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India-Israel Joint Mechanism against Terrorism: An Introduction

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Abstract

India is facing cross-border terrorist attacks from Pakistan, Israel is surrounded by hostile neighbours. India and Israel share a common plan to combat terrorism, under which both countries also share crucial intelligence to tackle the terrorist threat. The relationship between the two countries is officially viewed as a strategic partnership. In fact, India and Israel should be seen as part of a much larger strategic alliance against terrorism and as a coalition based on democratic values. After independence, in September 1950, India formally recognized Israel as a state; however, the relationship between the two countries was not immediately amicable. Against the backdrop of India's domestic political circumstances, its foreign policy—particularly its adherence to the Non-Aligned Movement—shifting dynamics of the Cold War, and the desire to maintain a permanent presence in the politics of the West Asian region, the bilateral relations between India and Israel remained largely dormant for nearly four decades. In the early years, India's foreign policy was heavily influenced by the views of Gandhi and Nehru, which led to a stance that was shaped by its opposition to both the Western bloc and imperialism during the Cold War. Additionally, India's reluctance to

engage with Israel was rooted in its deep scepticism towards U.S. foreign policy, knowing well that Israel was America's largest ally in the Middle East.

Key words: India, Israel, Terrorism

Introduction

After independence, in September 1950, India formally recognized Israel as a state; however, the relationship between the two countries was not immediately amicable. Against the backdrop of India's domestic political circumstances, its foreign policy—particularly its adherence to the Non-Aligned Movement—shifting dynamics of the Cold War, and the desire to maintain a permanent presence in the politics of the West Asian region, the bilateral relations between India and Israel remained largely dormant for nearly four decades. In the early years, India's foreign policy was heavily influenced by the views of Gandhi and Nehru, which led to a stance that was shaped by its opposition to both the Western bloc and imperialism during the Cold War. Additionally, India's reluctance to engage with Israel was rooted in its deep scepticism towards U.S. foreign policy, knowing well that Israel was America's largest ally in the Middle East.

With the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a unipolar world, international politics underwent significant

changes, influenced by the rise of neoliberalism. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had been India's primary diplomatic and strategic ally, India found itself in need of a reliable partner. It was at this juncture that India and Israel gave their relationship a new direction. In response to the shifting international environment, India restructured its foreign policy to accommodate Israel.(Naha, 2020) While Dr. Manmohan Singh, the then Finance Minister, embraced liberalization, privatization, and globalization in the economic sphere, India also began to soften its stance towards liberal capitalist countries and started forging new relationships. Israel became increasingly important for India, particularly because, at that time, the Soviet Russian military industry was facing a deep crisis, necessitating the search for alternative partners for arms supplies. Israel emerged as the most suitable option in this regard.

In 1992, when India's then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao established full diplomatic relations with Israel, the most critical aspect for both countries was

security cooperation. At that time, both India and Israel faced similar challenges. While Israel was contending with opposition from Arab Muslims surrounding it, India was dealing with its largest challenge for several decades in the form of the Muslim nation, Pakistan. To address these challenges, both nations forged significant strategic agreements and began working together as partners to strengthen their defense sectors. (Kiran, 2008) Israel was technologically advanced, while India urgently needed weapons based on modern technologies. India required modern technology to effectively implement its defense projects, while Israel recognized that it could not succeed in its long-term plans without capitalizing on its technological expertise or exporting its research. Israel understood that the form of U.S. assistance it was receiving could end at any time, and therefore, it needed to establish solid regional relationships to sustain its economic stability. (Karmon, 2022) In this way, the establishment of full diplomatic relations created mutual security cooperation between India and Israel, which included permanent ties in research, development and production. This cooperation laid the foundation for a shared struggle against terrorism in the future.

Strategic Partnership against Terrorism

Since the 1971 India-Pakistan war, India's intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), has maintained covert relations with Israel's counterpart, Mossad. The primary focus of these relations was to acquire knowledge in technology and surveillance skills, as well as to gather essential intelligence information. (Bhattacharya, 2021) Before the establishment of full diplomatic relations between India and Israel, their intelligence agencies would communicate through the Israeli consulate in Mumbai in their efforts against terrorism. After the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, India's National Security Guards and military officials received counter-terrorism training in Israel. In 1991, armed Kashmiri Muslim terrorists attacked a group of young Israeli tourists visiting the Kashmir Valley, killing several Israelis in Srinagar.

Following this incident, Israel closely observed the Indian experience with Muslim terrorism, particularly since its own citizens had been killed. This understanding led Israel to realize that both countries would have to equally confront the challenge posed by Muslim terrorism. (Stepnova, 2003) In light of the growing threat of Islamic terrorism to India, Israel has emerged as a convenient and reliable partner for India in the Middle

East, a non-Muslim power capable of countering terrorism. Following the Mumbai bombings in the previous decade, the intelligence agencies of India and Israel have continuously strengthened their bilateral relations.

