

Understanding India's Neutrality in the Israel Palestine Issue

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Abstract: India's presence in the Middle East region has been continuously evolving over the last few decades. An indicator of its ambitions and positions can be gleaned from its foreign policy stances in the Israel – Palestine conflict. Long considered a significant aspect of both Arab politics and India's Middle East policy, Palestine's importance is gradually receding. Given Israel's growing clout as an arms supplier to many countries including India, the Arab world's gradual acceptance of Israel and an Indian government aligned with Israel's right-wing world view, India's seeming neutrality in the recent Israel – Palestine clashes deserves an examination.

This brief thus, explains the dynamics underpinning India's positions in the conflict arguing that subtle shifts in India's alignments have been constantly taking place with the May 2021 incidents comprising one such recalibration point. It also situates this shift within India's otherwise preferred position of neutrality in the Middle East while reasoning out its future trajectory.

Keywords: India, Israel Palestine, Neutrality, United Nations, Hamas

Introduction

Recent international news cycles have been flooded with horrifying images and videos of Israeli forces launching several illegal operations to evict Palestinians from the Sheikh Jarrah District in a bid to expand its annexation of Palestinian lands and opening aggressions in the Masjid al Aqsa, considered a holy site by Muslims, Jews and Christians. In response, the non-state militant actor Hamas launched close to 2,000 rockets into Israeli territory. The ensuing tensions and conflict resulted in the death of close to 250 Palestinians and about 20 Israelis.¹

Against this backdrop, global condemnation and contrasting support has been abundantly expressed against both sides. Many countries such as the United States and other European nations as well as different celebrities have supported the Israeli right to self-defence and criticized Hamas as a terrorist organization, whereas many other individuals and nations across the world have offered their support for Palestine and criticized Israel's disproportionate response and arrests of Palestinians.²

India's stance in this tension has been curiously neutral. In an address to the United Nations Security Council, the Indian ambassador TS Tirumurthy condemned both the rocket attacks coming from Gaza (perpetrated by Hamas) as well as the Israeli aggressions in Palestine. More specifically, in the United Nations Security Council, it pointedly noted that the hostilities were started by the Israelis with the assault on worshippers in the Masjid al Aqsa complex during the last days of Ramadan.³

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This piece offers a brief explanation of the Indian stance on the Israeli Palestinian issue. Centrally it tries to answer the question of why India has adopted a seemingly neutral position on this issue, despite a growing congeniality between it and Israel. It does so by sketching out India's relations with both Israel and Palestine since India's independence, marking various phases and shifts in these relations. It then provides all the factors that could have given India some comfort in taking a more pro-Israeli stance and finally explains the reasons for this neutrality linking it to India's strategy of balancing act across the Middle East's conflicts.

The Changing Shifts in India's foreign policy towards Israel and Palestine.

India's relations with both Palestine and Israel have evolved since its independence. For a major part of India's post-independence history, it has supported the Palestinian cause and denounced Israeli moves against Palestine.⁴ While some observers would often wonder why a majority Hindu nation would support a cause championed by Muslim nations across the world, the reasons were often a combination of idealism and realpolitik.

Firstly, India's foreign policy moves have largely been guided by its first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who was intensely anti-colonialist. Nehru viewed the Israeli presence in Palestine as a colonially-imposed presence facilitated by the British and the Americans, thus supporting the Palestinian cause for ideological reasons.⁵ Secondly, India also viewed the Palestinian cause as a central issue for Arab nations with whom it wanted to garner good relations.⁶ This was inspired by both a desire to counter Pakistani alliances with Arab nations and to continue to procure essential materials such as oil from Arab nations.⁷

Thirdly, India also wanted to prevent foreign condemnation of its own control of Kashmir which has been contested by Pakistan. By supporting the Palestinian cause, it also hoped that on some level it would create enough goodwill to be protected from such criticisms.⁸ Fourthly, the Congress party which presided over most of India's history till the year 2014 saw its support of the Palestinian cause as a means to consolidate votes from the close to 200 million Muslims in the nation.⁹ Lastly, after 1972, when India signed the friendship treaty with the Soviet Union, it came to be seen as largely pro-USSR and anti-America (which was Israel's strongest ally at the point) in the Cold War.¹⁰

