



Foreign Minister Krishna's Visit to Israel: Adding Political Content to a Robust Partnership

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Summary

EAM S.M. Krishna's visit to Israel, marked by both positive atmospherics and substance, was an important political effort on the part of the two governments to further consolidate the burgeoning bilateral relations, which stands on three pegs – economic, defence, and people-to-people contacts. Among the deliverables achieved during the visit include the signing of an extradition treaty and India agreeing to the Israeli proposal for opening a Consulate in the hi-tech hub of Bengaluru. High-level political and strategic engagement as exemplified by Mr. Krishna's visit is essential to better understand each other's concerns regarding difficult foreign policy issues as well as conserve the momentum in the bilateral ties for mutual benefit.

External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna's visit to the West Asian region from January 8-11, 2012 was unique in many respects. The Minister visited Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with each of which India has important relationships. For instance, Jordan is an important supplier of fertilisers. The UAE is one of India's most important trade partners, the top destination for India's exports, and one of the top five suppliers of crude and natural gas. A substantial Indian diaspora works in the Emirates, with over 450 commercial flights per week catering to this population. These countries, however, do not necessarily have similar dynamics operating in their bilateral relationships: while Jordan is one of just two Arab states that have formal diplomatic relations with Israel, the latter has no diplomatic relations with the UAE.

India's foreign policy interactions with Israel have been marked by a 'delicate balance'¹, referring primarily to the political discretion exercised by India in its interactions with Israel while playing down the strategic aspects of the relationship, specifically the robust defence engagement. On the other hand, India's political interactions with the Palestinian Authority and countries of the Arab world are more robust. M. Krishna's West Asian sojourn, a major part of it devoted to Israel, is an effort to address this political lacuna in an otherwise robust relationship.

Mr. Krishna's visit to Israel was the first by an Indian foreign minister in nearly 12 years; the previous visit was by former Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh in July 2000. This visit also marked the first visit by a foreign minister of a Congress-led government in the two decades since full diplomatic relations were first established by the Narasimha Rao government in January 1992. It is pertinent to note that only four Indian Cabinet ministers visited Israel between 2000 and 2011 – two each during the NDA and UPA-led governments. Jaswant Singh's July 2000 visit was preceded by the visit of Home Minister L.K. Advani in June 2000. From the side of the UPA government, Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar visited Israel twice in November 2005 and May 2006, and Commerce Minister Kamal Nath paid a visit in November 2005. Visits by state leaders have been more frequent in recent years; the chief ministers of Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, and Himachal Pradesh have visited Israel since 2009.

From the Israeli side, apart from the landmark visit of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in September 2003 and President Ezer Weizman in 1997, three Deputy PMs (Silvan Shalom in February 2004; Eliayu Yishai in December 2006; and Benjamin Ben Eliezer in January 2010), Interior Minister Meir Sheetrit (in November 2007), and Transport Minister Shaul Mofaz (in March 2007) have visited India so far. In 2011, the ministerial traffic from Israel to India increased substantially: three senior ministers – Agriculture Minister Orit Noked

¹ S. Samuel C. Rajiv, 'The Delicate Balance: Israel and India's Foreign Policy Practice', *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 36, No. 1, January 2012, pp. 128-144.

visited in May, Stas Misezhnikov (the first ever by a Tourism Minister) in September, and Yuval Steinitz (the first by a Finance Minister in more than 15 years) in December.

Three Pegs of Bilateral ties: Economic, Defence, People-to-People Contacts

Mr. Krishna's visit to Israel was an important political effort on the part of the two governments to further consolidate the burgeoning bilateral relations, which stands on three pegs – economic, defence, and people-to-people contacts. Bilateral non-defence trade stood at \$5.3 billion during 2010-2011; it is expected to touch \$6 billion during the current year. With a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) being negotiated – three rounds of talks have already been held and an agreement expected to be concluded before 2012 – bilateral trade is expected to double in the near future. The focus areas of growth include agriculture technology, bio-technology, information technology, water management, telecommunications, hi-tech industries, and homeland security. These areas of cooperation were flagged by Mr Krishna in his joint press conference with Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman on January 10, 2012. Israeli Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz also the EAM and it can be surmised that issues relating to the FTA were discussed.