After 2014, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's rapprochement with Israel has been driven by specific political pragmatism, which contrasts with its major partnerships with Palestinians and Arab countries. The Indian government recognizes the importance of mutual cooperation with Israel, and this does not diminish its principled support for the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinians. India has consistently criticized Israel's policies regarding the Palestinians in global forums.(Staff,2017) Some scholars argue that India has developed closer ties with Israel at the expense of its relations with Iran and other Arab nations.(Behram,2001) However, Israeli experts believe that the India-Israel bilateral relationship is a short-term partnership that, while mutually significant, remains highly sensitive. (Karmon, 2022)

The fight against terrorism is a critical issue and challenge for both India and Israel. In 2001, both countries established a Joint Working Group through strategic dialogue. This Joint Working

Group served as a platform for cooperation in areas such as border security, fidayeen attacks, aviation security, information security, and the exchange of experiences in digital and cyber warfare. Despite this, a significant difference between India and Israel lies in their approach to understanding and addressing terrorism and its associated threats. While Israel believes in denying terrorism any opportunity as a means of political negotiation, India has always favored keeping the door open for dialogue. India views its threats as emanating from Pakistan-sponsored extremist Islamic groups, particularly Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Taliban, and Al-Qaeda, while Israel sees its threats coming from Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, as well as Hamas. Approximately 3,000 Indian soldiers from four battalions have been sent to Israel for training in counter-terrorism operations, including in challenging environments such as deserts, mountains, and forests, in addition to dealing with incidents like hijacking and hostage situations.

Impact of Recent Decades of Terrorist Attacks

The beginning of the 21st century was marked by bombings in the United States' WTO, while India witnessed a major terrorist attack on November 26, 2008, in Mumbai. Terrorists from the

Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba group launched attacks on five prominent locations across Mumbai, taking control of these areas for three days. The attackers deliberately targeted upscale areas of the city, where affluent and foreign nationals resided, with the intention of amplifying the impact of the attack on a global scale. Approximately 170 people were killed in the attacks, including 25 foreign nationals, and several Israelis were among the victims. Investigations into the attack, including the confession of terrorist Ajmal Kasab, led the Indian courts to hold Lashkar-e-Taiba responsible for the attack. Under external pressure, Pakistan arrested several members of Lashkar and confirmed the responsibility of the group for the attack. Subsequently, close ties between Pakistan's intelligence agency and Lashkar-e-Taiba were revealed, along with evidence of communication between the two before and during the attacks. The revelations also included evidence that a Pakistani intelligence officer, Major Iqbal, had directed and financed the attacks. (Sarin, 2009)

Following this attack, the bilateral relationship between India and Israel saw significant growth. The memories of the Mumbai bombings lie at the heart of the strengthened bilateral relations between the two nations. The planning of the attacks took place in Pakistan. These

bombings exposed the need for better control of borders, timely acquisition of actionable intelligence, and effective prevention and response to terrorist attacks on Indian soil. In response, India imported satellite imagery, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), handheld thermal imagers, night vision devices, long-range binoculars, remote surveillance equipment (LOROS), and counter-terrorism detection tools from Israel to enhance its capability in the fight against terrorism. In November 2016, during a historic meeting in New Delhi between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, both leaders reached a consensus to prioritize cooperation in the fight against terrorism. (Staff, 2017)

Post-2014 India-Israel Bilateral Relations

In the history of independent India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's historic visit to Israel in July 2017 revitalized the long-dormant relations between the two countries. This was the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister to Israel. In the ongoing fight against terrorism, India has placed defense-related issues at the core of its relationship with Israel. Modi's groundbreaking visit marked the beginning of a new chapter in bilateral relations, particularly strengthening the security ties between the two nations. However, this

close relationship with Israel has not significantly impacted India's other traditional partners in the Middle East. This is due to India's "de-hyphenation" policy, under which India has successfully developed independent relationships with its Middle Eastern partners. A key objective of Modi's foreign policy is to ensure that India's domestic policies do not affect its diplomatic relations and military agreements with other countries. (Naha, 2020)

