

# Why Sharon's India Visit Fell Short

by Ramtanu Maitra

The truncation of the two-day (Sept. 9-10) visit of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to India indicated that the trip fell significantly short of what was anticipated. The hype of a potential strategic alliance between India and Israel was not even on New Delhi's agenda. On the other hand, it is a near-certainty that arms and commercial relations between the two will flourish in the coming days. The Sharon visit was a major political event in the relations between the two countries. It was particularly so, since it took India almost 42 years to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel. That happened in 1992, and it took another 11 years before the first Indian invitation to an Israeli prime minister.

## Arms Sales

The "successes" of the trip were not insignificant. Israel agreed to sell three Phalcon airborne early-warning systems to India. Although the time-frame for the deal has not been finalized, Pakistan has expressed concerns. New Delhi claims the added capability provided by the Phalcon will bring large parts of Pakistani airspace within the snooping range of the Indian Air Force. Its keenness to acquire Israeli Arrow anti-ballistic missiles to face down the perceived nuclear threat from Pakistan, however, was dampened by Washington. Days before Sharon's arrival in India, Washington told Israel not to sell India the Arrow, which was jointly developed by Israel and the United States, with the latter footing most of its development costs.

There could be many reasons why Washington prevented the Arrow sale. In a paper titled "Arrows for India?" prepared for the Washington Institute, Richard Speier, a former Pentagon official specializing in missile non-proliferation issues, argued recently that the sale of the system to India would backfire on American and Israeli strategic interests. Speier pointed out that India has other missile-defense options: Russia is discussing the sale of the comparable S300V system; Washington could offer the Patriot missiles.

Nonetheless, it is evident that the India-Israel defense-related ties are advancing at a rapid pace. At a trilateral meeting held earlier this year in New Delhi, attended by the Washington-based Jewish Institute of National Security Affairs (JINSA) think-tank, former Israeli intelligence chiefs, and Indian security and defense experts, the security tie-up between the two was discussed.

According to some observers, Israel appears to have become India's second largest arms supplier after Russia. Israel

has provided India with sea-to-sea missiles, radar and other surveillance systems, border monitoring equipment, night vision devices, and the upgrading of India's Soviet-era armor and aircraft. In December 2002, Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes announced in the Parliament that India and Israel are planning to jointly produce and market an Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH). Overall, contracts worth more than \$3 billion for the supply of military equipment and know-how are said to be in the pipeline.

## Agreements, Differences, and Non-Negotiable

Beside the arms sales and security matters, India and Israel also signed six agreements, the most important of which is cooperation in combatting illicit trafficking of drugs, as well as environment, health, education, and culture. Counter-terrorism cooperation, secretly in effect for years, was made public.

While the agreements that were signed were significant, the differences that cropped up between the two are no less newsworthy. This became evident when the Israeli Prime Minister, citing the two back-to-back bombings in Israel, cut short his trip by 24 hours. India was concerned that Sharon's trip will be perceived in the Arab world as India caving into the growing anti-Islam pressures exerted from Washington and Israel. Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, while visiting Turkey Sept. 16-19, told the media that "good relations with Israel does not reflect enmity with Palestine. . . . We have been supporting Palestine's cause against Israel and we are in favor of a separate state of Palestine."

One of the items on Sharon's agenda was to ask India, on behalf of the United States, to provide peacekeeping troops to Iraq under U.S. control, if the United Nations agrees to send its peacekeeping forces to Iraq. Within 48 hours of Sharon's departure from New Delhi, India went on the record that it would not send any troops, even if the UN decides to issue a peacekeeping mandate. India cited its internal security issues and threats along the border areas as the reasons.

The other area where differences between India and Israel were pronounced was in the respective perception about Iran. India had earlier told both the United States and Israel that Iran is non-negotiable. India-Iran relations are extremely important for New Delhi for more than one reason. Iran is India's trade, economic, and cultural link to Central Asia, and trade link to Russia. India and Iran are involved in developing a North-South railroad-highway corridor which would allow India to trade with Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Russia.

Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Yosef Lapid made a telling outburst on NDTV, that nuclear weapons in Iran means "the end of civilization," displaying the Sharon's government's deep frustration vis-à-vis its discussion with India on Iran.

