



INDIA AND ISRAEL: FROM AN INTERLOPER TO AN INSIDER?

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Abstract:

Since the time of its creation (1948) and thereafter, Israel has been a thorny issue in India's foreign policy. Apparently, the two nations have had no bilateral disagreements, yet Israel continued to be a 'pariah' till 1992. Even though informal backchannel contacts were maintained between the two nations much before the formalization of ties, yet it is only from 2014 with a new government assuming power in India that relations between the two nations have acquired a degree of urgency and intimacy. In its attempt to comprehend the significantly altered nature of relations between India and Israel, the article provides a short historical framework before delving into contemporary times, focusing on the "real" character of the rapidly evolving relationship. The objective of the article is to critically understand the internal dynamics of the Israeli state, uncovering the various fault lines that remain, despite having acquired international legitimacy and acceptance and in an attempt to both comprehend and question India's changed stance.

Key words: Interloper, Insider, De-hyphenation, Ruptures, Contested Space, Ethics and Realpolitik

Titulo en Castellano: India e Israel: ¿De un intruso a un informador privilegiado?

Resumen:

Desde el momento de su creación (1948) y posteriormente, Israel ha sido un tema espinoso en la política exterior de la India. Aparentemente, los dos Estados no han tenido desacuerdos bilaterales, sin embargo, Israel continuó siendo un "paria" hasta 1992. Aunque los contactos informales se mantuvieron entre los dos Estados mucho antes de la formalización de las relaciones, sin embargo, es solo a partir de 2014, con el nuevo gobierno que asumió el poder en la India, cuando las relaciones entre los dos Estados han adquirido un grado de importancia e intimidad. En su intento por comprender la naturaleza significativamente alterada de las relaciones entre la India y Israel, este artículo presenta un marco histórico breve antes de profundizar en la etapa contemporánea, centrándose en el carácter "real" de la relación en rápida evolución. El objetivo del artículo es ayudar a entender críticamente la dinámica interna del Estado israelí descubriendo las distintas líneas de fractura que permanecen, a pesar de haber adquirido legitimidad y aceptación internacional, en un intento de comprender y cuestionar el cambio de posición de la India.

Palabras Clave: *Intruso, Acoplamiento, Rupturas, Espacio impugnado, Etica y Realpolitik*

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31439/UNISCI-38>



1. The Historical Background

Since the time of its creation (1948) and thereafter, Israel has been a thorny issue in India's foreign policy. Apparently, the two nations have had no bilateral disagreements, yet Israel continued to be a 'pariah' till 1992. The reason attributed to this stance was almost always 'ethical' and the tone, 'affected.' As a result, a crucial component, the domestic factors and compulsions were seldom taken into consideration. Relations or rather the lack of any was characterized by India's predominantly negative reactions towards Israeli overtures. The frigidity in its attitude towards Israel was in contrast to the longstanding accommodative approach towards Judaism as anti-Semitism has been distinctly absent in the Indian ethos. While Jewish culture, tradition and people continued to arouse curiosity, empathy and admiration in the private space, it was conspicuous by its absence in the public space and government policy. In other words, there was a manifest dual policy as far Israel was concerned. The Jewish people constituted one category while the Jewish state another. In the sphere of public policy, the reason attributed to this twofold approach was the inherent differences between the two nations both in terms of the nationalist struggle and the consequent policies adopted by the respective independent nations. In the case of India, the nationalist struggle was being waged against the British who had colonized India, on the other hand, the Zionist leaders were compelled to associate with the colonial power as it was the British who were willing to support the Zionist political ambitions of a Jewish state in Palestine. Following the same trajectory, post-independence, the Indian state adopted a foreign policy grounded on anti-imperialism. Israel, conversely, keeping in mind the regional animosity and seclusion that it had to contend with, adopted a policy of consolidating its connections with the forces of imperialism.

The catchphrases for the third world nations were "anti-colonialism" and anti-imperialism" and it made matters worse for the foreign policy makers of the independent Jewish state. Though both states were created as a result of a partition accompanied by anguish and enduring repercussions, the partition of India, despite its religious nature and the consequent communal insurrections was accepted by the mainstream leaders (Congress and the Muslim League) both in India and Pakistan. The scene in the Middle East was different as the Arabs who were a majority in Palestine, the regional states and the Palestinian leadership disapproved and rejected the United Nations partition plan that sought to divide the Mandate territory into two independent states, one Arab and the other Jewish. Understandably, India after independence could identify and associate itself with the decolonization process in Asia and Africa, while Israel could not. Israel was attempting to tide over the quagmire in the Middle East and found it appropriate and politically appealing to side with the colonial powers rather than the anti-colonial movements.

The Indian state was successful in creating an image of secularism and tolerance which along with its emerging political and economic influence and potential ensured that Pakistan was unable to make any substantive dent in its equation with the Islamic bloc and their regional organizations. Israel, meanwhile, had to contend with antagonistic regional organizations, blocs and forums such as the Arab League which ensured its international seclusion. A significant circumstantial difference between India and Israel has been the fact that the existence of the former was never in doubt. In the Israeli circumstances its very recognition as a state has been contended for a considerable period of time. As an independent political entity, the Indian state has adopted secularism as a founding principle whereas Israel perceives itself as a Jewish state. Conventions and laws have been framed and are interpreted accordingly in the respective states.²

² Kumaraswamy, P.R. (2010): *India's Israel Policy*, New York, Columbia University Press, pp.2-9.



