

Modi visit consolidates Indo-Israeli military-strategic partnership

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Narendra Modi's three-day visit to Israel last week, the first by an Indian Prime Minister to the Zionist state, represented a turning point in the development of military-strategic ties between the two countries.

But it was more than that. On the part of Modi and India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government the visit was meant to underscore that New Delhi is determined to purge any lingering vestiges of its former "non-aligned" foreign policy in pursuit of closer ties with the United States and its principal Asian allies—in the Asia-Pacific, Japan and Australia, and in the Middle East, Israel.

Modi and his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu, announced the upgrading of ties between India and Israel to a "strategic partnership," while casting their two countries as embattled champions of "democracy."

Underscoring the importance Israel attaches to courting Modi and further strengthening ties with India, Netanyahu gave the Indian Premier a grand reception. This included Netanyahu and his entire cabinet greeting Modi on the tarmac at Tel Aviv International airport on his arrival July 4. Only US presidents and the Pope have previously been granted such treatment.

In welcoming Modi, Netanyahu said Tel Aviv had waited for such a visit for "70 years," i.e. since the creation of Israel itself.

Under India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and his Congress Party government, New Delhi opposed Israel's admission to the UN in 1949, a year after the Zionist state had been founded through war and the expulsion of much of the Palestinian population. To bolster its phony "anti-imperialist" credentials and as part of its promotion of "non-alignment," India for decades thereafter claimed to be a champion of the Palestinian cause and refused to establish formal diplomatic ties with Israel.

India's Cold War "non-alignment" policy was bound

up with the close relations it established with the Soviet Union during the 1950s in response to Washington's burgeoning military-strategic partnership with Pakistan, India's principal rival following South Asia's bloody 1947 communal partition.

In the aftermath of the Stalinist bureaucracy's December 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union and in lock-step with the Indian bourgeoisie's abandonment of its state-led development strategy in favour of full integration into the US-led world capitalist order, New Delhi reoriented its foreign policy toward the pursuit of closer relations with the western powers, especially Washington.

In 1992, Narasimha Rao's Congress Party government established full diplomatic ties with Israel. Since then, New Delhi's relations with Tel Aviv have been systematically expanded both by Congress-led governments and those led by the Hindu supremacist BJP.

However, Modi's three-year-old government has been determined, as part of a more assertive and ostensibly "pragmatic" foreign policy, to take India's ties with Tel Aviv to a new level. According to Dore Gold, Israel's Ambassador to India and the former director general of Israel's Foreign Ministry, "Since 1992 there has been a growing relationship between Israel and India, but it was under Prime Minister Modi that the relationship has really blossomed."

In a clear message to Tel Aviv that his government is indifferent to Israel's oppression of the Palestinian people and that India's call for a Palestinian state is a hollow gesture, Modi broke with the longstanding Indian practice of combining official visits to Israel with a visit to Ramallah, the seat of the Palestinian Authority.

Netanyahu, for his part, clearly delighted in the company of the self-styled Hindu strongman, who came to political prominence in 2002 when as Gujarat Chief Minister he presided over an anti-Muslim pogrom.

The India media, which has lauded Modi's unabashed promotion of the Indo-US alliance as the "cornerstone" of the country's foreign policy, has also hailed what the *Times of India* termed as Modi's "coming out party" in Tel Aviv. A July 7 *Indian Express* editorial, titled "Take-off in Tel Aviv," welcomed "the de-hyphenation of India's relations with Israel and Palestine," calling it "perhaps the biggest achievement of this visit."

Following their talks, Modi and Netanyahu issued a joint statement in which they pledged to further develop bilateral military-strategic ties, including through enhanced intelligence sharing and the "joint development of defence products" and related transfers of Israeli military technology. They also signed a half-dozen agreements to further economic and technical cooperation. Israel committed to assist India with water management and agriculture, and the two countries agreed to greater cooperation between their space agencies.

Israeli weapon sales have been central to relations between New Delhi and Tel Aviv since even before diplomatic relations were established in 1992. Israel rushed military equipment to India both during the latter's brief border-war with China in 1962 and its war with Pakistan over Bangladesh in 1971.

Having purchased some \$10 billion worth of Israeli weapons and military equipment over the last 10 years, India has become far and away Israel's biggest market for arms, accounting for 41 percent of all its weapons exports.

With India engaged in a massive rearmament program and currently the world's largest arms importer, Tel Aviv is anxious to take an even bigger share of India's weapon's purchases. Currently, Israel is India's number three defence supplier, trailing only Russia and the United States.

In April, state-owned Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) announced a deal worth nearly \$2 billion to provide sophisticated air and missile defense systems to the Indian army—the largest foreign defence contract in Israel's history.

India sees advanced defence equipment from Israel as critical for augmenting its military prowess in South Asia and the broader Indian Ocean region, against both arch-rival Pakistan and China, with which it is locked in an all-round competition for strategic influence in Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

Israel has sold India Phalcon early-warning aircraft, its Barack II air defence system, which is currently being outfitted on all major Indian warships, and surveillance drones. It has also reportedly provided technical

assistance to India's nuclear-weapons program. According to some news reports, Modi snared a deal to purchase armed drones during last week's visit.

The Israeli Defence Force also periodically conducts joint exercises with the Indian military, although these are generally kept under wraps. Later this month, India will participate, along with the US and five other NATO countries, in an air combat exercise being hosted by Israel.

In their joint statement, Modi and Netanyahu "reiterated their strong commitment to combat (terrorism) in all its forms and manifestations." Israel, as the main agency of US imperialism in the Middle East, justifies its provocative military build-up against its regional rivals and its repression of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories in the name of "fighting terrorism." In the same way, India portrays its brutal military occupation of the country's only Muslim-majority state, Jammu and Kashmir, as a stand against "terrorism" and attributes the mass alienation of the Kashmiri people from Indian rule to Pakistani-supported terrorism, i.e., Islamabad's support for various Islamist pro-Kashmiri separatist militia.

The joint statement calls for "strong measures against all those who encourage, support and finance terrorism, or provide sanctuary to terrorists and terror groups"—language Israel will hold up as justification for its belligerence against Iran and the Palestinians, and India against Pakistan.

The emphasis placed on collaboration in combating "terrorism" also underscores an important ideological component of the Modi government's partnership with Israel. The Hindu supremacist BJP and its allies, stretching back to V.D. Savarkar—the pre-independence All-India Hindu Mahasabha leader and *Hindutva* ideologue—have venerated Israel and its militaristic nationalism, claiming that its treatment of the majority-Muslim Palestinian population should be an example for the "Hindu Indian nation."



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