

Modi's Moment, If He'll Seize It: Getting to No (Part 1)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



On July 4 at 4 p.m., Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi began his whirlwind visit to Israel, that has now concluded in triumph, both for him and for Prime Minister Netanyahu.

In order to understand just how “historic” this visit was, a little history may help. Let’s go back in time, all the way back to November 29, 1947. On that date, the U.N. Partition Plan for Palestine was put to a vote; in the Asian-Pacific region, nine countries voted against partition. All of them, with one exception, were Muslim countries. That one exception was India, which was essentially voting against the creation of a Jewish state, even one that would have consisted of three non-contiguous tiny bantustans. And two years later, in 1949, India had not softened its opposition, and voted against admitting Israel to the United Nations. It did not recognize Israel as an independent state until 1950.

The most important meeting concerning Indo-Israeli relations for the next several decades took place not at the U.N., but in Bandung, Indonesia. Israel was not invited. This was the site in 1955 of the famous Bandung Conference, where 29 African and Asian nations met to declare that they would not belong either to the Western or the Soviet bloc, but to a new, non-aligned bloc. And among other measures, the conference's political committee also unanimously adopted a ferociously anti-Israel resolution, which declared its support for "the Arab people of Palestine" (the "Palestinian people" had not yet been invented) and called for "the implementation of the United Nations decisions on Palestine and the achievement of the peaceful settlement of the Palestine question." The "U.N. decisions" that were referred to in the resolution provided for the internationalization of Jerusalem, the ceding by Israel of certain border areas and agreement by Israel to the return of Arab refugees to their former homes. Given Israel's military weakness in 1955, that resolution would have made Israel's continued existence doubtful, and certainly showed a palpable want of sympathy for the Jewish state. It is true that India's Nehru did express sympathies for the Jews as victims of the Nazis in Europe, but as the representative of India, he voted for the anti-Israel resolution at Bandung with all the rest.

For decades following, India remained lukewarm, at best, to Israel. It consistently rebuffed Israel's request for diplomatic ties. Israel, for its part, never stopped trying to reach out to India. Few may realize that Israel supplied military assistance – weapons and intelligence – to India during its conflicts with China in 1962 and Pakistan in 1965. In 1971, India quietly asked for, and again received, Israeli military aid, for use in the Bangladesh War. During none of this time, however, did India evince a more pro-Israel attitude. In fact, India continued to deepen its pro-Arab stance and demonstrated increasing hostility toward Israel. This process accelerated with the election of Indira Gandhi in

1966, partly because of the support she needed from the small parties, including the Communists. As the Soviet Union was then hostile to Israel, and wooing the Arabs, the Indian Communist Party took the same approach. Indira Gandhi's government, needing the votes of the Communists, found it made sense to keep Israel at arm's length, while Indian support for the Arabs increased. By the 1970s, such support for the Palestinian cause had solidified, and India's relationship with Israel worsened. After the Arab League recognized the Palestinian Liberation Organization as the "sole and legitimate" representative of the Palestinians in 1974, India quickly followed suit and permitted the PLO to open an independent office in New Delhi that was elevated to embassy status in 1980. The PLO provided nothing of tangible value to India, unlike Israel, which had aided India in three of its wars. Nonetheless, it was not until 1992, twelve years after the PLO opened its office, that Israel was permitted to open an embassy in India.

A quarter-century later, things are very different. The relations between Israel and India have been called "the most important new alliance in Asia." Israel is a world leader in many of the areas where India most needs outside help: anti-missile weaponry, water management (for agriculture and for drinking), cyber-warfare (remember Stuxnet?) and cyber-security. As of now, Israel is India's second largest supplier (after Russia) of weapons. Israel has just signed with India the largest single contract in its own defense industry's history, for MRSAM, an advanced air and missile defense system. The latest version of MRSAM is now being used by the Indian Air Force, the Indian Navy, and the Israel Defense Forces. Israel and India collaborate in anti-terrorism measures of every kind. India has agreed to buy 8,000 Spike anti-tank missiles from Israel, choosing it, despite heavy lobbying by Washington, over the American-made Javelin. India has also chosen Israel's Barak-8 air defense missiles for the Indian navy. Israeli and Indian experts collaborate ever more

closely on missile development, on anti-terrorism measures, and, increasingly, on cyber-warfare, both offensive and defensive. For its part, Israel seeks greater collaboration with the Indian navy, that patrols the sea between India and Arabia, in order to ensure the security of the sea lanes on which so much of Israel's trade with Asia depends.