While attempting to construe India's policy towards Israel, it is imperative to take cognizance of the internal/domestic context. The plurality of India's domestic social fabric (be it ethnic, religious, linguistic and nationalist) played and continues to play an important role in foreign policy making. India has a sizeable Muslim population constituting over 14% of its population and many political analysts attribute an important role to this section of its population in policy making both domestic and external, in most cases not directly enacted by them but due to their presence. Thus, it has been contended that India's approach to the Palestinian issue has been viewed through what has been termed as an "Islamic prism." However, while the sentiments of the largest minority community could not be ignored in shaping India's policy towards the Middle East in general and Israel in particular, an explicit official confirmation of the same has been elusive. On the contrary, such a linkage has been negated vociferously in the national narrative. Yet, keeping in mind the requirements of realpolitik, private channels of communication were always been kept open between the two nations much before the formal establishment of relations. In short, Indo-Israel relations can be categorized into various periods. The first phase was coterminous with the independence movement, wherein the Indian leadership was not positively inclined towards the political ambitions of the Jews in Palestine.

The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 marked the second phase in Indo-Israel relations in which the Indian prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru indicated support for the stabilization of relations between the two nations and the need to re-examine India's hitherto position with respect to Israel.

The next phase commenced from 1952 and it witnessed a toughening of posture, which eventually led to the denunciation of Zionism as racism in 1975 during the premiership of Indira Gandhi. Some progress was made in normalizing relations during the rule of the Janata Party in the late 1970s which was reversed with the re-assumption of power of the Congress party under Indira Gandhi in 1980.

Another phase started in January 1992, when the then prime minister Narasimha Rao, though belonging to the Congress party, which had generally supported the Palestine position, overturned the conventional policy and formalized diplomatic ties with Israel.³ The formalization of bilateral ties paved the way for the visit of the then Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon to India, the first one to do so as well. While the Congress continued to be in power, an overt rapprochement between India and Israel remained implausible in keeping with the party's professed "secular credentials" and traditional perception that considered Israel to be an "interloper" having "occupied" what was considered to be Palestinian territory, the assumption of power by the Bharatiya Janata Party in 2014, ushered in an extraordinary change, at least on surface, in India's official position towards Israel, in the latter's favour. In 2015 the then president of India, Pranab Mukherjee visited Israel, and in 2017, Narendra Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel. The "interloper" had become an "insider."

2. The Contemporary Context⁴

The chief minister of the state of Gujarat became the prime minister of India in 2014. Narendra Modi as the chief minister of Gujarat visited Israel in 2006 and was accorded a warm welcome. As prime minister of India, he paid a visit to Israel during 4-6 July, 2017, becoming the first Indian prime minister to do so. In the process, a clandestine relationship was accorded as some

³ *Ibid*, pp.14-23.

⁴ This section has been previously published as a series of blogs/reflections by the author for the platform, www.asiainglobalaffairs.in. See: "Modi in Israel: Uncovering the Veil", 9 July 2017, at <http://www.asiainglobalaffairs.in/reflections/page/5/modi-in-israel-uncovering-the-veil> and "Modi in Israel: Uncovering the Veil", 22 July 2017, at <http://www.asiainglobalaffairs.in/reflections/page/5/modi-in-israel-uncovering-the-veil-continued>



would put it, legitimacy. In more ways than one, the visit was termed as unique, significant and path breaking. It was a “stand-alone” visit for the Indian prime minister as he did not make a stopover at Ramallah in West Bank, the de facto administrative capital of the Palestinian National Authority. There was no reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Indian Ambassador to Israel articulated that there has been an effective “de-hyphenation” of India’s relations with Israel and Palestine. It was perceived as indicative of India’s “pursuit of its relations with the Jewish State on its own merit”.⁵ In fact, it was considered as emblematic of a change from clandestine “behind-closed-doors bilateral interactions, anchored in military and intelligence discussions”.⁶ In 1947, India voted against the partition of Palestine. In 1949, she voted against Israel’s admission into the United Nations. When the UN discussed whether Zionism is racism, India voted in favour of the resolution. India recognized Israel in 1950 but established full diplomatic ties only in 1992 in the post-Cold War era with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a period that concurred with India’s engagement with liberalization, globalization and privatization. In the meantime, Israel became one of India’s biggest foreign arms market from where it procures weapons and equipment estimated to be worth a billion dollars annually. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, India purchased around 41% of Israel’s arms export during the period 2012-2016. In 2017 Israeli companies have signed arms deals worth over 2 billion dollars with the Indian defence establishment. Trade and investment between the two nations has also been steadily increasing in water, agriculture, information technology and several other sectors.⁷

The Indian prime minister received a grand welcome, comparable to the one received by Donald Trump, the American president, perhaps again representative of critical political reconfigurations both in a regional and global sense. The visit was described as an attempt to break the remaining walls. Modi in his own words considered it to be his “singular honour to be the first ever prime minister of India to undertake this groundbreaking visit to Israel”.⁸ The civilizational linkages and continuing informal connections between the two nations at a societal level were highlighted. The relatively nascent political character of both states was underlined and the need to develop a strong, progressive political and economic partnership was emphasized with the Indian prime minister affirming to embark on what he termed as a “path breaking journey of engagement.” Prime minister Narendra Modi and the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, spoke of “shared priorities” and a partnership that “can help global peace and stability”, after conducting continuous meetings over four hours and signing seven deals, including pacts on agriculture and water management.⁹

