



Where Phalcons Dare India-Israel Defence Relations

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The Indian-Israeli defence relationship has been growing steadily much to the chagrin of the Left parties and pro-Arab members within the Indian polity. This relationship has certainly grown spectacularly, after the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1992.

What are the convergences between these two countries? Where is this relationship heading? What are the implications?

INDIA-ISRAEL DEFENCE RELATIONS: A SHORT HISTORY

Israel has become India's second largest defence supplier, and its role in helping the Indian army in crises, particularly during the Kargil conflict of 1999 has been well received. In the past also, tacit Israeli help was available during the 1962 war with China and the 1965 war with Pakistan (Pant, 2004). India helped Israel during the 1967 Middle Eastern conflict, by covertly sending military equipment to Israel. Before that, in 1963, General Shaltiel, Israeli Chief of Army Staff visited India for discussions with his Indian counterpart (Kalyal, 2000). Indo-Israeli delegations continued to meet despite strong opposition by India to Israeli policies vis-à-vis Palestine.

Prime Minister Morarji Desai secretly invited Israeli leader Moshe Dayan in January 1979, later admitting that Moshe Dayan could not be officially invited since no diplomatic relations existed between the two countries. "So I told the middlemen that if Gen Dayan wanted to come, he could come in a different way, so that he was not recognized" (Singh, 2001). This covert relationship continued with Indira Gandhi

allowing collaboration between the Indian external intelligence agency - the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and its Israeli counterpart MOSSAD. In the aftermath of the Indira Gandhi assassination, Israeli security services were contacted for assistance in overhauling the security apparatus. Additionally, RAW was also the recipient of sophisticated electronic surveillance from Israel (Kumaraswamy, 1998).

In the 1980s, Israel and India were suspected of being involved in secret discussions to undertake joint operations against the Pakistani nuclear facility in Kahuta. According to the Dawn Newspaper, the operation was subsequently called off due to fears of a retaliatory attack on Indian nuclear facilities. It is also believed that the CIA had tipped off Pakistan President Zia Ul Haq of these plans and the State Department warned India of stern action (Dawn, 29 October 2007). The timing of this suspected operation suggests that the US was concerned about Pakistan losing its focus on the Afghan Jihad against the Soviet Union. Indeed, at that time, Pakistan was an indispensable ally for the fight against the Soviet troops in Afghanistan, in the same way that Pakistan is a major ally today in the Global War on Terror. The difference now is that the US strongly encourages and remains an active party to the growing Indo-Israel relationship, and is an important factor in this growing relationship.

The American Connection

The American influence on the Indo-Israeli alliance has a long history. India and Israel did not have an extensive political relationship, till Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to the US in 1986. US congressmen Stephen Solarz helped Morris Abraham a Jewish lobbyist from New York, to establish cordial relations with India. This was a

great moment for Israel as a tilt in the Indian policy towards granting de facto recognition to Israel had emerged (Kalyal, 2000). India then announced its decision to formally establish relations with Israel, on the eve of Prime Minister Narsimha Rao's visit to the US in January 1992 (New York Times, January 30, 1992).

Furthermore, the US Jewish community has been of invaluable help to the Indian cause by lobbying actively in favour of India. For example, the head of the Washington-based Centre for Security Policy, Frank Gaffney, and a founder of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, Michael Ledeen, had strongly promoted Indian-Israeli military ties, while warning against relying on Pakistan in the war on terror (Asia Times, 27 May 2003). The role of the US in the Indo-Israeli alliance was furthered by Indian National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra, when he proposed a formal alliance between India, US and Israel in a speech to the American-Jewish Committee in 2003. According to him, "Stronger India-US relations and India-Israel relations have a natural logic" (BBC News, 9 September 2003).

Furthermore, a number of Israeli weapons technologies developed with funds from the US are joint venture productions. As a result the US

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exercises a strong say in matters of Israeli military sales to other countries. This was witnessed when US opposition led to the cancellation of the sale of Israeli Phalcon AWACS to the Chinese in 1999, which cost the Israeli's \$250 million in losses (New York Times, July 13, 2000). In sharp contrast, the US allowed the sale of Israeli Phalcon AWACS to India in 2004, overriding strong Pakistani objections to the same. With recent reports that the Indian defence establishment is seeking an additional supply of three Phalcon aircrafts, this would effectively mean the largest defence agreement in the history of the Israeli

state. The deal is expected to cost around \$300-400 million per aircraft (Economic Times, 16 April 2008).

II ISSUES AND IRRITANTS

India and Israel share mutual concerns regarding the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and terrorism. In the aftermath of September 11, there has been a marked shift in the relationship between the US, India and Israel. Islamic extremism is a very real threat for India and Israel. Both are democratic, pluralistic states with large domestic Muslim minorities (Pant, 2004). Arguments against the Indo-Israeli alliance have urged that India's relations with Israel have increased the possibility of becoming a target for international terror outfits, including the al Qaeda.

However, India has been the victim of terror from a host of organisations which subscribe to the fatwa issued by Bin Laden in 1996 (Raman, 2002). Furthermore, terrorism against India can be traced to before relations between India and Israel were formalised. That the interests of India and Israel are mutual was exemplified by a statement in September 2003 by Zvi Gabey, Deputy Director-General in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the annual joint working group meeting, when he said "We find ourselves in the same camp that fights terrorism and we have to develop our relationship according to that" (Asia Times, 9 September 2003).