Along with its high-tech weaponry, its famed intelligence services, its counter-terrorism experience, all of use to India, Israel is also a world leader in water management (drip irrigation, desalinization, recycling of "grey water"), for both agriculture and drinking. In agriculture, Israel has set up, in various parts of India, Centers of Excellence, demonstration projects of the latest ways to increase crop yields, to lower water demands, and even to encourage Indian farmers to grow new crops. Israel has already set up a demonstration olive farm in the Punjab, to see if olives from Israel, though new to the subcontinent, can become a viable export crop for India.

Finally, there is an increase in person-to-person exchanges, in education and tourism. Ten percent of the foreign students in Israel are from India. And India is a favored destination for young Israelis once they have completed their military service.

Who would have predicted, when India cast its vote against the Partition Plan in 1947, that tiny Israel would not only come into being, but survive many Arab attempts to snuff out its young life, and would thrive economically, in all the most cutting-edge economic sectors, and become the third largest trading partner of India, and its second-largest supplier of military equipment? Who could have imagined the deep security ties that would develop, the intelligence sharing about Muslim terrorists and the strategic and military capabilities of Muslim states, between Israel and India, intelligence ties that are certainly the closest India has with any foreign country, and, save possibly for its intelligence ties with the

United States, also the closest for Israel?

There were several reasons for India rejecting Israel's entreaties for so long. Partly, this reflected the desire of Indian politicians to curry favor with the Muslims who made up about 10%-14% of the electorate. Another factor was the desire to keep good relations with the Arab suppliers of oil. A very distant third factor was the attempt to keep the Arab states from supporting the Muslim separatists in Kashmir whom Pakistan backed.

All during this period, it is true, there were those Indian politicians, from the Hindu nationalist parties, who on both moral and strategic grounds argued that India should support Israel, but the Congress Party's reluctance prevailed until the beginning of the 1990s. Things began to change, slowly, after Israel, as noted above, unstintingly supplied military aid to India in its 1962 flare-up with China, and then again during its brief war with Pakistan in 1965, and again in 1971, during the Bangladesh Liberation War (which lasted all of two weeks after India entered the war on the side of the Bangladeshis against Pakistan). Israel's willingness to repeatedly come to India's aid did begin to affect Indian views. But as long as the Congress Party was in power, not much would change in India's policy toward Israel. Golda Meir had even dared to hope, in 1971, that in recognition of Israeli military assistance that year India might at least establish diplomatic ties, but she was disappointed.

The desire of some Congress Party politicians to curry favor with Muslim voters was not shared by the Hindu nationalists of the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP. When they came to power, those followers of Hindutva (the ideology seeking to make Hindus, and the Hindu way of life, dominant in India), who had always urged better ties with Israel, appeared to be vindicated. The Muslim electorate was not going to support the BJP, no matter how the BJP voted on Israel and "Palestine" in the U.N., so why bother to curry favor with it? And Israel

more and more was recognized for what it was – a fellow victim of Islamic terrorism – and valued for being willing to share what it had learned from its long experience in countering that terrorism, in everything from effective vetting of airline passengers, to infiltration of terrorist networks, to cyber security. Israel was an increasingly valued trading partner for India, offering both top-of-the-line weaponry and help to India's own arms industry, that no other arms supplier was willing to grant. Israel willingly shares with its advances as a world leader in water management and conservation. Finally, Israel provides a model of a "start-up" nation, that Indians admired and wished to emulate. In 2009, an international poll revealed that 59% of Indians viewed Israel with admiration, more than they did any other country, and more than did the people of any other country (in the same poll, 58% of Americans viewed Israel with admiration). Israelis have had their own love affair with India, perfectly aware that Jews in India had never experienced antisemitism from Hindus, but had lived safely in India for more than a thousand years, in such places as Maharashtra and Kerala.

Meanwhile, the feared Arab "oil weapon" turned out not to exist. Less than a quarter of India's energy now comes from oil. Supplies of non-OPEC oil, and renewable sources (wind, solar, biomass), are taking an ever greater share of the world energy market. This means that the Muslim members of OPEC are well aware that they need to hold onto what customers they can, and certainly don't want to be unreliable suppliers to such a major market as India, which would only push that country both to buy from other sellers of oil, and to switch as rapidly as it can to renewables (which now constitute less than 5% of its energy).

