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India-Israel Defence Relations: From Longstanding to Robust

Manjari Singh

India and Israel relations, even though just three decades old, have subsequently progressed over the years, especially in the fields of defence and agri-tech. After lying dormant since the time India formally recognised the Jewish nation in September 1950; the international, regional and domestic geostrategic environment compelled New Delhi to establish diplomatic relations and to normalise its relations with Tel Aviv in January 1992.¹ The normalisation not only earmarked the beginning of a full-fledged engagement between the two countries but also provided impetus to India's defence requirements.

By signing a strategic partnership agreement in July 2017 the two nations marked a paradigm shift toward encapsulating broad-spectrums in the bilateral. Needless to mention, since the normalisation of relations, it took a quarter of a century for India to openly embrace and engage with the Jewish nation. While the two countries are committed to engaging in many new unconventional domains; defence and agri-tech continue to form the bedrock of their relationship. The “strategic” component in the partnership provides leverage to further their defence relations. Today, India is Israel's largest recipient and acquires 43 per cent of the latter's

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total arms exports. At the same time, Israel accounts for 13 per cent of India's total arms imports after Russia and France. Additionally, the formation of a Joint Working Group (JWG) in October 2021 which is aimed to formulate a comprehensive 10-year roadmap and to identify new areas of cooperation in the sector; implies that the two countries are looking forward to signing a robust defence cooperation agreement. The impending defence cooperation is likely to embolden the relations further.²

Military-to-military engagements including joint exercises and defence industry collaboration are on the upsurge. Both government organisations and private industries are committed in co-developing defence systems. For instance, Israel Aerospace Industries and India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) have co-developed a medium-range surface-to-air-missile (MRSAM), named as BARAK 8 Air defence system which was successfully test-fired last month. Similarly, New Delhi is also sourcing Firefly loitering ammunition, Spike anti-tank guided missiles, and Spice guidance kits from Tel Aviv. Defence companies in Israel have started to invest in India's defence manufacturing sector which is propelled by the call for *Make in India* and *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (self-reliance) initiative.

While these cooperation's in varied military domains are new and it will take some time to review their progress, the defence relations, as of now, are significantly marked by arms trade. However, the paper argues that with these new markers towards diversifying the defence relations and with the changing global order, India and Israel are aiming to expand their defence domain from loosely defined and "longstanding" relations to well-defined, concrete and robust defence partnership. Towards this progress, the impending defence cooperation agreement will play a significant role in further concretising the relations.

The trajectory of India-Israel defence relations, however, is not linearly upward-moving but is rather tortuous. Israel's independence

in May 1948 was marked by controversies surrounding the Palestinian cause and the newly Independent India which gained its freedom majorly through non-violent means following Mahatma Gandhi's penchant could not make an independent decision vis-à-vis Israel. Additionally, the then Education Minister Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad's concerns about divisions in Muslim electorate compelled New Delhi to forge a pro-Arab policy. To simplify, India's defence relations with Israel can be divided into three phases, namely, (a) during pre-normalisation; (b) post-normalisation defence collaborations; and (c) finally after the arrival of the new Indian government in 2014 and the subsequent signing of the strategic partnership agreement in July 2017.

Defence Relations: Pre-normalisation

Though marginally documented, India's defence equation with Israel pre-dates normalisation. Probably a major reason why the defence relations between India and Israel are defined as "longstanding" by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA).³ However, there was no warm diplomatic embrace, rather defence and intelligence collaborations between the two countries remained under the purview of a clandestine affair.⁴ This long time interaction is attributed to the strategic communication between the two countries since the Sino-Indian war of 1962.⁵ Though it has not been established adequately and the MEA has rejected the claims of any "purported" letters written by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru for seeking help from Israel, yet some scholars believe that such communication did take place though in a hush-hush fashion to avoid its adverse effects on Indo-Arab relations.⁶

January 1963 is earmarked as the establishment of Indo-Israeli defence and military relations as it was this time, that is, three months after the border conflict with China that the Government of India showed a willingness to engage with the Jewish nation on military matters. Israel's Chief of the Army Staff General David Shaltiel along with Major General

Meir Amit, Director of Military Intelligence Directorate visited New Delhi to meet India's top military brass including the then Chief of the Army Staff, General Jayanto Nath Chaudhuri.⁷ It is believed that military delegations from both sides continued to meet each other despite India's strong opposition to Israeli policies vis-à-vis Palestine. Israel's controversial yet highly decorated Defence Minister Moshe Dayan's visit in 1977 is the most noteworthy factor in bolstering Indo-Israeli defence relations. Prolonged cooperation between intelligence wings of both the nations, India's Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) and its Israeli counterpart Mossad since the premiership of Indira Gandhi further confirms sharing of critical information pertaining to security and national interest.