One of the important features of this growing relationship has been the positive effect on the Israeli economy, which is dependent on its defence industry, because this provides the cornerstone of the country's security and helps provide domestic employment. Defence deals fund the country's research and development, which allows it to continue making cutting-edge weaponry. During Israeli President Ezer Weizman's visit to India in 1996, Doron Suslik, Director of Corporate Communications of Israeli Aircraft Industries (IAI) affirmed that India is one of Israel's important markets (Naaz, 2000). According to figures released last year by the Israeli Defence Ministry India accounted for 50% of Israel's military exports (Economic Times, 16 April 2008).

Indo-Israeli relations took on a new dimension, when India launched an Israeli spy satellite into

space in January this year. The satellite launch was a milestone in the relations between the two countries since it occurred when India was under considerable pressure regarding its relations with Iran. It was falsely reported that the satellite was dismantled owing to external pressure, ostensibly from Arab states who are greatly distressed over the growing Indo-Israeli ties (Daily News and Analysis, 3 December 2007).

The launch of the spy satellite Techsar is an indication that Israel wants to develop close relations with India in the space sector and reduce its traditional dependence on the United States. While the US continues to be Israel's strongest ally, there have been pressures to reduce American aid to the country. These rumours, despite being refuted promptly continue to afflict the Israeli psyche, while editorials have debated the need for greater economic independence from the US (Ynetnews.com, 18 June 2007). A stronger military-economic relationship with other countries, including India, is one such means.

The growing Indo-Israeli friendship in the military sphere explains the transformation of this relationship from a buyer-seller to a joint - production and research relationship. For example, India and Israel have decided to work together in the field of electronic warfare. With Israel's strength being sensors and packaging, and India's being fibre optic gyros and micro-electromechanical systems, both Israel and India can complement each other in this area (Pant, 2004).

Furthermore, in the military sphere, India and Israel are working towards upgrading their existing weapons technologies and development of new technologies. For example, a report in the 'Times of India' states that Indian and Israeli defence officials have initiated work on an unmanned helicopter. Being developed by Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL) and Israel Aerospace Industries' unmanned air vehicle division, Malat, this helicopter will have dual automated sophisticated operating systems for enhanced safety (Times of India, 2 April 2008).

According to an Israeli defence ministry official, joint production of defence equipment is possible because of "the quality of India's hi-tech manpower, its considerably lower production

costs, high industrial capability and its solid and reliable experience". Because of our close strategic understanding, a formal agreement or a memorandum of understanding is unnecessary and actual co-production can be decided between India and Israeli military industries on an item by item basis (Singh, 2001).

If properly pursued, these joint ventures may burgeon into a partnership for the co-production of armaments for sale to Third World countries and both countries will gain considerably from such collaboration. Similarly, joint military exercises by the Indian and Israeli armed forces would provide further strategic depth for their relationship (Niazi, 2006).

One of the biggest areas of tension in relations between India and Israel is Iran. Under the leadership of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran has led a virulent anti-Israeli tirade since assuming power. In statements which have been condemned worldwide, including by UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, he has repeatedly threatened the Israeli state (The Nation, 16 December 2006). Iran is suspected of developing an illegal nuclear arsenal, which is of great concern to Israel. India's traditionally strong ties with Iran, including talks over a proposed gas pipeline deal have troubled both Washington and Israel. Iran reacted strongly against the Israeli satellite launch, with its envoy to India expressing "concern" to the Indian state (Times of India, 6 February 2008).

India's energy crisis would force it to look at the nuclear fuel as option, for which it would push for a larger alliance with the United States in the form of the nuclear deal pact, or look at alternative pipeline routes from Central Asia. Coincidentally, local newspapers have reported that an Israeli company is in talks with Indian officials in this regard (Times of India, 16 April 2008). While India has rejected American opposition to India's

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relations with Tehran, it continues to maintain the need for Iran to come clean about its nuclear program.

Iran's active tutelage to terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas has also raised the ire of the international community (Council of Foreign Relations, February 2007). India will find it hard to ignore the activities of Iran, particularly as it endangers the values and commitments of India in the fight against nuclear proliferation and the war against terror.

III CONCLUSIONS

The Indian-Israeli defence relationship continues to grow stronger, irrespective of the strong opposition from traditional Arab/Islamic States. From Intelligence sharing, to counter-terrorism discussions, a number of aspects of this relationship continue to be cloaked in secrecy. India is one of the 39 countries with whom Israel has signed "secret cooperative agreements" to prevent information leaks from joint security projects.

Israel besides selling arms to India, has also expressed its desire to buy arms from India. According to Israeli defence sources: "While we intend to sell one weapon to India, we want to buy another from them" (Singh, 2001).

The Indian-Israeli relationship has evolved over the years and it can be safely assumed that the current positive trends will stay. This is evident from the fact that successive Indian governments have placed great store by this relationship, including the present UPA government.

What stands in the way of greater transfer of Israeli technology to India is the inefficiency of the Indian bureaucracy. As Major General Pratap Narain put it, 'Israel offers joint ventures. Unfortunately, our government's red tape is enough to deter any entry into the hi-tech field (Abadi, 2004).' With further cooperation and greater ties on the horizon, we have only witnessed the tip of the iceberg.

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