To this end, Modi developed a strategy that uses decisive and covert powers, including Special Forces operations. After the Uri and Pathankot terrorist attacks, India conducted a surgical strike on Pakistan in 2016. At the time, Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar stated, "Pakistan is in a state of coma, as one would be after surgery." (Jyoti, 2016) This statement resonated with Israel's approach to its enemy nations. Like Israel, India too has adopted a near-zero tolerance policy towards its adversaries. However, the Indian government faces challenges in adopting Israel's style of counter-terrorism policies. According to Shalom Salomon, Indian diplomats have refused to describe Modi's closeness with Israel and the progress in bilateral relations since 2014 as "transformational." This cautious approach is sensible, as unnecessarily antagonizing other countries in the Middle East would

not be prudent, especially when India has longstanding economic and political relationships with them. India believes that its relationship with Israel has been steadily growing since 1992, with Modi representing only a milestone in this journey. After 25 years of bilateral cooperation, Israel is now finding doors opening at the governmental level, as India has overcome its hesitations regarding the Jewish state. It can be observed that the growing closeness between India and Israel is not directed against shared enemies. While India does not fully share Israel's concerns regarding Iran and Islamic extremism, Israel has downplayed India's concerns regarding its relations with China. Due to traditional political relations, dependency on oil and labour migration in the Middle East, it is impossible for India to abandon its close ties with Arab nations. India will continue to strengthen its cooperation with Iran as a key ally in countering Pakistan's anti-India sentiment within the Islamic world. The sympathy of Indian Muslims towards Islamic countries and their perceived opposition has historically created a clear distance in political relations between India and Israel. However, Narendra Modi's approach to this issue has been different. In the direct fight against terrorism, India, with Israeli assistance, began developing a smart border system

along the Pakistani border in August 2017. This system, which is monitored by CCTV-controlled control rooms, aims to detect infiltration attempts. This initiative is part of a significant plan known as the Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System (CIBMS), which is a part of the Modi government's strategy to seal the India-Pakistan border. In December 2020, India and Israel held a virtual meeting to conduct a comprehensive review of their cooperation in strategic areas, including defense, security, counter-terrorism, and cyber security. (Puroshotham, 2009)

Defense Partnership against Terrorism

The ongoing partnership between India and Israel in the fight against terrorism is primarily centered around mutual agreements on defense deals between the two countries. Bilateral India-Israel relations, which have evolved over the past three decades, have now transformed into a strategic partnership. During this period, Israel has become a key supplier of defense equipment to India. According to data presented by the Indian Ministry of Defense, Israel surpassed Russia in signing defense contracts with India in the years 2013-2014 and 2015-2016. From 2000 to 2010, the estimated value of bilateral defense trade was approximately \$10 billion. A

report published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) titled "Trends in International Arms Transfers" states that India is the largest importer of Israeli weapons, accounting for 42% of Israel's total arms exports. (Kaura, 2017)

After successful collaboration on developing the Medium-Range Surface-to-Air Missile (MRSAM) and the Long-Range Surface-to-Air Missile (LRSAM), both countries also ventured into the field of space. In 2008, India successfully launched the Israeli intelligence-gathering satellite, TecSAR-1, in exchange for the installation of the X-band Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) on the RISAT-2 (a radar imaging satellite with all-weather capability). In 2018, both nations signed an agreement to collaborate in the fields of small satellites, atomic clocks, and Electric Propulsion Systems (EPS) for GEO-LEO (Geosynchronous Earth Orbit - Low Earth Orbit) optical links. Thus, from weapons sales to technology sharing, and from research and development to joint ventures (JVs), both countries have rapidly advanced their relations at strategic levels. (Pant, 2018)

Challenges

Despite the extensive cooperation in defense and security linked to shared policies against terrorism, some scholars

have raised questions about the nature of this bilateral security collaboration. They argue that in the bilateral relationship, India and Israel often find themselves in the roles of buyer and seller. Due to the customer-vendor relationship, they believe that India-Israel defense ties are of a temporary nature and that the so-called "strategic partnership" is based on mutual benefits, where New Delhi pays money, and Israel exports its weapons at high prices. However, India is making significant efforts towards self-reliance in defense production. Between 2012-16 and 2017-21, India reduced its arms imports by 21%, a reduction attributed to the development of a vibrant military-industrial ecosystem through research, domestic design and development, and the manufacturing of defense equipment by government and private companies. In December 2021, the Indian government imposed restrictions on the import of several defense systems and subsystems to promote indigenization in the defense sector. These restrictions apply to various weapon systems such as ships, air-borne early warning systems, tank engines, radars, towed artillery, short-range surface-to-air missiles, cruise missiles, and coastal patrol vessels. However, such restrictions on the procurement of defense equipment may lead to a decline in India-Israel defense cooperation.

Conclusion

On one hand, India is facing cross-border terrorist attacks from Pakistan, while on the other hand, Israel is surrounded by hostile neighbours. India and Israel share a common plan to combat terrorism, under which both countries also share crucial intelligence to tackle the terrorist threat. The relationship between the two countries is officially viewed as a strategic partnership. In fact, India and Israel should be seen as part of a much larger strategic alliance against terrorism and as a coalition based on democratic values.

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