How Identity Issues Keep India and Israel Apart

And Why Modi's Visit May Not Signal a Transformation in Ties

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at Ben Gurion International Airport, near Tel Aviv, Israel, July 2017.

When Narendra Modi visited Israel last week, he became the first Indian prime minister to set foot on Israeli soil. Modi's visit and the ecstatic reception he received in Israel reflected a little-discussed fact: the relationship between India and Israel is among the world's most unusual major-country

partnerships.

India recognized the newly established state of Israel in 1950. But for the next four decades, despite Israel's many overtures, Delhi refused to establish formal diplomatic relations with the country. After the two governments established formal ties in 1992, their bilateral trade and military ties took off: by 2016, annual trade between the two countries had risen from $200 million in 1992 to $4 billion, and Israel had become India's second-largest defense partner. Yet those changes did not translate into a close, friendly partnership. India often opposed Israel in the United Nations, and it avoided referring to Israel as a strategic partner—a term that is often used to publicly signal the deepening of ties. Only one Israeli prime minister has officially visited India: Ariel Sharon, whose 2003 tour became a public-relations disaster after large crowds protested his visit and an Indian opposition politician described the Israeli official as "the leader of one of the most racist, colonial regimes in existence today."

What explains Delhi's reluctance to embrace a country that, like India, is a democracy, has struggled with terrorism, and faces hostility from Muslim-majority states? The answer can be traced to identity issues, which along with material and strategic interests have helped shape the relationship between the two states. India's and Israel's historic perceptions of colonial ideology and religious nationalism are at the root of their longstanding divergence. Despite Modi's visit and his reputation as an anti-Muslim Hindu nationalist, these differences explain why an immediate transformation in bilateral ties is probably not forthcoming.

IDENTITY POLITICS

The experience of British colonial domination, the misery of Partition, and the creation of Pakistan in 1947 engendered in

many Indian leaders a strong opposition to colonialism, an aversion to religious nationalism, and a desire to showcase their country's credentials as a secular, anticolonial force. That helps explain why India's post-independence leaders tended to frame Jewish nationalism negatively. Although Indian officials were sympathetic to the "terrible trials" of the Jews, as Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, wrote in a letter to Albert Einstein, they also saw Zionism as a colonial, religiously nationalist project, and they vocally opposed Israel's policies toward the Palestinians. Nehru even called Zionism the "child of British imperialism." Delhi had immense sympathy for the Palestinians: their territorial losses in the aftermath of the collapse of British colonialism, it seemed, had something in common with India's own experience.

In the 1960s, as the leader of the non-aligned movement, India helped move that group to officially embrace the Palestinian cause. Delhi's position did not change even after Arab states provided political and military support to Pakistan, and even though Israel gave India some military support in its wars in 1962, 1965, and 1971. India saw Israeli's identity as the opposite of its own: that is, Israel was both colonial and religiously nationalist.

Pawel Kopczynski / REUTERS
Indians protesting the visit of Israeli leader Ariel Sharon, Delhi, September 2003.

Israel, on the other hand, was eager to establish a relationship with India, and its perception of its own and India's identities could not have been more different from New Delhi's. For starters, Israeli officials tended to pay little attention to India's ideological positions or anti-colonial commitments. (As one former senior Israeli official told us, "Unlike in Europe, in Israel's relations with African or Asian states, the normative, ideological, or historical context is a non-issue.") What's more, Israeli officials did not view their own country as India saw it: they rejected the idea that Zionism and colonialism were related.

India established diplomatic relations with Israel after the Cold War ended, in part because it sought Israeli weapons and lacked support from Arab states. But even then, identity issues played a role. One retired high-level Israeli official with experience in India reflected that, in hindsight, the fact that Israeli-Palestinian relations were on a relatively positive track in the early 1990s suggested to the Indian government that what it viewed as Israeli colonialism could have lost some of its edge.

A RELATIONSHIP OF CONVENIENCE?

Over the years that followed, Israel continued to misunderstand the importance of identity concerns to India. Since Israel does not view itself as a colonial power and forcefully rejects the connection between Zionism and colonialism, Israeli officials often saw India's ideological legacy as irrelevant to the bilateral relationship. Israeli policy analysts focused solely on material interests (mostly defense-related), bringing the two states into a pragmatic relationship. At times, this resulted in insensitive representations of bilateral ties. (In one tone-deaf [marketing music video](#) released in 2009, RAFAEL, one of Israel's largest defense manufacturers, portrayed Israel as India's protector.)

This helps explain why, for years, the relationship failed to reach its full potential. In 2012, for example, India refused Israel's request to allow Israeli Defense Minister [Ehud Barak](#) to attend an Israeli-sponsored defense exposition in New Delhi. India has consistently opposed Israel in the UN General Assembly: between 1992 and 2012, out of 266 relevant resolutions in the world body, India voted in favor of Israel only once.

As for economic ties, few Indian firms have invested in Israel. Indian officials with experience in Israel say that this is partly due to the small size of Israel's market. But they also point out that Indian industrial groups tend to avoid investing in the country due to the potential political costs of "the complications of the [Israeli-Palestinian] conflict." Despite eight years of discussion, and even after Modi's visit, the two countries have made little progress in negotiating a free trade agreement.

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Identities, like material interests, are not fixed. Modi's visit may signal the emergence of mutually compatible world views among Israeli and Indian officials. Hindu nationalism and hostility toward Muslims are important parts of the prime minister's politics.

But identity-related interests tend to be stickier than material ones: they take time to shift. Despite the historic nature of Modi's visit, it's important not to overestimate its near-term significance. India still enjoys a warm relationship with Iran—Israel's greatest rival. Netanyahu, who frequently raises the issue of Iran on the international stage, was more circumspect with Modi. What's more, the joint statement released by India and Israel after Modi's visit focused mostly on civilian cooperation in such areas as water management and agriculture. The statement did not include a commitment to mutual cooperation on terrorism, even though it affirmed the importance of countering terrorist threats. There was little explicit discussion of regional strategic issues, particularly in Israel's neighborhood. This was likely a reflection of Indian officials' sensitivity to their country's image in the wider Middle East: the region is India's main source of imported oil and natural gas and hosts some 7.3 million people of Indian descent. Even Modi's visit, which was originally planned for 2014, had to be delayed because of its sensitivity. And to balance out the visit to Israel, the Indian government hosted the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in May; in a statement at the time, the Ministry of External Affairs reiterated India's "political support to the Palestinian cause."

If India and Israel grow closer, it could raise the once unthinkable possibility of trilateral cooperation among India, Israel, and the United States, and it could position India—which would no longer be seen as unquestionably pro-Palestine—as an honest broker in the Middle East peace process. But if the two countries are ever to become true

strategic partners, such sensitive identity issues will need to fade. Otherwise, the new beginning in bilateral ties that Modi's visit seemed to herald, like the new beginning that was hailed in 1992, will produce little more than a convenient defense relationship.

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