One of the first places that prime minister Modi visited was Yad Vashem, which he termed “as a reminder of the unspeakable evil inflicted generations ago”, and urged for a determined opposition to the “evils of terrorism, radicalism and violence that has plagued the

⁵ India separating ties with Israel, Palestine: Ex-diplomat, *The Indian Express*, 30 June 2017, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-separating-ties-with-israel-palestine-ex-diplomat-4729769/>

⁶ Iyengar, Radhika: “How India’s relationship with Israel has been a diplomatic see-saw since 1948”, *The Indian Express*, 6 July 2017, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/how-indias-relationship-with-israel-has-been-a-diplomatic-see-saw-since-1948/>

⁷ Chaudhury, Prमित Pal: “Israel likely to become India’s largest arms supplier”, *The Hindustan Times*, 5 July 2017, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/israel-likely-to-become-india-s-largest-arms-supplier/story-tZQFenVzYWzaQFnPqbznqM.html>

⁸ “Israel welcomes first ever visit by an Indian PM”, *Middle East Eye*, 4 July 2017, at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-welcomes-first-ever-visit-indian-pm-294756339>

⁹ “PM Modi on ground breaking visit to Israel”, *The Week*, 4 July 2017, at <https://www.theweek.in/content/archival/news/india/pm-modi-on-ground-breaking-visit-to-israel.html>



world”.¹⁰ In keeping with the symbolism, the Indian prime minister met Moshe Holtzberg, the Israeli child who as a toddler survived the 2008 terror attack at the Chabad house in Mumbai. The Indian prime minister, who was almost always accompanied by his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu during the course of his three day visit stopped over at a technology exhibition in Tel Aviv, visited the Dor beach in Haifa and attended a demonstration of a mobile seawater desalination unit, paid homage to the deceased Indian soldiers who fought in World War I in Haifa, and announced that the people of Indian origin in Israel would receive the Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) card even if they had undertaken the compulsory army service. The Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in reciprocation, presented Narendra Modi with a photograph depicting Indian soldiers leading a British military column to liberate Jerusalem in 1917. While addressing the Indian diaspora, Modi announced that direct flights would be initiated between Delhi, Mumbai and Tel Aviv to “encourage people-to-people contacts”.¹¹ He also stated that an Indian cultural centre would be inaugurated in Israel, gratifying a long-standing demand of the Indian diaspora.

While the Israeli prime minister termed the India-Israel relationship as “a marriage made in heaven but we are implementing it here on earth”,¹² the Indian foreign secretary S. Jaishankar perhaps put it more appropriately “as two societies who consider themselves cradles of civilization, have now found a more contemporary basis for their relationship”.¹³ As the euphoria of what has been termed as a path breaking event abates, several queries come to the fore. A pragmatic analysis of the real, tangible achievements and ramifications of this new found, explicit India-Israel bonhomie is imperative. Narendra Modi’s visit abounded in imagery. From the Israeli point of view, the symbolism associated with the first ever visit of the prime minister of India, a nation, which not long ago insisted that its passports are “valid for any country except Israel”, was of great significance. The formal invitation to the Israeli prime minister to visit India, the complete absence of any reference to Iran and Palestine during the course of the Indian prime minister’s visit perhaps corroborated Netanyahu’s claim that Israel’s foreign policy can be de-hyphenated from the peace process.¹⁴ The tangible achievements for both Israel and India from the “historic”, “path breaking” visit comprise a total of seven agreements on areas including space, technology, water and agriculture. Precisely, seven Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) were signed for setting up of India-Israel Industrial R&D & Technological Innovation Fund (I4F), for Water Conservation in India, on State Water Utility Reform in India, India-Israel Development Cooperation-3 Year Work Program in Agriculture 2018-2020, Plan of Cooperation regarding cooperation in Atomic Clocks, regarding cooperation in GEO-LEO Optical Link and regarding cooperation in Electric Propulsion for Small Satellites.¹⁵

¹⁰ “PM Modi calls for opposing evils of terrorism, radicalism”, *India Today*, 5 July 2017, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/pti-feed/story/pm-modi-calls-for-opposing-evils-of-terrorism-radicalism-992459-2017-07-05>

¹¹ “People of Indian Origin in Israel to get overseas citizen of India card despite their army training”, *Outlook : The Newswire*, 6 July 2017, at <https://www.outlookindia.com/newswire/story/people-of-indian-origin-in-israel-to-get-overseas-citizen-of-india-card-despite-their-army-training-modi/971699>

¹² Gee, John: “Netanyahu and Modi: A Marriage Made in Heaven”, *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, October 2017, at <https://www.wrmea.org/017-october/netanyahu-and-modi-a-marriage-made-in-heaven.html>

¹³ “Narendra Modi Israel visit: PM speaks to Indian diaspora, says my government’s motto is reform, perform, transform. Delhi-Mumbai-Tel Aviv air link coming soon”, *The Financial Express*, 6 July 2017, at <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/narendra-modi-israel-visit-pm-speaks-to-indian-diaspora-says-matter-of-joy-that-for-first-time-in-70-years-an-indian-pm-has-visited-israel/750870/>

¹⁴ Singh, Priya and Krishnan Srinivasan: “Westward ho!”, *The Statesman*, Kolkata, 4 March 2018, at <https://www.thestatesman.com/opinion/westward-ho-1502595145.html>

¹⁵ “Highlights from PM Narendra Modi’s ‘Historic’ Israel Visit”, 6 July 2017, at <https://www.thequint.com/videos/news-videos/highlights-of-narendra-modi-visit-to-israel>



