

# Travelling together



*Netanyahu and Sara with Modi at the Sabarmati Ashram*

## Prime Minister Modi says he is filled with hope and optimism as he looks to the future of India's "exciting partnership" with Israel

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's state visit to India was expectedly one of pomp and circumstance, but, more importantly, underscored yet again the closeness that now characterises the bilateral relationship.

The rapport that has built up between Netanyahu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has transformed New Delhi's approach to Tel Aviv since the times it had shunned Israel so as not to disenchant the Muslim community back home, or alienate the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world that would unsettle the Indian diaspora there and imperil crude imports. Netanyahu had accompanied Modi through all the three days of his

state visit to Israel last July, and Modi returned that tribute to the visiting Israeli leader. Both called each other by their first names, and described each other as "my good friend".

Only one Israeli Prime Minister had visited India before Netanyahu, and that was Ariel Sharon, in 2003, with Netanyahu himself reciprocating Modi's unprecedented visit by an Indian prime minister six months earlier. Modi's visit itself had followed Pranab Mukherjee's, in October 2015 – again the first by an Indian President – which too was reciprocated by Reuven Rivlin in November 2016, only the second by an Israeli President to India, after Ezer Weizmann's in 1996.

At the start of his six-day tour of

New Delhi, Agra, Ahmedabad and Mumbai, Netanyahu hailed Modi as a revolutionary leader, and in his farewell statement termed his visit as "historic", saying it would be "long remembered". Modi, on his part, broke protocol to receive Netanyahu, and his wife Sara, at the New Delhi airport and lavished the couple with the fulsome welcome and sumptuous security that the Indian hosts now offer to all state visitors. Delegates travelling to India with Swiss President Doris Leuthard a year ago said they had been overwhelmed by the security accorded to their leader who many would not recognise in her own country and who had believed that such levels of security were reserved only for a visiting US President or the Pope.

The entire Taj Mahal complex was shut to tourists when the Netanyahus visited Agra and the 8 km secured

route from the Ahmedabad airport to Mahatma Gandhi's historic Sabarmati Ashram was marked by 50 stages that had live performances by artistes from different Indian states.

Netanyahu's itinerary included meetings and banquets with Modi, President Ram Nath Kovind and external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj, an inaugural speech at the Raisina Dialogue, meetings with Indian businessmen, Jewish community leaders as also with the Hindi film industry, in an exclusive "Shalom Bollywood" event, interaction at the centre of excellence for protected cultivation and precision farming on vegetables set up at Vadrad village in Gujarat under the Indo-Israel Agriculture Work Plan for exchange of advanced farming technology, and inauguration via video conference of a centre of excellence for date palms in Bhuj.

The first item on Netanyahu's trip was to join Modi at the re-named Teen Murti Haifa Chowk in New Delhi to pay homage to the brave Indian soldiers who had laid down their lives a century ago in the Battle of Haifa during the last months of the Sinai and Palestine Campaign of the First World War. But the plan to rename a downtown intersection in Mumbai after Shimon Peres, the late Israeli leader who had been both prime minister and later president of the Jewish state, was revoked by the municipal corporation.

### Poignant experience

The two countries signed nine agreements across several sectors to boost bilateral trade and cooperation. Netanyahu, together with 11-year-old Moshe Holtzberg, also visited the now refurbished Chabad House in Mumbai where the boy's parents, Rabbi Gavriel and Rivka Holtzberg, who were serving as directors at this Jewish centre, were killed along with six others by Pakistani terrorists during the 26/11/08 attack. Holtzberg was just two years old then and he had been rescued by his nanny Sandra Samuel who later moved with him to Israel where he now lives with his grandparents. Netanyahu recounted this visit to Chabad House as one of his two most poignant experiences on his India visit. The other was his meeting with a delegation of the Indian Jewish community



*India is Israel's largest client for arms*

now settled in Israel and who had for long looked forward to an Israeli prime ministerial visit to India. Lauding their involvement in the building up of Israel as well as their prodigious contribution to India, Netanyahu said that when each one of them spoke, they had wept with joy, not because there has ever been anti-Semitism in India – there never has – but because the meeting between cultures and between states and peoples that they had hoped for had happened before their eyes.

In the joint statement issued after delegation-level talks held on the second day of Netanyahu's visit, the two sides noted that their discussions were marked by convergence to accelerate the bilateral engagement and to scale up the partnership. These were to be pursued in three ways. Firstly, by strengthening the existing pillars of cooperation in the areas of agriculture, science & technology, and security that touch the lives of both the peoples. In

defence, India invites Israeli companies to take advantage of the liberalised FDI regime to expand manufacture in India with domestic companies. Second, by venturing into less explored areas of cooperation, such as oil & gas, cyber security, films, and start-ups. And third, by facilitating the flow of people and ideas between the two countries, an aspect requiring visa and policy facilitation, infrastructure and connectivity links, and fostering constituencies of support beyond government.

