

Why Modi matters to Israel

The time for shalom and namaste to converge is upon us.

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PM Netanyahu and India's Modi
(photo credit: PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE)

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Narendra Modi's historic visit to Israel, the first ever by an Indian prime minister, on July 4 is a revolution in Indian foreign policy and a milestone in bilateral relations. Coming after 25 long years since India established full diplomatic ties with Israel and 67 years since India formally recognized Israel, Modi's much-heralded trip is an expression of New Delhi's commitment to a blossoming strategic partnership with Tel Aviv as well as a message for domestic constituencies in India that Israel is pivotal to India's national interests.

By breaking old patterns and embarking on a standalone Israel visit, Modi is signifying political will at the highest level to demonstrate that India has turned a page. Although bureaucratic, ministerial, military and even

presidential exchanges between India and Israel have been occurring for years, the fact that India's prime minister, the ultimate wielder of power and shaper of policy, is debuting in Israel in a high-profile manner is a big deal, with symbolic and practical import.

For decades, India's leaders before Modi had tiptoed around their nation's growing relations with Israel and avoided making a splash of it. They were fearful of upsetting the "minority vote bank," i.e. religiously mobilized Indian Muslims who swayed election outcomes and held New Delhi hostage against embracing the Zionist state. The logic for prime ministers before Modi used to be that Israel brings myriad benefits to India and they must partake of them, but keep the affair hush-hush to avoid "hurting Muslim sentiments" and antagonizing leftist political parties advocating boycott of Israel and solidarity for Palestinians.

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What Modi is doing is to break these taboos and pursue his "India First" agenda, which is to put national interests above narrow sectarian and ideological calculations that hitherto hindered full realization of the potential in India-Israel cooperation. His rapport with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his ardent admiration for Israel's scientific achievements are novel in the Indian political context, where hypocrisy and doublespeak were previously the norm.

Modi is yanking the India-Israel bond out of the closet and proclaiming it fearlessly. Instead of shame and ambiguity, he is ushering in a brave new age of pride and clarity. Overall public opinion in India has always been sympathetic to Israel, which is viewed as a survivor against odds in the Middle East and the protector of the globally persecuted Jewish faith. Average Indians draw parallels between their country and Israel owing to the sense of common victimhood at the hands of jihadi terrorism and hostile neighbors.

Modi, who has an uncanny knack for the people's pulse, is both steering and satiating this natural popular enthusiasm in India for Israel. Unlike countries from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), who coordinate with Israel but do so furtively, Modi's India has nothing to hide and no one to be apologetic to for cultivating the vital friendship with Israel.

Apart from the massive symbolism of Modi touring Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa, he comes with a pragmatic purpose of advancing bilateral relations with a prime ministerial push. Famed for his personalized foreign policy, Modi looks eagerly toward Israel as a knowledge partner. His itinerary in

Israel includes sites of innovation, entrepreneurship and technology development, especially in water, soil and agriculture management.

Over the years Israel has raised knowhow in farming techniques across various states of India and helped improve yields and incomes of India's rural communities. Modi's image as a development-focused politician has no better mascot than Israel's 26 Centers of Excellence in agriculture and horticulture that could drive India's direly-needed second "Green Revolution." The Indian prime minister has forever felt that if Israel could "make the desert bloom," there is something great and profound about Israelis that Indians must imbibe.

Modi's flagship initiatives like "Startup India" and "Smart Cities" are also poised to gain inspiration and traction from joint ventures with Israeli corporate and public policy successes. The large delegation of Indian corporate executives accompanying Modi to Israel can propel deals that can expand the currently average bilateral trade levels of \$6 billion per annum manyfold.

Modi is of the conviction that Israel is an indispensable partner for his "Make in India" dream of building a large indigenous manufacturing base via technology sharing and FDI from abroad. The phenomenal value of co-production in hi-tech weapons systems with Israel, which has been most forthcoming in transferring state-of-the-art defense technology to India, is not lost on Modi. With India accounting for a whopping 41% of Israel's global weapons sales, he is looking to leverage this special equation to further integrate national security systems of both nations.

Our intelligence agencies and armies already have mutual trust that will receive a fillip when Modi and Netanyahu stand shoulder-to-shoulder unabashedly. Although terrorist threats and territorial disputes faced by India and Israel are unique to their respective regions and histories, there is much that India needs to learn from Israel in a complex international environment where state-sponsored as well as non-state jihadists are causing mayhem.

Lastly, Modi is a masterful cultural ambassador for India and his presence in the Holy Land will boost two-way tourism and visibility in laypersons' imagination. For the 4,000 Jews in India and the 100,000 Indian Jews in Israel, seeing Modi in the flesh in Jerusalem will be an eternal moment to cherish. The business and security partnerships which Modi is championing with Israel will be undergirded by the civilizational touch of his long-awaited visit. The time for shalom and namaste to converge is upon us.

The author is a professor and dean at the Jindal School of International Affairs in Sonapat, India, and the author of Modi Doctrine: The Foreign Policy of India's Prime Minister.