Accords in 2020 have facilitated diplomatic relations between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco and they have joined Egypt and Jordan in making peace with Israel. ([Karam, J., & Alrawi, M. 2021](#)) It is also rumoured that other Arab and Muslim states such as Oman, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia are considering the normalization of relations with Israel. ([Krasna, J. 2021](#))

4. FACTORS INDICATING THE IMPORTANCE OF STRATEGIC COOPERATION

Analysis of the below-mentioned factors indicates that strategic cooperation is very important for India:

The geopolitical situation on our borders: Pakistan, an aggressive China, a historically anti-India Taliban ruling Afghanistan, forced infiltration of terrorists in Kashmir and radical terror groups trying to get a foothold in Bangladesh, makes it necessary for us to have a strategic and reliable partner for supply & support of top edge defence equipment & technology and for gathering & sharing intelligence. Israel, for the past 60 years, has proven to be one of them.

Common Threats: Views of terror groups on India and Israel are the same.

Israel's position on Kashmir: Israel has formally taken a position in India's support on the issue of Kashmir. ([Parashar, S. 2017](#)) Israel provides specific intelligence inputs on Kashmir whenever they come across any and this is very often.

Need of the US to have a better and more favourable policy towards India: Jewish lobby in the US is capable of positively influencing US lawmakers to take foreign policy decisions in India's favour. The US is still the most powerful nation. China is becoming stronger and more aggressive. Russia is weakening and also cooperating with China as seen in the Ukraine crisis.

India's economic development: We are still a developing country and the majority of our population is poor. Israel with its expertise in agriculture, water management, renewable energy, cyber security, genome technology etc. can be of great help. ([Naha, Alik. 2020](#))

Indian people's perception of Israel: More than 58% of Indians favour a good relationship with Israel. Israeli citizens have always favoured good relations with India. ([Sen, S. 2020](#)) With public support, the decision to have a strategic partnership is much easier for democratic governments.

Supporting Democracy: India and Israel, both have democratic forms of government and both follow the rule of law as per the constitution.

Mutual Benefits: India is a huge market for the Israeli industry. The relationship will be hugely beneficial for Israel as well.

Russia's growing proximity to China on account of the Ukraine War: There are growing differences between China and US. US position on Taiwan is the main reason. China has improved their relationship with Russia becoming their major oil supplier. It is an opportunity for China to get cheap oil from Russia and also to counter the US. Historically, Russia has sided with India vis-à-vis China. Now the situation has become different. Relationships with Israel can be helpful to balance this.

Reliability of supply of Russian arms: Russia needs more arms for their own use. A lot of raw materials and components required for manufacturing arms are sourced by Russia from outside. Sanctions have created major challenges in sourcing. They may not be able to meet their arm's sales commitments to India. Israel may prove to be a reliable supplier.

5. CHALLENGES

While strategic cooperation is very important for India, the challenges are also many. The important ones are listed below

India being seen supporting an aggressor and occupier: Many countries, especially Pakistan and Turkey, try to project India as the aggressor and occupier of Kashmir, similar to Israel being an aggressor and occupier of Palestinian land. ([Ghosh, A. 2021](#)) India's policy right from independence till a few years back was to unequivocally support oppressed people's right to self-determination. Change of this policy to a balanced approach, with India's own needs being of prime importance, is not easy.

The projected similarity between Kashmiri Muslims and Palestine Arabs: Some countries create a narrative of Hindu Majority India trying to suppress Kashmiri Muslims in their own land similar to Israeli Jews trying to suppress Arab Muslims in their own land. ([Essa, A. 2022](#)) A strategic partnership with Israel can make it easy for such countries to create mistrust among Hindus and Muslims in India.

Need for deviating from our policy and principles: India being secular, having a policy of non-aggression and not supporting any aggression on & occupation of other countries, is different from Israel's policy. As of now, we are able to take a stand which can be

against Israel at times. India voted against Israel making Jerusalem its capital. With a strategic partnership, this type of stand will be difficult.

Increased dependence on a country which has a very high possibility of facing a war: India is and will become more dependent on Israel's defence technology. Any war on Israel and the damage that may happen to Israel will affect our defence supplies.

US sanctions against Russia have to be followed by their allies: The US has applied sanctions on Russia due to the ongoing Ukraine crisis. If there is a ban on the sale of weapons to any country that continues to deal with Russia, then even Israel will have to stop the supply of weapons to India.

India-Arab relations: The relationship is deep and historical. There is a large Indian diaspora in the Middle East. Most of our energy needs are met by oil imports from the Arab countries. ([Ahmad, T. 2021](#)) Having a good relationship with Israel may affect all of these.

India-Iran relationship and support for Palestine Arabs: Iran does not recognize the legitimacy of Israel as a state and has hostile relations with Israel. The two prominent non-state groups supporting the Palestine Arabs i.e., Hamas and Hezbollah have the stated position that "Israel does not have a right to exist". ([TOI Staff. 2021](#)) Hezbollah has support from Iran. Iran will see India's partnership with Israel as against their supported cause.

6. THE WAY FORWARD

Strategic cooperation between India and Israel is extremely important for India. While the challenges are real, they are not insurmountable. India can do the following:

De-hyphenated relationship: Independently deal with both Israel and Palestine. ([Barthwal, N. 2021](#)) While increasing the defence cooperation and trade with Israel which is in our own interest, we should continue to support the Palestinians in humanitarian areas. We should avoid openly taking sides, especially in the UN for or against Israel.

Taking supply guarantees: Agreements, especially in the area of defence and technology, should have clauses that assure supplies under all circumstances including sanctions that are brought in on account of matters not directly related to India or Israel.

Transfer of technology and joint local manufacturing: There should be a mandatory clause on this with a defined timeframe.

Cultivating the Jewish lobby in the US: The increased cooperation and trade with Israel should ensure that the Jewish lobby works with the US lawmakers in favour of India's interests.

Continue to deepen the engagement with other important countries in the region: For every step that we take to improve the strategic relationship with Israel, we should consciously take a parallel improvement step with countries like Saudi Arabia and UAE. We should also ensure that business relations with Iran continue.

7. CONCLUSION

India should continue to enhance this strategic cooperation as the benefits outweigh the challenges. India should reap the maximum benefit of the geopolitical realignments gradually being brought in by the Abraham Accords. The establishment of relations between Arab nations with Israel makes India's balancing position of supporting Palestinians and also having a strategic relationship with Israel much easier. Islamic countries recognizing Israel can make the Indian Muslims convinced that having a relationship with Israel is not a move against Palestinians or Muslims.

India and Israel's strategic cooperation can help both countries to work productively on global issues like climate change, water scarcity, pollution and food scarcity.

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