Apart from the economic peg underpinning the relationship, which is fast gaining traction and becoming diversified from its still continued dependence on the diamond trade, the defence peg of the relationship continues to be robust. Defence Minister A.K. Antony informed the Rajya Sabha in May 2007 that defence purchases from Israel during 2002 – 2007 stood at over \$5 billion.² In the post-2007 period, concluded mega deals include that of Spyder surface-to-air missiles worth \$1 billion, Barak-8 tactical air defence systems for \$1.4 billion. The Lok Sabha was informed in December 2009 that projects under joint development included long-range surface-to-air missile (LRSAM) for the Indian Navy worth Rs 2606 crore and medium-range SAM (MRSAM) for the Indian Air Force worth Rs 10,075 crore.³ Future deals could include Spike anti-tank missiles worth \$1.8 billion. During Mr Krishna's visit, counter-terror cooperation was stressed, with the EAM expansively stating that 'our efforts should be to checkmate and ultimately eradicate terrorists from the face of the earth.'⁴

² Rajya Sabha, Unstarred Question, No. 4481, 'Defence Deals between India and Israel', May 16, 2007, available at <http://164.100.47.5/qsearch/QResult.aspx>, accessed on April 28, 2011.

³ Lok Sabha, Unstarred Question, No. 3865, 'Joint Development of Missiles', December 14, 2009, available at <http://164.100.47.132/LssNew/psearch/QResult15.aspx?qref=77880>, accessed on April 21, 2011.

⁴ IANS, 'India calls for stepping up counter-terror cooperation with Israel', January 10, 2012, available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-calls-for-stepping-up-counter-terror-cooperation-with-Israel/articleshow/11438076.cms>, accessed on January 11, 2012.

Vibrant people-to-people contacts make up the third leg of the relationship. Nearly 50,000 Israelis visited India in 2010, making up close to 20 per cent of all foreign tourist arrivals from West Asia during that year. India is also the primary source country of tourists from Asia to Israel – 40,000 visited Israel during 2010, more than double the number in 2009. Given that the tourism sector is one of India's primary employment generators (9 per cent) and an important element in the gross domestic product (GDP; 7 per cent), such numbers from a small country like Israel are indeed noteworthy. Both countries also agreed to celebrate the completion of two decades of diplomatic relations on a high scale with the involvement of civil society and Mr Krishna encouraged the Israeli public to actively participate in those celebrations.

Positive Atmospherics and Substance

Positive atmospherics and substance were much evident in Mr Krishna's interactions with his interlocutors. While the EAM complimented President Shimon Peres as 'a statesman of calibre', the Israeli leader termed India as the 'greatest democracy on earth'.⁵ Mr Peres expressed Israeli support for India's claims to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Welcoming the EAM, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that "India and Israel are two ancient peoples seizing the future - in technology, in innovation, in enterprise, and I think we can seize it even better by our cooperation."⁶

On his part, Mr Krishna underscored the impressive growth in bilateral ties since the establishment of diplomatic relations two decades ago. He stated that comprehensive discussions on ongoing and future areas of collaboration between the two countries were being held, and that this would set the stage for significant growth in ties over the next two decades. The complementarities between the two countries were constantly advertised during his interactions. Even during his press conference, when the first question addressed to the Israeli foreign minister was about a domestic political issue regarding the minister's party member being disciplined by the Knesset Ethics Committee, the EAM jocularly remarked that a 'free press' was very much a similarity between the two countries!