Furthermore, it is again faintly believed that Israel supplied weapons to India in its other major wars too such as that of 1965 and 1971. It supplied M-58 160-mm mortar ammunition to India in 1965.⁸ In response, India covertly sent military equipment to Israel during the 1967 war. Gary J. Bass in his book *The Blood Telegram: India's Secret War in East Pakistan* bases his argument on the Indian diplomat P N Haskar's papers, the principal secretary to the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, to illustrate that when the Nixon administration "turned blind eye" to the repressions of the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) by Yahya Khan, in July 1971, the then Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir secretly arranged for an Israeli arms manufacturer to supply mortars and ammunitions and instructors to India.⁹

Post-Normalisation

Merely six years post the establishment of diplomatic relations, Tel Aviv's unconditional support to New Delhi was again put to test when in 1998, Israel was one of the few countries that chose not to condemn India's Pokhran nuclear test. Not only did Israel support India's right to test its civil nuclear capabilities, but it also aided India with mortars and ammunitions and provided laser-guided missiles for IAF Mirage 2000H

fighters during the Kargil conflict that followed the nuclear testing.¹⁰ To be specific, Indian Air Force (IAF) were supplied and aided with unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), ‘Searcher’ and surveillance systems for Jaguar and Mirage squadrons. MIG 21 was also upgraded by Israel. The Indian Army on the other hand was equipped with Israeli made Laser Guided Bombs (LGB) and 160-mm mortar ammunition. These weapon systems helped India to secure an edge over their adversary.

After the establishment of diplomatic relations, given that it was a formative stage, India-Israel ties furthered with over 50 defence related visits alone in a span of nine years, that is, from 1992 to 2000. It is noteworthy that while Israel was more forthcoming in establishing a robust military collaboration through military co-production, given its traditional Arab policy, India was still reluctant to openly declare its developing relations with the Jewish nation. Indian Government’s reluctance is well reflected in the then Minister of State for Defence, S. Krishna Kumar’s statement in February 1992, that is, within a month of normalisation, that “there was no proposal, no initiative, no offer for any kind of defence ties with that country—that subject had not even been discussed in the Defence Ministry”.¹¹

However, by mid-1992, the situation changed and many Indian leaders began to acknowledge Israel’s role in countering terrorism in its own country and that “Israel had certain defence capabilities worth noting”. In this context, the views of former Defence Minister Sharad Pawar and later on Krishna Kumar’s himself is notable. Starting from a six-member defence team visit to India and discussion on matters of mutual interest to rapid progress made in the subsequent years including high-level visits (especially from Israel), various arms purchases and urgency regarding up-gradation of Russian purchased avionics and weapon systems such as MIG 21 Bis, Russian T-72 tanks and remotely piloted vehicles suggested that India had found another reliable defence partner in Israel.

Though not readily acknowledged, India's normalisation with Israel in 1992 had two strategic connotations and concerns. One, post the disintegration of the Soviet Union, India was required to diversify its defence procurements. Soviet Russia is one of the major traditional arms suppliers to India which accounted for 72.46 per cent of the Trend Indicator Values (TIV) of total imported arms.¹² Though the Russian military-industrial complex and production capability had been reduced by the collapse, its defence exports capabilities were barely affected. However, to reduce dependence and to avoid uncertainty, India needed to diversify its sources of defence requirements, given its adversarial concerns. Israel, in that context, was a promising option. A similar situation has once again arisen with the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis where the endgame is nowhere to be seen. Given that 90 per cent of India's arms imports are from Russia (accounting for 68.28 per cent),¹³ further diversification in sources of defence imports, co-production with friendly foreign countries (with strengthened foreign direct investments) and propelling indigenisation initiatives, can be the only saviours.

Two, given the change in the geostrategic environment, India wanted to achieve its goal of self-reliance in military equipment production. This was essential for achieving strategic autonomy as part of India's vision as a global and regional power. Israel was emerging as an embodiment of a state managing and nurturing its indigenous military-industrial complex by using state-of-the-art technologies, both dual-use and disruptive. It had made its mark and had a singular reputation in the defence sector. Additionally, it showed keenness in the commercial expansion of its defence technologies to other countries through technology transfer, up-gradation of existing machinery and providing new advanced weapons.¹⁴ Thus, for the first time, these two crucial aspects compelled India to act pragmatically vis-à-vis Israel than driven by traditional Arab-centric ideology.