Indian attitudes began to shift after decades of non-aligned and pro-Arab policies which yielded no apparent benefit. The Arabs did not provide military aid or crucial intelligence to India; Israel did, in 1962, 1965, and 1971. The Arabs had no

advanced weaponry to sell to India; Israel did. The Arabs had no expertise in irrigation, water conservation, desalinization; Israel did. In 1991, India defied the Muslim bloc and voted at the U.N. to repeal the infamous "Zionism is racism" resolution. In January 1992, India finally established diplomatic relations with Israel, and ties between the two nations have flourished since, primarily due to common strategic interests and security threats. The formation of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the blocking of India by Pakistan from joining the OIC contributed to this diplomatic shift. It was now clear that India would never be truly accepted by the Muslim nations, no matter what it did to support "Palestine." On a diplomatic level, India and Israel managed throughout this period to maintain healthy relations, despite India's repeated strong condemnations at the U.N. of Israeli military actions against the "Palestinians."

And then, the biggest change to Indian-Israel relations occurred when Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014. A Hindu nationalist, Modi has throughout his career exhibited an understanding of what the Muslim invaders and conquerors meant for the ancient civilization of Hindu India; he agrees with the writer V. S. Naipaul, who described India after the Muslim invasion and centuries of conquest, as "a wounded civilization." Modi had always been known for his palpable lack of sympathy for Islam. When he was Chief Minister of the State of Gujarat in 2002, inter-communal riots broke out after Muslims set fire to a train filled with Hindu pilgrims returning from a visit to the temple at Ayodhya. Sixty Hindus died, and many more were injured. In retaliation, Hindus started rioting and attacking Muslims. Muslims attacked back. These riots lasted three days. Hundreds were killed on both sides.. Modi did not immediately suppress them (nor is it likely he could have done so before they petered out of their own accord), which in the Western press, never sympathetic to the Hindu nationalists but always willing to cut Muslims some slack, earned him the reputation of being an anti-Muslim

“bigot.” Muslims have repeatedly tried to have Modi convicted of supposedly fomenting the violence. The violence from Hindus did not need any “fomenting” by Modi; the burning alive of sixty innocent Hindu pilgrims was quite enough. In any case, Modi was absolved of the charge, by every court, all the way up to, and including, India’s Supreme Court.

Now Modi’s natural sympathies for Israel, as a Hindu nationalist, have meshed with a new kind of realpolitik calculation: that Israel can do far more than any other potential partner for India’s security against a common Islamic enemy (both terrorist groups and state actors). Israel is now able to supply India with advanced weaponry, including anti-tank and surface-to-air missiles, that in some cases is superior to what either the U.S. or Russia offers, and with technology, know-how, and intelligence it is willing to share with India as that country continues to develop its own weapons industry. And Israel has also been willing to share its expertise in every aspect of agriculture and water management, especially in drip irrigation (which Israelis were the first to use), in desalinization plants (where Israel is a world leader), in its expertise in using treated sewage in agriculture (ditto). Israel has also become a pioneer in many aspects of agricultural research and technology, with innovative work in developing crop cultivars suitable for arid climates, and otherwise reducing the water consumption of agriculture. All this know-how in water use and crop management has become an important benefit for India, the palpable fruit of its good relations with Israel. Finally, India has something to learn from Israel about how best to encourage innovation more generally, how to promote a climate of entrepreneurship, how to link those entrepreneurs with those responsible for technological advances, and what legal and financial frameworks most effectively encourage the “start-up.”

India’s relations with Israel have been so spectacularly

beneficial for both sides that it is impossible to imagine any undoing of this new alliance. But will this unofficial military and security alliance lead, as it ought to, to a completely different Indian policy at the U.N., a possible public break with the kangaroo court that sits, in continuous session, with Israel always in the dock? Narendra Modi should be noted not just for what he has done on his visit to Israel, but what he did not do. He did not bother to visit, as so many other visiting dignitaries to Israel routinely do, the "Palestinian Authority" in Ramallah, only 30 minutes from Jerusalem. He did not once mention "Palestine" or the "Palestinian people." The "Palestinian" leaders in Ramallah were and no doubt still are in a rage, but what can they do? Modi's studied indifference will only make similar treatment by other world leaders more likely – no one wants to be the first, but now that Modi has done it, others – seeing there were no repercussions – can, if they wish, follow suit.

