

Explaining India's stand on the Gaza conflict

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India's fixed pro-Palestine stand made the Arabs take it for granted and become disdainful of India's core concerns like Kashmir. Tilting towards Israel is bad but tilting towards the Palestinians is worse, runs the thinking in New Delhi now



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Does India's stand on the Gaza conflict mark a change in policy? In 1974 India was the first non-Arab state to recognise the Palestinian Liberation Organisation as the "sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people." India was one of the first states without a Muslim majority and the first non-Arab state to recognise the state of Palestine in 1988. In 2017, India voted in the UN against President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Earlier, India had voted against the original 1947 UN resolution establishing Israel.

Such resolute constancy in policy has changed. Immediately after the September 7 Hamas attack "we stand in solidarity with Israel at this difficult hour," Prime Minister Modi tweeted on X, without offering words of comfort to the Palestinians. In October India abstained on a UN

General Assembly resolution calling for a “humanitarian pause” on violence, even as 121 states voted in favour. At some point India had to recognise the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe, as it indeed did, by despatching humanitarian aid for Palestine, reiterating support for a two-state solution, and supporting a UN resolution asking for a pause in the fighting to deal with the humanitarian crisis.

Was this a return to India’s pro-Palestine stand? The answer is no. Important as humanitarian considerations are, the tilt towards Israel stands stable. If India no longer pursues a pro-Palestine policy, there must have been an audit. Thus, India has abandoned “the dogmas of Delhi” in favour of “pragmatic settlement,” putting into practice the exhortations made by External Affairs Minister Jaishankar in his book *The India Way*. Tilting towards Israel is bad but tilting towards the Palestinians is worse, runs the thinking.

Why Is India Tilting Towards Israel?

Go further back to India’s foreign policy at its pomp in the 1950s. Predictable support for the Palestinians became a totemic principle. Consistency elevated to principle makes partners anticipate one’s choices taking support for granted. Consistency is mediocrity as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto observed in his book *The Myth of Independence*.

India’s fixed pro- Palestine stand made the Arabs disdainful of its core concerns like Kashmir. Recently India has won diplomatic rounds on Kashmir with the UAE leading. India’s strategic ties to the Gulf states are primed to yield geoeconomic benefits. Why should India jeopardise this for the Palestinians when the Arabs themselves are lukewarm? Few Arab states have sympathy for Hamas, or even have pursued a clear Palestine strategy recently.

India used the dormancy of Gaza to benefit from the Abrahamic Accords, gaining confidence to engage Israel, the Arabs, and the US simultaneously. India’s ties to the UAE and Saudi Arabia matured, I2U2 was launched, and the India- Middle East- Europe Economic Corridor was announced. Countering China’s Belt and Road with networks in the Middle East and beyond to the west is a present requirement. The Hamas attacks have put pause on development of such China- facing capabilities.

India is Israel’s biggest market for defence hardware. In December, 2022, Israel’s annual defence exports stood at around \$2 billion. Intelligence co- operation is strong. Israel is thought to have shared defence technologies putting it in the league of the Soviet Union- Russia and France. Are the benefits of energy cooperation and inward remittances from skilled workers in Arab states greater than strategic benefits from such military ties? There are no good answers but India has made a calculated choice.

Besides, Hamas’ video graphed acts of terror serve as a painful reminder of India’s own victimhood. It would have been odd to be resolute on Pakistan-sponsored terror and irresolute on Hamas’ terror. “Zero tolerance of terrorism,” whosoever the perpetrators or

victims might be, makes India's case compelling. That is why India termed the Hamas attack an act of terror, and Jaishankar was quick to point out that "we are big victims of terrorism." India was sending messages to adversaries (Pakistan), and to partners (the US, by extending support to Israel).

Finally, the case for equivalence between Israel and Hamas is weak. Israel is a state the Arabs deal with, while Hamas is a non-state actor. The imperfect Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is still legitimately-elected.

Yet, India has not declared Hamas a terrorist organisation, possibly considering that even Israel has in the past bolstered Hamas to counter the Palestinian Authority. Yasser Arafat had transformed from an advocate of violence into a leader espousing peaceful methods. Hamas in theory could move in the same direction. India also has something to learn from Hamas about strategic surprise.

What Now?

The assumption that diplomatic ties to Israel would provoke a negative reaction from Indian Muslims proved wrong. Drawing the lesson India has distanced itself from Hamas, which has few friends. Indeed, the cautious Arab response to Hamas' attack provides India space to nuance its response, and make a distinction between Hamas and the Palestinians.

Perhaps, in a paradoxical way, Hamas' resilience might foster future reconciliation with Israel leading to a two- state solution while upholding Israel's regional prominence. This would install order and stability helping India pursue its global ambitions, from I2U2, to the India-Middle East- Europe Economic Corridor. If China must remain India's main strategic challenge in the decades ahead India must also build countervailing coalitions, wherever, in whichever way possible.

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