Among the deliverables achieved during the visit included the signing of an extradition treaty and India agreeing to the Israeli proposal for opening a Consulate in the hi-tech hub of Bengaluru, Mr Krishna's hometown, as pointed out by the Israeli foreign minister. Mr Lieberman, in response to a question, stated that Israel would proceed robustly to establish the consulate soon, which should give a fillip to hi-technology cooperation between the two countries in the areas of IT and bio-technology, among others.

⁵ PTI, 'Israel Backs India's Bid for Permanent UNSC Membership', January 10, 2012, available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/middle-east/Israel-backs-Indias-bid-for-permanent-UNSC-membership/articleshow/11434635.cms>, accessed on January 11, 2012.

⁶ IANS, 'India Calls for Stepping Up Counter-terror Cooperation with Israel', n. 4.

Cooperation in Agriculture Technology

Cooperation in agriculture technology was another prominent issue of discussion. Mr Krishna remarked that given the high importance that agriculture holds in the Indian framework, cooperation in this area was vital. In his remarks at the formal function marking two decades of diplomatic ties, the EAM stated that 'up-gradation of agricultural productivity, agricultural infrastructure and food processing facilities remain major requirements' for India.⁷ In his press conference with Mr Lieberman, the EAM announced that both countries were set to adopt the next agricultural plan to further boost cooperation. An agricultural work plan programme was launched initially in 2006; since then, cooperation has expanded dramatically. For instance, the Indo-Israel Centre of Excellence for Vegetables was set up in Haryana in January 2011. Similar centres are expected to come up in Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and West Bengal as well as other states.

The Israeli Ambassador to India, Alon Ushpiz, in an interaction at the IDSA on December 7, 2011, talked about mutually beneficial cooperation in agriculture wherein Israeli technologies are being shared and applied, rather than being limited to just technology transfers. In this regard, he had pointed to the formulation of a Joint Action Plan in the states of Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu where close to 30 projects have been identified, spread across three categories: vegetables and fruits, water, and dairy. With state governments like Andhra Pradesh embarking on ambitious programmes like the Rs 6,000 crore 'State Milk Mission', there are opportunities galore for cooperation.⁸ Reports had also indicated that Asia's largest dairy farm was likely to come up in Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh, and the project was "waiting for clearances" as of December 2011, according to Ushpiz.

Rare Political Visits to West Asia: Exception or the Norm?

While such high-profile visits between the two countries have been limited, it is pertinent to note that this is in keeping with India's foreign policy interactions with the West Asian region. For instance, an Indian Prime Ministerial visit to Riyadh in 2010 took place after a gap of 28 years and it actually followed the January 2006 visit of the Saudi King Abdullah to India. The Saudi monarch's visit itself came after a gap of 50 years. The then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan visited India during November 2008, again after a gap of 25 years for dignitaries from both countries.

⁷ See 'Remarks by EAM at the Reception to Commemorate the 20th Anniversary of Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between India and Israel', January 10, 2012, available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=190018883>, accessed on January 11, 2012.

⁸ See Office of Chief Minister, Government of Andhra Pradesh, 'Rs. 6,000 crs State Milk Mission to be Launched Soon', September 8, 2011, available at <http://cm.ap.gov.in/08sep11press.asp>, accessed on January 11, 2012.

The EAM did not respond to specific questions from the Israeli media characterising Israel as 'a mistress' of the bilateral ties due to the fact that India was not forthcoming in acknowledging the strength of the relationship with high-level political visits. Mr Lieberman, however, opened his remarks by pointedly referring to Mr Krishna's visit as the 'first high official visit after 10 years'. In response to a question from a *Jerusalem Post* reporter about the political differences between the two sides, Mr Lieberman remarked that over the 'next five years', he hoped to see 'more close cooperation on other issues, including at the political level'.⁹ Other senior Israeli ministers have also in the recent past downplayed the political differences between the two countries. Finance Minister Steinitz, for instance, during his visit to India in December 2011 in an interview to CNN-IBN on December 23, 2011 remarked that differences existed even in the US-Israel relationship and that the robust nature of ties that Israel has with the US and India indicates that 'mature nations can overcome some differences...'¹⁰