Indeed, in a few decades, India became Israel's largest buyer of weapon and Israel became India's second largest supplier of military equipment after Russia

As a result of this, Indo-Palestine relations were warm often offering symbolic gestures such as the release of a stamp in solidarity with the Palestinian people in 1981. In addition, India was the first non-Arab nation that recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization as the sole authority in Palestine allowing them to open their first office in India in the year 1975.¹¹ In response, the Palestinians often offered support to the Indians in every way they could and even chose to stay silent on the Kashmir issue, despite Kashmiris often supporting the Palestinian cause.¹²

Much of this warmth, however, began to peter out towards the 90's when India's foreign policy directions underwent some significant shifts. It was in 1992 that India grew closer to Israel leading to the opening of an Israeli embassy in New Delhi.¹³ Relations between the two nations gradually improved to a point where current Prime Minister Modi even visited the nation in 2018 (though he also visited Palestine during the same visit).

There were several factors for this slow shift from a pro-Palestinian to a more neutral stance. First, India began to slowly unmoor itself from its ideological foreign policy stances. Interestingly, this wasn't new to India. Recent documents have revealed how even the idealist Nehru sought help in the form of military equipment from Israel in the 1962 war against China despite not officially recognizing it.¹⁴ His reticence to prevent disenfranchising the Western world also guided his decision to recognize Israel as a country in 1950. As such, for the last few decades, India recognized the need to engage with Israel which is now one of the strongest military powers and political powers in the Middle East. Second, this was also due to India's requirement for military equipment which it often purchased from Israel.¹⁵ Indeed, in a few decades, India became Israel's largest buyer of weapon and Israel became India's second largest supplier of military equipment after Russia.¹⁶ Third, the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 led India to shift directions towards America (with some reservations) and its allies of Israel and the Gulf nations, among others.¹⁷

Whither Indian Support for Israel Currently

It is due to the two nations' burgeoning ties that the Indian ambassador's words reasserting Indian support for the Palestinian cause was surprising. Apart from India being a major defence partner with Israel, there are many other reasons why the changed political atmosphere should have brought about a significant shift in Indian policy and rhetoric.

India's growing economic potential and desire to establish itself as a regional power lends it a credibility and strength that makes it an important partner for most countries even in the Muslim world

First and foremost, India's trade relations with Israel, at five billion dollars, were almost 100 times larger compared to 51 million dollars with Palestine as of 2018/2019.¹⁸ Indeed, that figure is so insignificant that even countries like Libya and Algeria which have far lesser ideological and geostrategic relevance for India trade with it in the billions.¹⁹ As such, India did not have to fear losing out revenue if it did support Israel. Second, Palestine is also no longer the Middle East's central focus with support for the Palestinian cause dwindling significantly over the years.²⁰ Third and related to the previous point is the fact that India's strongest allies in the Middle East (apart from Israel), the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, have overtly and covertly normalized relations with Israel as seen in the Abraham accords of 2020.²¹ As such, India would not have to fear blowback from these nations if it were to support Israel.

Fourth, India's growing economic potential and desire to establish itself as a regional power lends it a credibility and strength that makes it an important partner for most countries even in the Muslim world. Such strength is why India was not faced with much censure from the UAE – Saudi Arabia dominated Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) when it revoked statehood for Kashmir and imposed a nearly year-long internet ban on the region.²² This is in stark contrast to the OIC's previous routine criticisms of India's actions in Kashmir, even expelling the nation from the body in 1969 after it had become an honorary member.²³

Last and significantly, both India's BJP and Israel's Likud party have strongly tilted right with major anti-Muslim biases being exhibited.²⁴ In India, this meant neglect of traditionally symbolic Muslim issues (under which bracket Palestine belongs) as well as visible support online for Israel from Indian netizens and from BJP lawmakers reflecting the desire to satisfy their constituencies.²⁵ Therefore, keeping these factors in mind, it was surprising to some that India did not wholeheartedly or visibly support Israel.