The India-Israel love affair has been a long time coming. But it is a real one, that goes deeper than arm sales and trade. A shared history of being victims of Islamic aggression, in having their lands seized and their own histories rewritten, an awareness in both Israel and India that Hindu India was one of a very few places in the world where there never was antisemitism, the Israeli awareness that it was an Indian regiment that drove the Muslim Turks out of Haifa in 1918, and the Indian awareness that Gandhi's indispensable first supporters were South African Jews, even the fascination with India of young Israelis who after their military service so often choose India as the place to travel and decompress, and the admiration of Hindus for what the Jews in their tiny state – with less than 1% both of India's population and its land area – have managed to accomplish, and finally, the recognition that Israel and India are the only true democracies in western Asia, all contribute to this alliance of interest, of affection, of esteem.

Now India under Modi can do something besides sign those agreements and exchange with Prime Minister Netanyahu those extravagant words of praise and bear hugs. In 2015 India began to abstain from, rather than vote in favor of, anti-Israel resolutions, at the U.N., UNESCO, and the U.N. Human Rights Commission, including those having to do with bringing Israel before the I.C.C. for supposed "war crimes" in Gaza. It has continued to abstain on similar resolutions in 2016 and 2017. This is an important shift, from Yes to Abstain. But it was not across the board. In 2016 India still voted in favor of a new resolution that would set up a database of Israeli and international firms working in the "illegal Israeli settlements." Such a database, of course, could be useful for enforcing threats of retribution against those found to be listed.

This May, an anti-Israel resolution at UNESCO denying Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem (including the Western Wall) was again proposed. In April 2016, a similar resolution had garnered 33 Yes votes; in October 2016 there were only 24 Yes votes. In the latest, May 2016 vote, only 22 countries voted yes. The most important shift was that of India, from Yes to Abstain, much commented upon at the time.

And after that vote change, the sky did not fall for India. Expressions of dismay from Ramallah. But the Muslim states did nothing. After all, what could they have done? In a buyer's market, could they have refused to sell India oil, thereby pushing India still more in the direction of renewable sources of energy? Could they have threatened to support the Kashmiri Muslims more than they do? How, exactly? Could Indian Muslims threaten to vote against the BJP? They already do. Modi is not indifferent to Muslim desires; he is openly hostile to them, and has no intention of hiding it.

Meanwhile, the Muslim Arabs are more divided among themselves than at any time in their history. They are preoccupied with their own problems. In the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and several Gulf

sheikdoms (U.A.E., Bahrain), as well as Egypt, are relentlessly pressuring Qatar, which they charge with supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. For the Saudis, the Muslim Brotherhood practices an inadmissible form of "terrorism" because it has repeatedly shown itself a threat to the Saudi regime. In 2003, the Brotherhood attacked the Saudi rulers for allowing American forces into the Kingdom; the Saudis were even more shocked when the Muslim Brotherhood helped overthrow Mubarak in Egypt, for this was interpreted as a potential future threat to the Saudi rulers as well. Also unacceptable to the Saudis are Qatar's continued close ties with Iran, that go beyond the economic links naturally resulting from the fact that Qatar and Iran share the largest natural gas field in the world. And Al Jazeera, based in and funded by Qatar, reports critically on the Saudi regime, as it does on other Arab rulers (though of course exempting those in Qatar itself); some of this news is highly embarrassing to the Saudis and other ruling families. In late June, the Saudis, the U.A.E, Bahrain, and Egypt cut diplomatic ties and severed all their land, sea, and air links to Qatar, and made thirteen demands. These included ending all support for "terrorism" (i.e., the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, ISIS, among others), expelling known terrorists who had been living in Qatar, and stop paying ransom to Al-Qaeda and ISIS for kidnapped Qatari nationals. As for its ties to Iran, Qatar was told to close the Iranian diplomatic missions in Qatar and the Qatari missions in Iran, to expel members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, and to cut off all military and intelligence cooperation with Iran. Furthermore, all trade and commerce with Iran by Qatar must strictly comply with US and international sanctions. And Qatar was told to stop funding Shi'ite militias in Iraq.

