



NETANYAHU'S INDIA VISIT: COMING OUT OF THE CLOSET

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January 25, 2018

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Calling his trip to India as "very emotional and deeply satisfying"¹, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu tweeted as he bid his week-long trip to India adieu.

What began as a budding relationship between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has now flourished into a full-blown friendship. On January 14, 2018 Prime Minister Netanyahu arrived in Delhi for a six-day visit, accompanied by a 130-member business delegation, representing 102 companies - the largest business delegation that has ever accompanied an Israeli premier on an overseas tour. This was the first prime ministerial visit from Israel to India in 15 years after that of Ariel Sharon in 2003. Last year, Modi made history when he became the first Indian leader to visit Israel in July.

Netanyahu's visit marks 25 years since India and Israel established diplomatic relations in 1992, and even though it comes just weeks after India voted in favor of a UN resolution disapproving President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, that did not hinder the 'bromance'. Replying to a question on this topic, Netanyahu stated, "Naturally I am disappointed but I think this visit is a testament to the fact that our relationship is moving forward on so many fronts."² However,

¹ Times Now, "Calling his trip to India as "very emotional and deeply satisfying", the Israeli Prime Minister @netanyahu complemented the relations between the two nations. #NetanyahuUpfront @IsraelinIndia <https://t.co/xsXh670FKi>," *Twitter*, January 18, 2018.

² The Independent, "Netanyahu disappointed by ally Modi's Jerusalem rejection," *The Independent Uganda*, January 15, 2018.

this did not stop protests from sparking across the country because the protestors believed that the visit "gave legitimacy to the occupation of Palestine by Israel."³

Indian authorities pulled out the stops during Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit. The tour started with Modi embracing Netanyahu on the tarmac - a move described by the Indian foreign ministry as a "departure from protocol"⁴- before the pair set off to pay tribute at a war memorial in the Indian capital. The two leaders also reviewed more avenues for cooperation in technology, water and agriculture. The Netanyahu accompanied by his wife also made an emotional visit to a Jewish center which was targeted in the 2008 Mumbai attacks, stopped at the Taj Mahal and called on Modi's home state of Gujarat. In the last leg of his journey, Netanyahu wooed Bollywood luminaries in Mumbai at "Shalom Bollywood", a high-profile outreach programme by the Israeli government to improve its image abroad.

However, beyond the public relations smokescreen and the monotonous rhetoric of shared history, affability and the necessary public displays of affection, there were practical realities that drove the two countries to sign various agreements.

The most important of all would be in what is considered to be a major strategic achievement, is India's purchase of Israel's Spike anti-tank guided missiles, weeks after New Delhi cancelled the \$500 million defense deal.⁵ Arms deals are a foreign policy treasure-trove, and this particular move is a win-win for both countries because while India is a huge money-spinning market for Israel - currently, Israel is the fourth largest supplier of arms to India after the US, Russia and France⁶- a report by India's Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defense suggests that most of India's weapons are either 'obsolete or obsolescent'.⁷ Given this, New Delhi is in desperate need to upgrade its weapon systems.

The relationship between Delhi and Tel Aviv is going way beyond coming out of the closet. The attention has shifted to encompass economics as well. Netanyahu and Modi signed a number of bilateral agreements in the fields of energy, cinema, aviation and other mutual investments. The two governments also agreed to cooperate in the field of cyber security by sharing technological

³ Vijay Prashad, "Netanyahu in India: What was swept under the carpet," *Narendra Modi | Al Jazeera*, January 20, 2018.

⁴ Al Jazeera, "Defence, trade and Bollywood: Netanyahu visits India," *India News / Al Jazeera*, January 14, 2018.

⁵ "Scrapped \$500 mn Israeli missile deal back on track: PM Benjamin Netanyahu," *The Economic Times*, January 17, 2018.

⁶ Prमित Pal Chaudhury, "Israel likely to become India's largest arms supplier," *Hindustan Times*, July 05, 2017.

⁷ Gurmeet Kanwal, "'Critical Hollowness' in India's Defence Preparedness," *The Wire*, August 14, 2017.

advancements and executing joint training programs. The two leaders also attended a forum of managing directors of major Israeli and Indian companies and went on to attend an economic event, along with hundreds of Israeli and Indian business people, at which the prime ministers launched an Israel-India Industrial research and development fund, called I4F.