Yet, doubts regarding the “permanence of the moment” remain. An editorial in *Haaretz*¹⁶ reminded its readers about the crucial hazard associated with a likely friendship with India, specifically, its democracy. Comparing and contrasting it with the decision-making apparatus in China, the editorial pointed out that the possibility of a transfer of power in the Indian parliamentary democracy where its politicians are accountable to the electorate. As such, a government led by the opposition Congress could prove to be less accommodating and supportive in comparison to the current dispensation. Moreover, a sudden turn of events such as a confrontation with the Hamas or Hezbollah or an arms transaction with China and Pakistan, India’s principal competitors could transmute Israel’s status from a prospective ally to an impediment. While, by and large the Indian media like its Israeli counterpart was supportive of what was termed as a “pragmatic” and “strategic” move, there were the intermittent voices of disapproval that called for retrospection and restraint. By negating the very existence of Palestine as though it were almost a “myth,” the current dispensation could in actuality deprive India of the opportunity to play a part in the quest for a just and amicable solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. This section of the academia and press drew comparisons between what was referred to as the dominant ideologies of Zionism and Hinduvta; the perceived underlying common philosophy of the new-found overt affability between the two nations with an emphasis on the centrality of “militant nationalism” and the marginalization of the subservient “other”.¹⁷

The prime minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, paid a “return” visit to India during January 14-19, 2018 in what could be termed as the ultimate step in formalizing bilateral relations between the two nations. Netanyahu’s visit lay emphasis on the future with a joint statement that lay out a 25-year timeline for the actualization of the potential of the strategic collaboration. The symbolism of the visit was not missed by both the audience and the analyst. The perfunctory visit to Mahatma Gandhi’s Samadhi (memorial), the Taj Mahal in Agra, the Chabad House in Mumbai, the site of the terror attacks of 26 November 2008 in which Israeli citizens were slain and the of course a visit to prime minister Modi’s state of Gujarat where the customary flying of kites was undertaken along with a visit to Mahatma Gandhi’s Sabarmati Ashram. All gestures suggestive of the camaraderie shared by the two leaders. In terms of tangible commercial collaborations, the Israeli side offered support in the area of Indian manufacturing, a key area in terms of both potential as well as deficiency as India seeks to ward off its image of a predominantly trading center. The offer was welcomed by the Indian side whereas the Israeli delegation referred to the unbeatable amalgamation of an India that has “size and scale” and an Israel that has “sharpness and edge”. The Israeli premier, Netanyahu in a speech at the Ministry of External Affairs yearly Raisina Dialogue, went on to comment the two nations possessed a “natural partnership” and a “natural friendship” which likewise accommodates their requirement for “hard power.” However, unlike the earlier visit of the Indian prime minister to Israel (July 2017), the somewhat reciprocal visit of the Israeli prime minister was not bereft of a reference to the Middle East peace process. A joint statement was issued by the two nations in this context, which “reaffirmed their support for an early resumption of peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians”. It is significant to note that the meeting between the Israeli prime minister and his Indian counterpart took place in the aftermath of India’s vote at the United Nations that countered the decision of the United States to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. This was followed by the visit of the Indian prime minister to Ramallah in Palestine and to the United Arab Emirates as well as Oman, symbolic

¹⁶ A series of articles/opinion pieces in *Haaretz* during June-July 2017, prior to and during the course of Narendra Modi’s visit to Israel extensively covered the visit, while generally positive in tone, a few did elicit caution.

¹⁷ Chatterjee Malini: “Hinduvta for Zionism”, *The Telegraph*, Kolkata, 10 July 2017, was one such article in the Indian media, at <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/hinduvta-for-zionism/cid/1460535>



of the desire to maintain an even equation with both Israel and the Arab world.¹⁸ According to Benjamin Netanyahu:

“The weak don’t survive. The strong survive. You make peace with the strong. You ally with the strong.”¹⁹

Vijay Prashad in a write-up for *Al Jazeera*, “Netanyahu in India: What was swept under the carpet”,²⁰ offered a critical analysis of the visit of the Israeli prime minister to India. He brought forth what he considered the key components of the visit and what he observed was concealed from the public eye. Prashad termed the commercial interactions as defence related meets. In other words, the business transactions that predominated were arms deals negotiated by “weapons manufacturers” and “weapons contractors.” The collaborations thus were not partnerships for peace but cooperation for wars. Citing Mahatma Gandhi, “Palestine belongs to the Arabs [...] It is wrong and inhumane to impose the Jews on the Arabs”; “Why should [Jews] depend upon American money or British arms for forcing themselves on an unwelcome land? Why should they resort to terrorism to make good their forcible landing in Palestine?”, Prashad seemed to imply that the visits of the two prime ministers to Israel and India were an affront to the memory of Gandhi, who had faith in pacifism and non-violence and as a snub to the anti-colonial movements of which India had been an intrinsic part, in fact a leader of sorts. What was critical for Prashad was that the dissent that greeted the visit from multiple quarters was well camouflaged both by the mainstream media and the government. The voices of protest in favour of Palestine by pro-Palestinian groups and the communist movements in India were by and large well concealed from the public eye. The writer in fact drew a nexus between arm dealers and the wealthy elites, specifically the members of the Indian Film Industry (Bollywood) that represents India’s soft power, globally.