Iranian Nuclear Issue

Apart from the Palestinian issue, significant differences continue to exist between India and Israel over the manner in which the Iranian nuclear programme needs to be tackled. India is opposed to a military solution, terming it 'unacceptable international behaviour', while Israel has been a 'champion' of such an approach in international and bilateral fora. Mr Krishna, in his press conference, pointed to the 'consistent stance' of India at the IAEA regarding Iran and reiterated that 'every country has the right [to a peaceful nuclear energy programme] but that right is within the parameters which the IAEA sets up. We fully subscribe to that principle and we commend that principle to other nations.' He added that the IAEA 'provides the basic framework for addressing technical issues relating to any nuclear programme.'¹¹

Issues Regarding FTA

Regarding the FTA, specifically, there have been concerns reported about jobs moving away from Israel. Finance minister Steinitz had, however, dismissed these concerns earlier by insisting that 'Israel usually exports added value and not end products.'¹² Issues relating

⁹ Video of the press conference available at <http://link.brightcove.com/services/player/bcpid1140772454001?bckey=AQ~~,AAAA4Q00iRE~,zBDGy0QkIBlMT3nMCupudyS5B02SHi6B&bclid=0&bctid=1379982009001>, accessed on January 11, 2012.

¹⁰ Video of the interview available at <http://ibnlive.in.com/videos/214545/india-israel-must-take-strong-action-on-syria-steinitz.html>, accessed on January 11, 2012.

¹¹ See n. 9.

¹² Ron Dagoni and Eran Preer, 'Israel and India Move Toward Free Trade Pact', October 10, 2010, available at <http://www.globes.co.il/serveen/globes/docview.asp?did=1000592891&fid=1725>, accessed on December 5, 2011.

to the pharmaceutical sector have also been flagged, given India's strength in the international generic drug market and the effect of a level-playing field on each other's commercial strengths.¹³ It is pertinent to note in this regard that the generic drug manufacturer Teva, which has a multi-million dollar manufacturing facility in Noida, is also Israel's biggest company.

Concerns about Israeli intellectual property rights (IPR) regulations specifically in the pharmaceutical sector in the light of issues between US and Israel are equally pertinent. Israel for instance was placed on the US Trade Representative (USTR) Super 301 'Priority Watch List' in 2005. A US interest group alleged that lax Israeli pharmaceutical IPR regulations 'cost US manufacturers billions of dollars'.¹⁴ An agreement was reached between both the countries in February 2010 to move the country from the 'Priority Watch List' to the 'Watch List' pending implementation of the agreement.¹⁵ However, the May 2011 USTR Special 301 Report still had Israel on the 'Priority Watch List', along with 11 other countries, for having 'the most significant concerns regarding insufficient IPR protection or enforcement, or otherwise limited market access for persons relying on intellectual property protection'.¹⁶ These and other related issues would hopefully be discussed to each other's mutual benefit before the FTA is finalised before the end of 2012.

On their part, Israeli policymakers and business leaders have been naturally upbeat about their prospects in the Indian market with Finance Minister Steinitz stating in November 2010 that 'the giant Indian market is full of endless opportunities for Israeli companies.'¹⁷ During Mr. Steinitz's December 2011 visit, collaboration in education and R&D was also stressed.

¹³ 'Commerce Min Talks FTA with Israel, Assigns DoP to Gather Pharma Inputs', April 28, 2011, available at http://www.pharmabuzz.org/news.php?news_id=3566, accessed on January 11, 2012.

¹⁴ Ronny Linder-Ganz, 'US Muslim group seeks to nix US-Israel Free Trade agreement', *Haaretz*, April 23, 2009, available at <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/business/u-s-muslim-group-seeks-to-nix-u-s-israel-free-trade-agreement-1.274646>, accessed on January 13, 2012.