Designed to promote technological collaboration between the two countries, the fund will invest \$40 million over a period of five years and finance up to 50% of the research and development expenses of both Israeli and Indian technology projects and startups.⁸ During the week, the two leaders also visited the iCreate Centre for Entrepreneurship and Technology where 36 startups, 18 from each country, were chosen to participate in a unique "Bridge to Innovation" plan, the goal of which is to find joint responses to global water, agriculture and health challenges.⁹

The list of MoUs signed by both sides are as follows:

S.No.	MoU / Agreement / Lol
1	MoU on Cyber Security Cooperation between India and Israel
2	MoU between the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas and the Ministry of Energy on Cooperation in Oil and Gas Sector
3	Protocol between India and Israel on Amendments to the Air Transport Agreement
4	Agreement on Film-co-production between India and Israel
5	MoU between the Central Council for Research in Homeopathy, Ministry of AYUSH and the Centre for Integrative Complementary Medicine, Shaare Zedek Medical Center on Cooperation in the field of Research in Homeopathic Medicine
6	MoU between Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology (IIST) and the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology for cooperation in the field of space
7	Memorandum of Intent between Invest India and Invest in Israel
8	Letter of Intent between IOCL and Phinergy Ltd. For cooperation in the area of metal-air batteries
9	Letter of Intent between IOCL and Yeda Research and Development Co Ltd for cooperation in the area of concentrated solar thermal technologies

Source: "MEA Statements : Bilateral/Multilateral Documents," *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.*

⁸ Suhasini Haidar, "India, Israel to set up \$40 mn research fund," *The Hindu*, July 05, 2017.

⁹ FE Online, "Narendra Modi, Benjamin Netanyahu in Gujarat: Israel has brought revolution in agriculture with the help of technology , says PM," *The Financial Express*, January 17, 2018.

The intent behind the MoUs was eclipsed in Mr. Netanyahu statement at the Raisina Dialogue, when he said : “The weak don’t survive. The strong survive. You make peace with the strong. You ally with the strong.”¹⁰

Meanwhile, while addressing the 13th session of the Parliamentary Union of Islamic Countries (PUIC) in Tehran, Pakistan's Senate Chairman Raza Rabbani sounded a warning when he said an emerging nexus between the US, Israel and India is a major threat to the Muslim world and that the Muslim Ummah need to be unified in the face of this danger.¹¹ As if he were adding weight to Mr Rabbani’s advice, Netanyahu has also backed Indian double-speak over the situation on the Line of Control (LoC) along the border with Pakistan, saying, “Pakistan should not behave like an enemy towards us (Israel) because we do not view them that way.”¹²

It is an open secret however, that the Israeli factor in Pakistan-India relations only worsens the most devastating aspect of the rivalry between the two countries - an accelerated arms race. Which is essentially a threat to the entire region’s peace and stability.

All things aside, what this visit did was to showcase economic diplomacy at its best, and was in essence part of Israel's Asia strategy which circles around expanding economic engagement and tapping into the huge Asian market for Israeli technologies. It also shows that Netanyahu and Modi both understand that bilateral ties cemented in firm economic ties are both sustainable and beneficial.

Netanyahu calls India-Israel relations a 'marriage made in heaven'¹³ but it remains to be seen if India can play best friends to Israel and Iran at the same time? The construction of a smelter in Iran by India’s National Aluminum Co. and investment in an Iran-Afghanistan rail line by India’s state-run engineering company IRCON are evidence of friendly ties between Tehran and Delhi. Moreover, after having hosted Netanyahu, Modi will land in Ramallah on February 10 for what will be the first-ever visit by an Indian prime minister to Palestine. Delhi believes the visit will help dispel the notion that there has been any change in India's Palestine policy. This is of course a demonstration of India’s policy of multi-alignments ... and of Modi’s shrewdness. Whether this strategy can hold out remains to be seen.

¹⁰ "Benjamin Netanyahu at Raisina Dialogue 2018: Israeli PM sounds 2019 bugle for Narendra Modi, goes turbo-realist," *Firstpost*, January 16, 2018.

¹¹ "US, Israel, India nexus major 'threat' to Muslim world: Pakistan Senate Chairman," *The Economic Times*, January 18, 2018.

¹² "Israel not enemy of Pakistan: Netanyahu," *The News*, January 18, 2018.

¹³ Jyoti Malhotra, "Beyond The News: How India-Israel 'marriage made in heaven' is shaped by geopolitics," *The Indian Express*, January 16, 2018.