One of the intangible concomitants of the visit of the Indian prime minister for the nation, as Robert Jenkins²¹ articulates, is the possible import or perhaps reinforcement of the notion of “a nation under siege,” a feeling that is evidently distinguishable in the dominant Israeli (Jewish) psyche. Importing weapons from Israel could be a practical necessity; however, imbibing a political state of mind as a corollary could have grave consequences for a nation that is grappling with problems of contestation and managing dissent. While the influence of the tactics employed by the Israeli Defense Forces on its Indian counterpart cannot be missed, the spread of any such influence to the civilian ethos could spell imminent danger. Emphasizing upon economic efficiency and good governance as qualities that are worth emulating is perfectly justifiable but not at the expense of social and political inclusiveness and reason. While oversimplifications, generalizations and binary constructs should be circumvented, essentially, the policy choices for India appear to be one between political expediency and farsightedness.

3. The Ruptures Within

The criticism within India of the increased bonhomie among two emerging global powers in their respective spheres calls for an analysis of the perceived jarring notes within Israel that still

¹⁸ “On a new keel: Netanyahu's visit to India”, *The Hindu*, 20 January 2018 at <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/on-a-new-keel-netanyahus-visit-to-india/article22475166.ece>; Priya Singh and Krishnan Srinivasan: “Westward ho!”, *The Statesman*, Kolkata, 4 March 2018, at <https://www.thestatesman.com/opinion/westward-ho-1502595145.html>

¹⁹ “Benjamin Netanyahu at the Raisina Dialogue”, 16 January 2018, at <http://www.indino.in/benjamin-netanyahu-raisina-dialogues-2018/>

²⁰ Prashad, Vijay: “Netanyahu in India: What was swept under the carpet”, *Al Jazeera*, 20 January 2018, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/netanyahu-india-swept-carpet-180120161503967.html>

²¹ Jenkins, Robert: “India’s Costly Embrace of Israel”, *The Diplomat*, 3 July 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/indias-costly-embrace-of-israel/>



makes it a “pariah” for many in India. While it is impossible to delve into all aspects of the social and political fabric within Israel, a few issues that could be regarded as fault lines/ruptures can be examined in this essay. On such critical issue is the treatment and status of the Arab citizens of Israel. The importance of minority rights is crucial for the sustenance of a truly inclusive society. In the words of David Grossman²² “How long can a relatively large minority be assumed by the majority to be an enemy without in the end actually turning into one?”

For most outside observers perhaps, the Palestinian population within Israel does not constitute a critical resistance to the Jewish State. Despite their deep-seated grievances and spasmodic articulation of protests and acts of restricted defiance the Palestinians of Israel are not perceived as intrinsically posing a grave challenge to the Jewish state. In actuality and on the contrary, the relation between the Jewish majority and the significant Palestinian minority within the apparent confines of the Israeli state is not merely crucial to an understanding of the social and political fabric of a professedly democratic nation but also critical to any enduring and amicable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The critical subject of contention is the issue of a ‘redefinition’ of the Israeli nation that is being increasingly identified with its exclusive and definitive Jewish identity. The fundamental question at stake is the innate paradox between the ‘Jewish state’ and the ‘Israeli nation.’ At present there are around 1.5 million Palestinian citizens of Israel, comprising about 20% of Israel’s population. Even though they are by and large identified with the larger Arab world, Palestinian Arab citizens in Israel embody a national (Palestinian), ethnic/racial (Arab), linguistic (Arabic) and religious (Muslim, Christian and Druze) minority within the state. The Palestinian Arab citizens in Israel are a section of the Palestinian people who were displaced and evicted from their native land in 1948 in the aftermath of the formation of the state of Israel. While the vast majority of Palestinians were compelled to migrate and became refugees around 153,000 of them stayed back in Israel and were granted citizenship in due course of time. A section among those who stayed back were ‘internally displaced,’ compelled to migrate from their villages as their households were demolished. The Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel were subject to military rule till 1966. As a result, there were constraints on their freedom of movement, evictions and land appropriations. Notwithstanding the constrictions, the Palestinian community within Israel has somewhat actively resisted the state’s attempts at encroachment on their identity and language at the same time it has preserved and encouraged the linkages within the community as well as persistently advocated its rights. While remonstrations by this substantive minority community were a constant feature it reached its climax on March 30, 1976, that eventually came to be characterized as Land Day, when protests broke out as a consequence of the government’s decision to appropriate a substantive strip of Arab-owned land in the central Galilee region. Land Day is deeply emblematic for the Arab Palestinian community as it memorializes a significant alteration in the community’s combined efforts to accomplish its rights in its native land. Israel does not have a written constitution, but it identifies itself as “Jewish and Democratic.” In lieu of a written constitution, the Israeli state possesses certain Basic Laws and the *Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty, Purpose, Article 1, State of Israel, 1992* states that “The purpose of this Basic Law is to protect human dignity and liberty, in order to establish in a Basic Law, the values of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.” However, since its inception the state of Israel through its Parliament (Knesset) has enacted a series of inequitable laws that run contrary to its professed democratic character as it has inimical

²² Grossman, David (2003): *Sleeping on a Wire: Conversations with Palestinians in Israel*, London, Picador, p.203. Peleg, Ilan and Dov Waxman (2011): *Israel’s Palestinians: The Conflict Within*, New York, Cambridge University Press, p.1



implications for its largest minority community, that is, the Palestinian citizens in Israel as well as the Palestinian residents of the Occupied Territories, including East Jerusalem.