"We are working with Israel to make it easier for our people to work and visit each other's countries, including for longer work duration," mentioned Modi. "To bring people closer on both sides, an Indian Cultural Centre will soon open in Israel." He added that it was also decided to start an annual exchange of bilateral visits by 100 young people from science-related educational streams. The two prime ministers also exchanged perspectives

on the regional and global situation.

While both sides spoke of their vision for a strong partnership, the relationship so far has been more as one between a vendor and its client than between two equal partners. This sliver of a country that sprang out of the desert 70 years ago and with a population of 8.5 million has spearheaded agricultural and horticultural cooperation by bringing in advanced practices and technology to India, a country of 1.34 billion and one whose Indus Valley civilisation had been the cradle of agriculture and animal husbandry over five millennia ago.

Measuring 20,770 sq km, Israel is about as big, or as small, as the north-eastern state of Mizoram of 21,081 sq km, and yet enjoys a trade surplus in our two-way trade that was worth \$5 billion in 2016-17. While its GDP totals \$297 billion to India's \$2.25 trillion, its per capita GDP is \$34,800 compared to India's \$6,700.

If government-to-government military sales by Israel were to be included, its trade surplus would be even more lopsided, the country being among the largest defence suppliers to India, alongside the US, Russia and France. The world's largest arms purchaser, India is also Israel's largest client for arms, buying almost \$1 billion per year.

As Modi was showing the Netanyahu around the Sabarmati Ashram of Mahatma Gandhi – the apostle of non-violence who had hoped a future India would have “the smallest army imaginable” – there came the news of the reinstatement of India's \$500 million deal with Israel for its Spike anti-tank missiles that New Delhi had cancelled, just prior to the Israeli Prime Minister's visit. India, which has the second largest standing army in the world after China, and budgeted ₹3,59,854 crore (\$56.6 billion) for its military this year, had opted for the Spike, made by Israel's Rafael Advanced Defence Systems, over the US's Lockheed Martin/Raytheon Javelin missiles. Modi reportedly urged Netanyahu to discount reports of the cancellation, leading the Israeli leader to term the deal “very important” and to add that “there will be many more deals”.

In April last year India awarded Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) contracts totalling almost \$2 billion. IAI



Abbas: handling with care

will supply the Indian Army medium range-surface to air missile (MR-SAM) air and missile defence systems and additionally a long range-SAM (LR-SAM) air and missile defence system for India's first indigenous aircraft carrier, *Vikrant*, scheduled for commissioning later this year. With integrated advanced phased-array radar, command and control, and mobile launchers and missiles, these systems are advanced air and missile defences that provide protection against a variety of aerial threats. India's defence ministry recently also cleared a proposal to procure 131 Barak missiles from Rafael at a cost of ₹460 crore (\$72.3 million). These are surface-to-air missiles designed to be used as a ship-borne anti-missile defence system against anti-ship missiles.

### Closer ties

Last year had marked the 25th anniversary of India-Israel diplomatic ties that were established with the two countries opening their respective Embassies in 1992. India had formally recognised Israel much earlier, on 17 September 1950, and a Consulate was opened in Bombay in 1953 more as a facility to cater to the Jewish population in India. BJP-led governments have traditionally had closer ties with Tel Aviv that today have flowered into areas ranging from agriculture, education,

science and technology and IT to diamonds and defence, counter-terrorism and homeland security. To commemorate the 25 years of diplomatic relations, both countries had chosen *A Growing Partnership* as the motto for the occasion to signify that their relations, and the celebration of these, were not bound to one specific point in time.

Prime Minister Modi's state visit to Israel last July had been as path-breaking as it had been high on symbolism too. Not only was his visit the first by an Indian prime minister to Israel since its creation in 1948, it clearly delinked Palestine from India's equations with the Jewish state even while elevating New Delhi's ties with Tel Aviv to a “strategic partnership”. Modi had reassured visiting Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in New Delhi in May that India's ties with Israel would in no way impinge on its relationship with the State of Palestine. There has nevertheless been a clear diplomatic tilt towards Tel Aviv.

India, however, is not entirely partisan. In December, it joined 127 other countries in voting in the United Nations General Assembly in favour of a resolution opposing the recent decision of US President Donald Trump to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital. New Delhi was mindful of the fact that the Arab countries could have well retaliated by acting against Indians working there and also by restricting India's access to their oil.

The Palestinians have viewed the Indian vote favourably, an aspect that will have a favourable impact on Modi's visit to Palestine on 10 February, the first-ever by an Indian prime minister. Modi will hold a meeting with Mahmoud Abbas during his visit there, Palestine being part of India's outreach to the Arab world, with the prime minister visiting Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as well, over three days.

“As we look to the future of this exciting partnership with Israel, I am filled with hope and optimism,” Modi said during Netanyahu's visit. “In Prime Minister Netanyahu, I have a counterpart who is equally committed to taking the India-Israel relationship to soaring new heights.”

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