Post-2014 and Strategic Partnership Agreement

While these varied instances establish that India's defence relations is indeed longstanding. However, it cannot be denied that post-2014, while Narendra Modi led National Democratic Alliance's (NDA) pro-Israel policies provided impetus to the relations; Indian profound focus on defence indigenisation through Make in India initiatives, furthered India-Israel defence domain. More importantly, since the signing of the strategic partnership in July 2017, the Indo-Israeli defence liaison is not only longstanding but is more refined and robust.

In terms of volumes of arms trade, as per recent Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reports, for decades, India is the world's largest importer of arms followed by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Australia and China. In 2017-21, it accounted for 11 per cent of global arms imports wherein its main suppliers are Russia (46 per cent), France (27 per cent) and the US (12 per cent).¹⁵ Israel is the fourth-largest supplier to India with 8.48 per cent share. This shows that despite post-Cold War diversification in arms imports, India continues to rely heavily on Russian supplies, for instance, since the last decade, the Russian share in the Indian defence market stands at 68.28 per cent.

In the 2000s, Israel's share in the Indian defence market has been tortuous with declining trends in the 1998-2006 time periods, when posting the uplifting of US sanctions, Indo-American defence trade started to increase. This was also the time, especially in 2006, when India slapped corruption charges on Israel Aerospace Industry (IAI) and Rafael Advanced Defence System on procurement of Barak missiles and both the companies were banned.¹⁶ Since 2014, the share of Israel in India's arms market has been increasing.

While the arms trade continues to play a significant role in India's defence relations with Israel, the two countries are also working together in co-producing defence items to support India's *Atmanirbhar Bharat*

(self-reliance). In terms of areas of cooperation, Israel has been upgrading India's aircraft systems such as MIG 21s; cooperating on developing Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) and Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH) with Indian aeronautic giants like Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) and Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) along with Israeli Elbit System IAI; co-producing surveillance equipment such as UAVs and Remotely Piloted Vehicles (RPVs); in providing assistance on developing Main Battle Tanks (MBT) such as Arjun MBT.¹⁷ Moreover, India imports critical defence technologies from Israel such as Heron UAV, a Medium Altitude Long Endurance (MALE) system; Searcher, a multi-mission tactical UAV; air defence systems such as SPYDER-MR; BARAK surface-to-air-missile; beyond visual range air-to-air missile (BVRAAM) such as Python-5, Derby, Griffin laser-guided module, HAROP, and Crystal Maze along with guided bombs, loitering ammunition and surface-to-air (SAM) missiles; and sensors such as EL/M-2248 MF-STAR, EL/M-2221 STGR, EL/M-2032, EL/M-2075 Phalcon, etc.¹⁸

Nonetheless, as per India's *Srijan* Portal,¹⁹ a Government of India initiative for providing data on Indian Defence Indigenisation which became active since August 2020, India imported around 92 defence related items from Israel worth Rs 2,111 million (US\$ 27.53 million). Of the 92 items, as many as eight items clubbed under guided missiles warheads and explosive components MRSAM, electrical insulators and insulating materials, engine instruments, transformers, hardware and abrasives, laboratory equipment, etc. are indigenised.

Reflecting on the new global strategic challenges, while India pledges to increase its defence indigenisation process by including public and private organisations and companies, and to decrease its volume of arms import; growing self-reliance on arms will impact the quantum of the Indo-Israel defence relationship which is majorly guided by the arms trade. Nonetheless, the recent extraordinary range of cooperation in terms of procurement and co-development of equipment such as missiles

like long-range surface-to-air missiles (LRSAM), MRSAM, radars, UAVs, assault weapons and so on and so forth, confirms that there will not be any negative impact on growing defence relations between India and Israel, especially in the short-term.²⁰

Moreover, Israeli defence industry is well placed given its prolonged exposure to the Indian defence market, to take advantage of the government's measures in increasing defence manufacturing. Additionally, India's drive and demands toward military modernisation are huge, and so are its needs of the growing internal and external security concerns. Thus, in the times to come Indo-Israeli defence relations will be much more solidified and robust, even when the arms trade component may reduce. *Srijan* portal gives an inkling that India's decision to indigenise is well-supported by Israel. To improve the country's defence exports profile, a robust relationship with Israel will prove significant. For instance, with an increasing focus on joint development and production, the countries could explore markets in the developing nations such as Africa, South-East Asia, and Asia to export Indian manufactured Israeli products such as UAVs, small arms and ammunitions, radars, etc.