The lists of such enactments are innumerable but the cardinal principle behind them is a further reinforcement of the Jewish character of the state primarily at the cost of its substantive Palestinian Arab citizens. The Palestinian citizens of Israel today as in the past have coalesced to put forth a united and comprehensive approach by way of the formation of a High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel that urges the international community to convince and compel the Government of Israel to withdraw the unequal laws and scrap the *Jewish Nation-State bill* that practically transforms its Palestinian citizens to second-class citizens, and infringes upon their status as a national minority. Essentially at the core of the demands of the Palestinian community within Israel is an urge to influence the state to preserve the right of equality for all its citizens in its Basic Laws and to disallow inequality founded upon “national belonging, race, religion and gender.” In 2018, the High Follow-Up Committee has been galvanizing support for its demands across the globe in the last two weeks of January, an effort that is expected to culminate on January 30, 2018 with the observance of an annual “International Day for Supporting the Rights of Palestinian Citizens in Israel.” The initial part of the two-week movement incidentally coincided with the visit of the Israeli prime minister to India.²³

Another significant, though a considerably smaller minority within the state of Israel, are the Bedouins of Negev/Naqab.²⁴ Customarily, a semi-nomadic people, the Naqab/Negev Bedouin have survived by farming and raising herds in the Negev desert for centuries. Over a period of time the term Negev Bedouin, for instance, has evolved intricate socio-political norms, a situation made more convoluted with the insertion of categories such as Israeli Arab or Palestinian. The Bedouin residents of Naqab have perceived sweeping changes in their homeland and their socio-political interfaces due to the persistent ‘territorial conflict and national conquest’ over past centuries. Consequently, the characteristic expressions articulated by the Naqab Bedouin today are considerably dissimilar from those voiced by their ancestors. The Naqab/Negev Bedouin currently constitute around 200,000 Palestinian-Arab citizens in Israel. Most of them reside in metropolitan Bi’r as-Saba (Beersheba) area in northern Naqab. Historically they have been administratively separated from the rest of the Arab population in Israel and until recent times, constituted a fringe within the Israeli and Palestinian political setting, being idealistically imagined as ‘socially and culturally distinctive.’ The conflict over land between the state of Israel and its Bedouin citizens is a multifaceted one. The legal aspects constitute only a fragment of the entire story as historical, social, financial, cultural and ethnic issues are at play. Moreover, land disputes between nomads and state authorities are not confined and peculiar to Israel. They are found to exist in many countries with nomadic populations. In fact, the states of the Middle East have continually treated the Bedouin as second-class citizens. Their contention is that the contribution of the Bedouin to the region’s national economies is limited and that they remain detached from the settled population by raising animals merely for their subsistence. Their nomadic way of life was regarded as nothing but an attempt to wriggle out of civil obligations, such as military service and payment of taxes. The rationale behind settling the Bedouins was to make them ‘more productive and more

²³ The section has been published as a blog by the author for the platform Asia in Global Affairs, “Palestinians in a Jewish State: An Addendum”, at <http://www.asiainglobalaffairs.in/reflections/page/3/palestinians-in-a-jewish-state-an-addendum>. Also See Ilan Peleg and Dov Waxman (2011): *Israel’s Palestinians: The Conflict Within*, New York, Cambridge University Press; The website of ADALAH: <https://www.adalah.org/en/law/index>; Document of “The High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens”, Nazareth, January, 2018.

²⁴ Negev is the Hebrew word for the desert and semi desert region in southern Israel while Naqab is the Arabic word. Since the creation of the state of Israel, the term Negev is used to indicate the region.



governable.’ In recent times, conscious attempts have been made by governments in the region to assimilate nomadic and semi-nomadic Bedouin populations into sedentary society. The general trend is to settle nomads by establishing farming or manufacturing cooperatives to enable them to survive in their new environment. In all such endeavors, the state plays the decisive part in constructing both the ‘policy environment’ and the ‘spatial reorganization’ which in turn encourage sedentarization. The Israeli authorities initiated new types of sedentarization. In contrast to many other Middle Eastern Bedouin communities, the Naqab/Negev Bedouin were completely sedentarized when the Israeli government began to implement its settlement programs. Thus, these programs were not intended primarily at ‘settling a previously highly mobile population;’ instead the objective was to expel this population from its lands and to relocate it in another place. Forced settlement and migration has been the distinguishing feature of Israeli government policy toward the Bedouin, even though eventually it appears to have been voluntary. In its yearning to procure Bedouin lands, the state has effectively not left out any Bedouin family from some kind of encounter with the authorities. Sedentarization as a settlement policy was employed as an authorized instrument to transmute Bedouin land into state land as well as multiple methods were used to expel, displace and relocate Bedouin groups from their land so as to make such a transmutation a reality. In September 2011, the Israeli government approved a five-year economic development plan called the Praver Plan. One of its implications would have been the relocation of some 30,000-40,000 Negev Bedouin from areas not recognized by the government to government-approved townships. This would require Bedouins to leave ‘ancestral villages, cemeteries and communal life’ that they have been accustomed to. Critics of the Praver Plan contended that it would turn Bedouin dispossession into law and could result in compelling the Bedouin to relocate. It was also censured on the grounds that it could lead to a form of ethnic cleansing. Several members of the European Parliament severely criticized the plan. Bedouin, Palestinian and Israeli activists staged a ‘Day of Rage’ against the Praver Plan on November 30, 2013, holding rallies and protests throughout Israel and Palestine, with international solidarity protests taking place in cities across the world, one among the many ‘days of rage’ mass protests. As the Israeli government announced that it had withdrawn the bill that proposed the expropriation of land and the forcible transfer of tens of thousands of Bedouins from 35 unrecognized villages in the Naqab/Negev desert in the south of present-day Israel, there was widespread celebration among the Bedouins in particular and the larger Palestinian community in general as well as the Israeli activists who had joined the protests. Adalah, the legal center for Arab minority rights in Israel, called the withdrawal of the Praver Plan bill as a major achievement in the history of the Palestinian community in Israel. However, the struggle endures as new enactments are sought to be enforced and articulations of dissent continue in tandem.²⁵