## Factors Behind the Trip

India-U.S. relations are much closer now than ever during the Cold War. There should not be any doubt in anyone's mind

that the United States is the strongest promoter of bilateral relations with Israel. In fact, many in India believe that India-U.S. relations cannot fully blossom unless India develops close bilateral relations with Israel.

In addition, following the end of the Cold War, India has shown determination to modernize its industry and its military. India's military arsenal remains stocked to a large extent with Russian armaments. But now, India wants to diversify and buy from other nations that have developed modern weapons and technology. One of the unsaid facts of life is that Israel has received a lot of frontier technologies in the armaments industry from the United States. India sees this as an important factor in developing defense-relations with Israel.

Finally, the new alliances that have cropped up following Sept. 11, 2001 also played a role. According to New Delhi—disputed by many, including the Palestinians—Israel is dedicated to fighting terrorism. Much of this is a directionality given by Washington, but some of it is indigenous, and perhaps tinged largely by India's anti-Pakistan, and to a lesser extent, anti-Muslim bias.

### **American Jewish Community Input**

The push to develop an India-U.S.-Israel compact at the strategic level began months ago, but surfaced only recently. In May, India's National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra was in Washington to form the India-U.S.-Israel axis. In a clear public announcement, made in front of 1,200 dinner guests of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), Mishra spoke in support of such a triangular bonding. He proposed such an alliance a necessity to fight terrorism together.

That speech, by a non-political authority in a sort of private gathering, was just one among many defining moments in a longer process. When Indian Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani was in Washington in June, his brief visit included dinner at the elite Cosmos Club, courtesy of the American Jewish Committee. "It's a natural alliance between Israel and India," said Jason Isaacson, the committee's director of government and international affairs. "It's about trade and common interests between democracies, complementing what is the growing relationships between Indian Americans and American Jews." Isaacson has visited India seven times since 1995, and the AJC plans to set up a liaison office in India this year.

In a recent interview with *India Abroad*, a news daily published from New York, Isaacson gloated that although Indo-Israeli relations had remained "very quiet," the Jewish nation had in fact helped India in 1999, at the time of the Kargil crisis with Pakistan in Jammu and Kashmir. "Israeli involvement, the help that Israel was really able to give to India at the time of the Kargil crisis as a friend and ally, had not taken place before."

Subsequently, visiting Israeli special envoy David Ivry told New Delhi that Israel will assist India in its battle against

terrorism. Ivry met with External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha, Advani, and Mishra.

### **Economic Tie-Ups**

But that is not all. The traders' bonding has also become pretty tight. The Indian lobby that promotes a strong India-Israel business linkage also finds it necessary to justify why Israel should be brought closer. They point out the commonalities that hang these two countries together—India and Israel are both democracies and have survived in a sea of hostility, surrounded by implacable adversaries and a heavily militarized security environment. Both nations have fought wars in nearly every decade of their existence. No other two countries in the world have suffered so much at the hands of "state-sponsored Islamic jihadi terrorism" as India and Israel, the rhetoric goes.

On the other hand, the case for a close Indo-Israeli relationship is indeed compelling. Across a wide range of fields the two countries can both complement and supplement each other. On the level of civilian commerce, there has already been considerable success. Bilateral trade has increased dramatically since the early 1990s—growing fivefold from barely \$200 million in 1992 to more than \$1 billion by 2000.

Although India is commonly seen as a largely labor-intensive economy offering competitively priced skilled manpower as its major asset, and Israel as an advanced knowledge-based economy, this view only partially captures the real picture. Despite India's poverty and technological backwardness amongst the majority, India is a leader in the information technology sector, and has developed indigenously, which means it has developed in the process a large pool of scientists, engineers, and technicians, its own space program, ballistic missile project, and nuclear fission capabilities.

The economic side in this trip was not ignored. Ariel Sharon was heading a 150-member delegation. India's daily *Financial Express* pointed out that even before Sharon arrived in New Delhi, a team of leading information technology (IT) players had landed in India. The mission of this delegation was to identify opportunities where Israeli industry could corner a major chunk of the Indian market. Ahead of the visit, India and Israel had already started work on the feasibility of a free trade agreement (FTA). According to ministry sources, the proposal for this has been mooted, but is still in a nascent stage.

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