To conclude, while India-Israel traditional defence relations have been longstanding, however, with the changing strategic realities which demand increasing indigenisation, the relations are becoming increasingly robust. Until now, the bilateral has been earmarked by increasing arms trade and up-gradation of weapon systems imported from elsewhere. Nevertheless, even in a role changing mechanism, Israel as a dependable strategic partner will continue to contribute significantly to India's domestic defence industry. Both the public as well as the private defence sectors in both countries are well-equipped in collaborating to fulfil India's critical defence requirements. Thus, India's defence relations with Israel will continue to flourish given that both the countries provide each other with strategic unique selling points (USPs). Indian USP lies in its vibrant defence market while Israel with its cutting-edge technology and

willingness to transfer such technologies has proven to be a dependable strategic partner. Hence, defence cooperation will continue to further bolster Indo-Israeli defence relations.

Notes

1. For elaboration on various international, regional and domestic factors that led India to build diplomatic relations with Israel see: Manjari Singh (2021), "India's Equation with the Middle East and its Strategic Impact", *Scholar Warrior*, Spring, pp. 53-61.
2. Rahul Singh (2021), "India, Israel to Work on 10-year Roadmap for Defence Cooperation", *The Hindustan Times*, 29 October, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-israel-to-work-on-10-year-roadmap-for-defence-cooperation-101635521274759.html>, accessed on 6 May 2022.
3. MEA (2021), "India-Israel Bilateral Relations", Government of India, https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Israel_final_21.pdf, accessed on 22 April 2022.
4. The fact that India had a clandestine relation with Israel in defence and Intelligence related issues, there are limited or no declassified official records to support the claim. Hence, most of the claims and counter-claims are established based on books written by authors who once held official positions or through some of the sparse declassified documents.
5. Santosh Chaubey (2017), "India-Israel Relation Over the Years: Ten Defining Developments", *India Today*, 4 July, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-israel-relations-narendra-modi-kargil-independence-1022258-2017-07-04>, accessed on 24 April 2022.
6. "India-China War: No Records of Nehru Writing for Israeli Help", 18 December 2011, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-china-war-no-records-of-nehru-writing-for-israeli-help/articleshow/11154490.cms>, accessed on 24 April 2022; See also: Harsh V. Pant and Ambuj Sahu (2019), "Israel's Arms Sales to India: Bedrock of a Strategic Partnership", Observer Research Foundation, Issue Brief No. 311, at https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/ORF_Issue_Brief_311_India-Israel.pdf, accessed on 24 April 2022.
7. Farah Naaz (2000), "Indo-Israeli Military Cooperation", *Strategic Analyses*, Vol. 24, No. 5, at https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_aug00naf01.html, accessed on 24 April 2022.
8. N. A. K. Browne, "A Perspective on India-Israel Defence and Security Ties", *Strategic Analyses*, Vol 41, Issue 4, 2017, pp. 325-335.
9. Gary J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram: India's Secret War in East Pakistan* (New Delhi: Random House, 2014).
10. Nicolas Blarel, *The Evolution of India's Israel Policy: Continuity, Change and compromise Since 1922* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).
11. S. Rajen Singh, "India and Israel: Towards Greater Cooperation", *India Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 4, 2001, pp. 113-148.

12. Nicolas Blarel, n. 10.
13. Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2021", *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, March 2022, at https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/fs_2203_at_2021.pdf, accessed on 24 April 2022.
14. Harsh V. Pant, "India-Israel Partnership: Convergence and Constraints", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2004, pp. 60-73; See also: Siddharth Ramana, "Where Phalcons Dare: India Israel Defence Relations", *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, Issue Brief No. 68, 2008, at <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/57301/IPCS-IssueBrief-No68.pdf>, accessed on 24 April 2022.
15. Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2021", *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, March 2022, at https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/fs_2203_at_2021.pdf, accessed on 24 April 2022; See also: Yesli Seli, "India is amongst the World's largest arms importers, says SIPRI as it cites conflict with China", *The New Indian Express*, 14 March 2022, at <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2022/mar/14/india-is-amongst-the-worlds-largest-arms-importers-says-sipri-as-it-cites-conflict-with-china-2429965.html#:~:text=India%20is%20amongst%20the%20world's%20largest%20arms%20importers%2C%20accounting%20for,main%20contributors%20to%20these%20imports.,> accessed on 24 April 2022.
16. Harsh V. Pant and Ambuj Sahu (2019), n. 6.
17. Samuel Rajiv, "India-Israel Defence Trade and Defence Indigenisation", *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, Issue Brief, 4 February 2022, at <https://idsa.in/system/files/issuebrief/ib-india-israel-defence-trade-ssrajiv.pdf>, accessed on 24 April 2022.
18. Harsh V. Pant and Ambuj Sahu (2019), n. 6.
19. The *Srijan* portal lists items procured from foreign original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) by the DPSUs, ordnance factories and Service headquarters, at <https://srijandefence.gov.in/>, accessed on 24 April 2022.
20. Samuel Rajiv, n. 17.