Israel, since its inception has projected itself as the only democratic state in the region. Created and built on the memories of the great injustice inflicted upon the Jews in the Holocaust and other pogroms of an earlier era, the state of Israel was erected and subsequently consolidated upon an edifice of a constructed homogenization with its emphasis on a single unified language (Hebrew) and an imagined common culture based upon Jewishness.

²⁵ Singh, Priya: “Resisting from the Margins”, at <http://www.asiainglobalaffairs.in/reflections/resisting-from-the-margins/#more-568>; Henriette Dahan-Kalev, Emilie: *Le Febvre and Amal El’sana-Alh’jooj, Palestinian Activism in Israel: A Bedouin Woman Leader in a Changing Middle East*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, (Introduction). pp. xix-xxi; Oren Yiftachel: “Bedouin Arabs and the Israeli settler state: Land policies and indigenous resistance,” in Champagne and I. Abu-Saad (eds) (2003): *The Future of Indigenous Peoples: Strategies for Survival and Development* pp. 21-47, Los Angeles: American Indian Studies Center, UCLA; Avinoam Meir (1997) *As Nomadism Ends: The Israeli Bedouin of the Negev*, Boulder CO: Westview Press; Harriet Sherwood: “Israel shelve Plan to forcibly relocate Bedouin from Desert land,” *The Guardian*, 12 December 2011, at <http://electronicintifada.net/blogs/maureen-clare-murphy/withdrawal-praver-plan-bill-major-achievement-palestinians-israel>



Collectivity and communes were a crucial method employed for inculcation of a common, homogenous identity. While the state propagates the myth, the nation has demystified it. Articulations of discontent within the majority community and the substantive minority are a feature of the Israeli nation. For those at the helm of power, an acceptance of the reality and accommodation of dissent could be the first step in the establishment of a real, pluralist democracy in the state of Israel.²⁶

4. Engaging in a Contested Space²⁷

The UN partition plan was resisted by the Palestinians who initiated the 1948 war. The decision did not emanate purely out of a sense of revulsion for Jews or discontentment with the plan itself. The primary reason for resistance was their reluctance to consent to an existence of exile, alienation and exclusion to gratify a collective arriving from beyond its borders, asserting a home, from which they had ostensibly drifted in times gone by. Recognition of the Zionist assertion inevitably implied expulsion of the Palestinian population. In 1948, Jews did not constitute a majority in Palestine. For the establishment of a Jewish democratic state, it was imperative for the Jews to constitute a majority. This in turn, connoted the expulsion, displacement and dispossession of the 750,000 Palestinian inhabitants of the land. This would have been the case even if they had approved the partition plan and had not proclaimed war on the newly created Jewish state of Israel.²⁸ Thus 1948 came to be recognized as the year of the Palestine *Nakba* (Catastrophe), the displacement of the Palestinians and the fragmentation and ‘de-Arabisation’ of what used to signify ‘historic Palestine.’ The process of ‘de-Palestinisation’ was a corollary of the war of 1948. Israel habitually contends that it has a right to exist, a claim that is founded on the presence of a powerful army and backed by a robust equation with a geographically remote power, the United States. Nonetheless, it is not supported by both the people inhabiting within the boundaries on which the state has been instituted and those who have a genuine claim to live within the frontiers. In the case of Israel the word ‘democracy’ thus becomes, in the opinion of many, a fabrication, not merely on grounds of intolerance towards and bias against Palestinians residing in the state or due to the deprivation/denial of basic rights to the Palestinians inhabiting the lands grabbed in 1967. It is a misrepresentation for the reason that in 1948 the first step of the Israeli government was the eviction of the bulk of the populace residing on the land it had captured. They were deprived of their right to vote and reside on the territory upon which they had an innate and legitimate claim.²⁹

Israel’s claim to be a ‘democracy’ is a highly contested one and it is perceived as an unusual example. It was an exception, to some an aberration from its inception. It symbolized a ‘settler-state’ created/instituted not in the background of ‘imperialism’ but in an epoch of ‘decolonization and self-determination.’³⁰ The terms commonly used to describe the state by its critics are, “‘ethnic cleansing’, ‘settler-colonisation’, ‘Apartheid/Separation Wall’, ‘de-Arabisation’, ‘ethnocracy’, ‘memoricide’, ‘politicide’ and ‘toponymicide’.”³¹ An illustration of

²⁶ Singh, Priya: “Palestinians in a Jewish State: An Addendum”, at <http://www.asiainglobalaffairs.in/reflections/page/3/palestinians-in-a-jewish-state-an-addendum>

²⁷ Singh, Priya: Nurturing a New ‘Nakba’? at <http://www.asiainglobalaffairs.in/reflections/nurturing-a-new-naqba/>

²⁸ Siegman, Henry: “The Two-State Solution: An Autopsy”, *London Review of Books*, vol. 40 n° 10 (24 May 2018), p.18.