¹⁵ 'Deputy USTR Sapiro announces United States and Israel have reached an Understanding on Intellectual Property Rights Issues', February 18, 2010, available at <http://www.ustr.gov/about-us/press-office/press-releases/2010/february/deputy-ustr-sapiro-announces-united-states-and-is>, accessed on January 13, 2012. Text of the agreement is available at http://www.ustr.gov/webfm_send/1664.

¹⁶ 'USTR Releases Annual Special 301 Report on Intellectual Property Rights', May 2011, available at <http://www.ustr.gov/about-us/press-office/press-releases/2011/may/ustr-releases-annual-special-301-report-intellectual-p>, accessed on January 13, 2012.

¹⁷ Tani Goldstein, 'Israel, India to Sign Free Trade Agreement', November 25, 2010, available at <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3989862,00.html>, accessed on January 11, 2012.

Israel–Pakistan Dynamics?

An interesting question posed to the EAM during the joint press conference with Mr Lieberman was regarding the media interview of former Pakistan President, Pervez Musharraf, to the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* on January 6, 2012. Musharraf had noted that one of the positives of establishing ties with Israel would be to counter the India–Israel relationship, especially ‘cooperating on intelligence, which is a very big deal. Pakistan adjusting its stance toward Israel has the advantage of possibly breaking those anti-Pakistan activities.’¹⁸ Another positive Musharraf saw was a possible dilution of the anti-Pakistan rationale of the Jewish lobby in the US, given that ‘Israel has clout in the media. I would say the Jewish community has clout in the media, in the US and elsewhere.’¹⁹

Mr. Krishna's response was measured, stating:

‘It is between Israel and Pakistan to decide what kind of a relationship that they want to establish as much as it is between India and Israel as to what kind of a relationship that we want to establish. We certainly will not come in the way of Israel having its relationship with any other country because each relationship stands ultimately on the values on which we stand for – media freedom, democracy, rule based law, adult suffrage. We certainly would like Israel to look into all these contents.’

The possibility of ties between Israel and Pakistan has been the subject of not insignificant speculation ever since their Foreign Ministers met in Turkey in September 2005 and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon (whom Musharraf describes as a ‘great military leader’ in the *Haaretz* interview) and Musharraf shook hands at the United Nations in the same year. However, apart from the considerations that Mr Krishna brought to the attention of the Israeli media, Israeli policymakers like Finance Minister Steinitz are also aware of the fact that ‘the most significant assistance that the Iranians got [on their nuclear programme] was from Pakistan.’²⁰ Reports do however note that channels of communication between Israel and Pakistan have been functioning.

Visit to Ramallah

Mr Krishna's visit to Ramallah, after the interactions with the Israeli interlocutors, to meet the Palestinian Authority President, Mahmoud Abbas, Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and his counterpart Raid al-Maliki, was an affirmation of India's long-standing support

¹⁸ Danna Harman, ‘Relations with Israel Could help Pakistan, says Former President Musharraf’, *Haaretz*, January 6, 2012, available at <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/magazine/relations-with-israel-could-help-pakistan-says-former-president-musharraf-1.405846>, accessed on January 11, 2012.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See n. 10.

to the Palestinian cause. This is recognised and accepted by Israel. It would be interesting to see whether the Israelis have expressed any views to Mr Krishna regarding the current Indian stance supporting East Jerusalem as the future capital of the Palestine state, given their sensitivities on the issue. Such high-profile visits also provide an opportunity to convey India's concerns regarding the Palestinian issue to the highest levels of the Israeli government. As an editorial in *The Jerusalem Post*, dated January 10, 2012, rightly notes: 'India's foreign policy is proof that a strong pro-Palestinian stance is not an obstacle to robust and mutually advantageous relations with Israel.'²¹ Mr Krishna told PTI that "it is India's fond hope that the talks which are being explored between the two sides will be continued and they will find a purposeful end in terms of finding a permanent solution which has eluded time and personalities."²²

