

India: First-ever visit by an Israeli PM used to strengthen strategic ties

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's six-day visit to India last week highlighted the moves by both governments to further develop already close bilateral military-strategic and commercial ties. Netanyahu's visit to India was the first ever by a sitting Israeli premier.

Last July, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi became the first Indian premier to visit the Zionist state, underscoring New Delhi's determination to purge any lingering vestiges of its former "non-aligned" foreign policy in pursuit of closer ties with the US and its principal Middle East ally.

Ties between Israel and India are burgeoning in the context of rapidly escalating global tensions. Both countries are key allies of US imperialism, Israel in Washington's reckless drive to consolidate its hegemony in the Middle East by pushing back Iranian influence, and India in the US drive to economically, strategically and militarily isolate China.

Modi's BJP government has transformed India into a front line state in the US military-strategic offensive against China. Modi has also moved to develop closer bilateral and trilateral ties with Japan and Australia, Washington's two most important Asia-Pacific allies. In November, India joined a US-led, anti-China quadrilateral strategic dialogue with Japan and Australia, which the Trump administration hopes to develop into a NATO-type alliance.

India sees its closer ties with Israel as a means of pursuing New Delhi's strategic interests, mainly by securing the supply of arms and advanced military technology. Modi's Hindu-supremacist BJP also has very definite ideological interests in deepening ties with Israel, especially hard-right Zionists like Netanyahu. Hindutva ideologue V.D. Savarkar championed Zionism as part of his aggressive communal opposition to India's Muslims, whom he claimed were alien to the Indian nation and should be denied full citizenship rights.

Modi, in a clear indication of his government's enthusiasm for closer ties with Israel, broke protocol by rushing to New Delhi airport to receive Netanyahu with a

warm hug. Netanyahu was accompanied by a 130-member delegation, the largest business delegation ever to accompany an Israeli Premier on an overseas tour.

At the beginning of Netanyahu's visit, both sides rushed to declare that India's vote with 127 other countries in favour of a UN resolution condemning US President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, would not impact the two countries' close relationship. On January 15, Vijay Gokhale, Secretary in charge of Economic Relations at India's External Affairs Ministry, stated, "Both sides agreed that our relationship is much larger and our relationship is not determined by this [vote]." Upon arrival in New Delhi, on January 14, Netanyahu himself asserted this, telling the media "one negative vote would not affect the ties," even though Israel was "disappointed" by India's vote.

On January 15, the two countries signed nine pacts to boost cooperation in key areas, including cyber security and energy, following delegation-level talks headed by Modi and Netanyahu.

In the course of discussions with Modi, Netanyahu managed to secure a \$US500 million deal for New Delhi to buy 1600 anti-tank missiles from Israel's state-owned defense contractor, Rafael. India had cancelled the contract just weeks before Netanyahu's visit in favour of building indigenous missiles.

The deal has been finalized under conditions in which war tensions between India and its arch-rival Pakistan are escalating. India's NDTV recently reported that Pakistan's soldiers may have missiles that can strike Indian tanks and bunkers at a distance of 3-4 km, while India's equivalent missiles have a range of just 2 km.

In the joint statement issued during Netanyahu's visit, both prime ministers noted the "readiness of Israeli companies to enter into joint ventures with Indian companies in the defence sector under the Make in India initiative."

India has purchased some \$10 billion worth of weapons and military equipment from Israel over the last decade, making Israel India's third-largest supplier of weapons and

weapons systems, and India Tel Aviv's biggest market for arms. Just last year, India signed two new mega arms deals, spending \$2 billion on Israeli missile defence systems.

Another significant development was the two leaders' emphasis on the "importance of building comprehensive cooperation in counter- terrorism," for which they signed a memorandum of understanding. This indicates mutual support for each other's militaristic policies pursuing their own strategic aims—against the Palestinians in the case of Israel, and against Pakistan in the case of India.

In an exclusive interview to *Times Now*, Netanyahu expressed Israel's support for any future military attack by India on Pakistani territory across the Line of Control (LoC), which divides Indian- and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, in the name of hitting "terror hideouts." His remarks will undoubtedly encourage India to repeat the "surgical strikes" its military carried out inside Pakistan in September 2016.

Even as Netanyahu gave the interview, India and Pakistan were exchanging fire across the LoC, resulting in the deaths of soldiers and civilians on both sides.

Publicly, the Modi government has peddled the transparent lie that India's ever-deeper cooperation with Israel in no way affects its stance on Palestine. The Joint Statement said the two leaders had discussed the diplomatic situation with the Palestinians, but omitted, no doubt at Netanyahu's insistence, even a standard reference to India's support for a so-called "two-state solution."

Rattled by the fall in India's growth during 2016-17, the BJP government has intensified its push for "pro-investor" reforms. Speaking at the India-Israel Business Innovation Forum on January 15, Ramesh Abhishek, the secretary in the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion, promised New Delhi will "resolve all problems and make things easier and better for Israeli companies to do business in India." Seeking unfettered access for Israeli big business, Netanyahu declared, "If you want to have economic power, you must reduce taxes, simplify taxes and you must cut bureaucracy."

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

This policy was bound up with the close relations India established with the Soviet Union during the 1950s in response to Washington's burgeoning military-strategic partnership with Pakistan. Following the dissolution of the

Soviet Union in 1991, New Delhi reoriented its foreign policy toward the pursuit of closer relations with the western powers, especially Washington. In 1992, Narasimha Rao's Congress government established full diplomatic ties with Israel. Since then, New Delhi's relations with Tel Aviv have been systematically expanded by both Congress- and BJP-led governments.

Having initiated diplomatic ties with Israel and enthusiastically developed the relationship with Tel Aviv, the Congress Party has no serious differences with Modi's drive to expand India's partnership with Israel so as to pursue the Indian elite's strategic interests, especially the strengthening of its military prowess. The Congress Party issued no official statement on Netanyahu's visit, but did post a video on Twitter mocking Modi's bear-hugs of several world leaders, including Trump and Netanyahu.

The only significant dissent within the ruling elite on Netanyahu's visit came from the Indian Stalinists. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, and the Communist Party of India (CPI), along with several other parties in their Left Front, held a protest in New Delhi on January 15 against the visit, criticizing Tel Aviv mainly for its brutal repression of the Palestinians.

However, the Stalinists' opposition is based on defending the national interests of the Indian bourgeoisie and has nothing to do with the interests of the Indian and international working class or the struggle against imperialism. An article in the CPM's English weekly *Peoples Democracy* on January 14 blamed the Modi government for "sacrificing the country's interests to serve the cause of countries like Israel and the US."



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