Indian Neutrality – Sticking to its Grand Strategy.

Charting India's experience and moves in the Middle East - a region roiled by intermittent conflicts, protests, and tensions between different nations – makes its tightrope act easier to decipher. Since it began operating as an independent nation, India has tried to follow a largely neutral line when it came to foreign conflicts (except of course in the case of Israel). Major reasons to follow this trajectory was to ensure that it avoided severe repercussions for taking sides in tense issues. Thus, apart from Israel and Palestine, it has also managed its relations with other rivals as well including Iran and Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran and Qatar and the four Gulf nations that placed an embargo on it.²⁶

As of the last few decades, since it has also tried to position itself as a security provider in the Middle East, especially in the backdrop of a withdrawing United States, it has worked hard to maintain its multi-alignment strategy and sustain good relations with various Middle Eastern nations.²⁷ A proof of this was India obtaining concessions to continue trade with Iran when previous president Donald Trump overturned the Iran deal and imposed sanctions on it.²⁸ Similarly, India did not take sides in the Intra-GCC conflict which saw Qatar ostracized by other members of the Gulf Co-operation Council.²⁹ Thus, it makes sense then that although India is a close ally of Israel, it chose to “de-hyphenate” its relations with Israel and Palestine as Indian analysts call it, that is, to critique both nations independently rather than treat them as one hyphenated entity (Israel-Palestine). The Israeli side also seemed to have picked up on this, which would explain why it did not include India's name in a list of nations it thanked for supporting it against Hamas.³⁰

However, one should not be quick to assume that this is a definitive exhibition of Indo – Palestinian support. As some Indian analysts have pointed out, India's seeming criticism of Israel is also packed with support for it and new aspects that demonstrate a shift in its position. Indeed, this was made much sharper in India's UN General Assembly Address a few days after its speech at the UNSC.³¹ In the UNGA, it affirmed the right to retaliation and addressed the Masjid al Aqsa as the Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount, a reference to it perceiving the holy structure as not owned by Muslims alone. These semantics were new and not previously seen in India's

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speeches.³² As such, it is possible that while subtle, there is a shift towards an Israeli narrative by India. In fact, it seemed like this may have been tacitly approved by Israel which continued to sell weapons crucial to India even after its address in the UNSC.³³ This is in addition to India announcing its intentions to buy anti-drone systems after an incident of twin drones setting off bombs in Jammu and Kashmir.³⁴

Moreover, it is also most likely that given the region's power dynamics skewing towards Israel, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt, all allied with each other at different levels, India may just continue to keep tilting towards an Israeli narrative in the future. This comes not just from the dynamics in the region, but from India's grand strategy to become a powerful actor in the region.

Conclusion

The current situation in Israel and Palestine gives analysts a chance to infer the foreign policy maneuvers that different nations engage in to deal with the situation. India's stance towards both nations has shifted ever so slightly as was seen in its subtle policy statements in the United Nations. Observers should realize that despite a seemingly neutral stance, India has tilted towards the Israeli narratives just slightly more than in the past. This is a change from its traditional position, which reflects India's adaptation to Middle East's changing dynamics and its own defense and economic needs.

In the future, India's growing ambitions to become a superpower (notwithstanding its abysmal domestic situation due to the pandemic) will require it to take sides. At that point, if the rest of the Muslim world is not supportive of Palestine (beyond rhetorical statements), it will not be surprising to see India completely shed its support for the embittered nation. Given the new Naftali Bennet coalition government's continuation of expansionist policies from Netanyahu's time, it is likely that such opportunities to display its new closeness to Israel will crop up.³⁵ Moreover, if the current government were to further consolidate its strength, its right-wing constituents will call for a more vociferous support of Israel over time.

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