²⁹ Masalha, Nur (2012): *The Palestine Naqba: De Colonizing History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*, London, New York, Zed Books, pp.1-18; Alqasis, Ahmad: “Challenging the ongoing dispossession and displacement of the Palestinian people on the 70th commemoration of the Nakba”, *Mondoweiss*, 15 May 2018. at <http://mondoweiss.net/2018/05/dispossession-displacement-commemoration/>

³⁰ Salt, Jeremy: “Celebrations in Jerusalem, Slaughter in Gaza”, *Palestine Chronicle*, 15 May 2018, at <https://www.palestinechronicle.com/celebrations-in-jerusalem-slaughter-in-gaza/>

³¹ Masalha, *The Palestine Naqba*, p.11



the determined effort to resist the obliteration of the indigenous presence is the commemoration of the *Nakba* by way of the observance of the *Nakba* day. 2018 marks the 70th anniversary of the *Nakba* and May 15, as is the case each year, was observed as the *Nakba* day. The difference this year was that this remarkable day also witnessed another remarkable event, the ‘display’ of the US embassy being opened in Jerusalem (Al Quds), considered as an ‘occupied city under international law.’ Simultaneously, as the festivities marking 70 years of the creation of the Israeli state and the transfer of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem took place, Palestinian protestors were bearing the brunt of the mighty Israeli state on the ‘other side of the Gaza fence line’ as they proceeded with the ‘Great March of Return.’³² An important aspect that needs to be highlighted in this context is the real fact of the Gazan situation. The use of the term border to designate the 1949 cease-fire line that separates Gaza from Israel is fiercely contested by the Palestinians. It is this separation that the Palestinian protestors seek to eradicate through the ‘Great March of Return’ wherein they attempt to cross the fence despite obvious jeopardy to their lives. Israel categorizes it as a border and as such adopts a ‘policy of open-fire’ towards the demonstrators of the march on the grounds of safeguarding its independence and for reasons of security while contending that as it has no settlements in the territory since 2005 and no longer occupies it, consequently it has no obligation towards it. The reality, according to Palestinian opinion is that the so-called border consists of an armed web of “naval ships, barbed wire, electronic barriers, lethal no-man zones, and surveillance systems that function as the fence of an open-air prison.”³³ In other words, Israel continues to regulate the everyday existence of Gaza’s population as it manipulates the flow of people and goods. The occupation thus continues behind the veil of preservation of the territory of the Israeli state. In turn, overt and hostile protests gain momentum as old ruptures are reinforced and new fault lines emerge.

5. Conclusion: Ethics versus Realpolitik

The establishment of the state of Israel, irrespective of the criticisms regarding the morality of the process, bestowed upon the Jewish state formal legitimacy. While it continued to be regarded as an untouchable, at least officially by a significant section of the international community, its existence as a legal entity was beyond doubt, backed as it was by the most influential power of recent times, the United States of America. The trauma that was experienced by the Jews across the globe over centuries and particularly under Hitler’s Germany convinced many of the justness of their cause. India was no exception. At a private/unofficial level, there was a considerable degree of admiration and empathy for the Jews. The rupture for most took place at the point when the Jewish state was perceived as an intruder into what was legitimate Palestinian territory. The displacement and dispossession of the Palestinians by a community that had undergone similar fate elicited greater condemnation particularly from what was then termed as the “third world.” India happened to be one of the original leaders of the anti-colonial movement and was thus expectedly drawn into the Arab-Israeli/ Israeli-Palestinian quagmire. Even as India continued to champion the Arab cause at large and the Palestinian cause in particular, she did maintain back channel contacts with Israel. Ethics demanded the former while realpolitik necessitated the latter position. Widespread political and economic changes in the 1990s initiated an era of premeditated liberalization and globalization that compelled most nation-states and regions to rethink and reconfigure their alliances. Israel, in the post-cold war era benefitted from the changing global and regional configurations. Her technological prowess particularly in the defence and information technology sectors made her acceptable to the Arab world as the geo-political nuances in the

³² Iraqi, Amjad: “The Myth of the Gaza Border”, +972, 17 May 2018, at <https://972mag.com/the-myth-of-the-gaza-border/135392/>

³³ *Ibid.*



region were undergoing fundamental alterations. Israel for most in the region became more acceptable than Iran as new battle lines were drawn in the Middle East and North Africa. The Palestinian issue continued to evoke sympathy and draw symbolic support but national interests of the individual states of the region took precedence. India could no longer ignore the seismic changes and post 2014, with an overtly pro-Israel dispensation in power the progression towards an Israel centric policy has been rapid.

The question that arises is what will India choose? The answer perhaps lies in the new approach to global politics that reinforces the importance of connected geographies wherein the territorial boundaries will become subservient to the demands of global connectivity with its emphasis on global infrastructures and governance. The process, it may be contended has commenced with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in which the Middle East has a very important role to play. India in response has begun looking at the region beyond the prism of the Israel/Palestine issue and the traditional lens of remittances from the Non-Resident Indians residing in the Gulf region though they continue to hold an important position in its official foreign policy paradigm. The region has important transit routes which will enable India to bypass Pakistan, its most important rival in South Asia and check China in its quest for global supremacy through the BRI. In other words, transnational logistics could take over bilateral, regional and transregional ties. Till that time, India does need to introspect with regard to its ties with Israel and Palestine, keeping in mind its own diverse fabric which is perhaps witnessing its most fragile moment as a new national narrative appears to be unfolding challenging the hitherto dominant ideology and institutionalized way of life.

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