An Assessment

The future contours of India's relationship with Israel will continue to exhibit political differences in their respective foreign policy positions on issues like Iran and Palestine, as against the robustness in their bilateral ties. It is, however, important to note that these differences are not related *per se* to bilateral issue areas but are caused by 'third-party' issues. While these may not derail the overall relationship, their ability to generate complications remains. A closer examination of some of these problematic issue areas reveals 'affinities of interest' towards a common outcome. For instance, both India and Israel have time and again expressed their opposition to the presence of another nuclear weapon power in their extended strategic neighbourhood. The goal of Palestinian statehood is also shared – in the aftermath of Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu's speech at the BESA Centre in June 2009, though both sides hold different views on issues relating to the nature of the state.

With bilateral ties getting hooked on to the increasingly dominant 'economic peg' – a process that should continue apace with the FTA – there is every opportunity for bilateral ties to move forward constructively. This is especially so since some of India's domestic constituencies opposed the relationship – for instance, members of the Samajwadi Party have stated that while they are not opposed to India-Israel relations, they are opposed to the defence aspects of the relationship.

It is equally pertinent to note that no major opposition to the EAM's visit has been expressed by the Indian political class or intelligentsia. At one level, this could point to the success

²¹ JPOST Editorial, 'India's Delicate Balance', January 10, 2012, available at <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Editorials/Article.aspx?id=253065>, accessed on January 11, 2012.

²² PTI, 'India Backs Peace Talks between Israel and Palestine', January 11, 2012, available at <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/218368/krishna-arrives-ramallah-meet-palestinian.html>, accessed on January 13, 2012.

of Israeli public diplomacy in informing opinion in India about its policies and way of life. It is pertinent to note that analysts like former Special Envoy to the Middle East Peace Process Chinmaya Gharekhan recognise this aspect.²³ The Israeli Embassy, for instance, has undertaken various tasks, including bringing out its newsletter in Urdu and Hindi, organising exhibitions of relevance in places like Lucknow, and facilitating the trips of Indian Muslim political/religious/educational leaders to Israel, among other efforts, geared towards 'polishing its image—and its hardware in India', according to a US Embassy cable sent in March 2008.²⁴

At another level, it is proof that Indian foreign policy can now afford greater flexibility in its political interactions with Israel, in the light of the positive nature of Israeli involvement in crucial areas like India's developmental needs and food security, apart from defence cooperation. It remains to be seen whether the continuing political concerns can be overcome and the next obvious step at the political level will be undertaken by India—that of a first prime ministerial visit to Israel. The principle of reciprocity suggests that this could be the next major political development in bilateral ties slated for the near future, given that PM Sharon came here in 2003 on the invitation of the Vajpayee government. Such a visit would be a strong political affirmation of the value that both countries bring to the relationship. High-level political and strategic engagement as exemplified by Mr Krishna's visit is essential to better understand each other's concerns regarding difficult foreign policy issues as well as conserve the momentum in the bilateral ties for mutual benefit. Mr Krishna's visit, therefore, has added the crucial political content to one of India's most significant bilateral relationships of the post-Cold War era.

Given India's rising geo-strategic footprint, great power ambitions as exemplified by its desire for UNSC permanent membership, and the need to more effectively safeguard its core national interests vis-à-vis issues like the Iranian nuclear programme, there is an imperative need for India to be more pro-active in its strategic engagements with countries of the region. Only then will there be opportunities to shape the evolving regional dynamics to suit India's interests rather than be reactive to developments that could negatively affect it.

²³ This was while delivering a special talk at the 11th IDSA-BESA Bilateral Dialogue, held at the IDSA on December 7, 2011.

²⁴ Hasan Suroor, 'Israel's PR Offensive in India', *The Hindu*, March 19, 2011, available at <http://www.hindu.com/2011/03/19/stories/2011031965681500.htm>, accessed on April 21, 2011.