Another demand was for the Turkish airbase in Qatar to be shut down, presumably because Erdogan, though a Sunni, has been too friendly to Iran for the Saudis to accept.

Qatar shows no signs of accepting even one of these demands,

and this mini-war in the Gulf appears to have no foreseeable end. Qatar has been able to use airfields in Iran; Iranian ships continue to bring in food. And being fabulously rich from its sales of natural gas, Qatar cannot be starved into submission.

The war in Syria has gone on for six years, with many different states and groups involved. Russia and Iran support Assad, while the Americans support only the “democratic” rebels. Turkey and Qatar support Muslim Brotherhood fighters; the Saudis oppose the Muslim Brotherhood and Assad, but will support Sunnis of the Salafist line. Hezbollah and Iran both help Assad. Turkey and Qatar oppose Iran in Syria, but outside of the Syrian theatre, both maintain relations sufficiently close to Iran – though Turkey and Iran sometimes have flareups – to anger the Saudis. Jordan and Lebanon, for their part, are also caught in the Syrian swamp, overwhelmed with refugees from Syria – 700,000 in Jordan, 1 million in Lebanon (or 20% of the Lebanese population – that have become full-time problems. There are 2.7 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, a profound threat to political and economic stability for that country, which has been, thanks to Erdogan, in a state of almost continuous upheaval, as he systematically undoes Kemalism, makes war on the secularists, and shores up his powers so that he has legalized his despotism. Finally, in Syria, the loss of the Assad government’s control has created a vacuum into which the Islamic State has flowed. And jihadis from elsewhere in the Middle East, and North Africa, and Europe have arrived to join the Islamic State, and to fight not just Assad, not just the hated Shi’a (Hezbollah, Iranians), not just the “secular” rebels, but all those, including al-Qaeda, who may be close to IS in ideology but do not themselves submit to the Islamic State. In Syria, or because of Syria, so many different groups are stuck in different parts of the quagmire; Syria has become, politically, the La Brea Tar Pit of the Middle East.

In Iraq, the Shi'a-dominated government shows no signs of wanting to relinquish any of the power that naturally devolved to the Shi'a Arabs once the Americans removed Saddam Hussein. And the Sunni Arabs show no sign of accepting this new arrangement, which makes them permanently subservient to the far more numerous Shi'a. They worry, too, about the Iranians in Iraq who are helping the Shi'a militia. And both Sunni and Shi'a Arabs oppose the Kurds, who have announced their plan to hold a referendum this September on an independent Kurdistan.

The unrest in Bahrain among the majority Shi'a population protesting against their Sunni ruler continues, low-level but unending. The Egyptian regime feels itself threatened by Muslim Brotherhood-backed terrorists, based mainly in the Sinai, where they receive aid and training from Hamas fighters who come from Gaza. It also worries about terrorists coming from ISIS training camps in Libya. After the beheading of 31 Egyptian Copts in Libya in February 2015, Al-Sisi bombed ISIS camps in that country. And after Islamic State fighters attacked a bus full of Coptic pilgrims near Minya, killing over 30, Al-Sisi sent Egyptian fighters to bomb the Islamic State forces near Derna, in Libya. Islamic State fighters, undeterred, attacked an Egyptian army post on July 8, killing 23 soldiers, and triggering an attack by Egyptian forces. While the Islamic State appears to have dug in in the northern Sinai, the Muslim Brotherhood continues to attack police and the military, both from Sinai hideouts and from cells in Egypt proper. Both terrorist groups keep Egyptian forces, and the Egyptian state, fully occupied.

Saudi Arabia is the busiest of all, engaged on every front. It is leading the campaign of Gulf states against Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood. It is propping up the Sunni ruler of Bahrain, keeping his Shi'a population under control. It is fighting a proxy war against Iran in Syria, supporting Sunni rebels who are sufficiently religious to meet Saudi standards, but not votaries of the Islamic State, to meet Saudi

standards. And since 2015, the Saudis have been involved in a live war in Yemen, bombing both military and civilian targets among the Shi'a Houthis, with no hint of an end in sight. If Syria is the equivalent of the La Brea Tar Pits for Muslim Arabs, Yemen is for Saudi Arabia its very own Tar Baby.