



India's Outreach to Palestine: Reassuring Visit of Prime Minister Modi

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi undertook a four-nation visit to Jordan (transit), Palestine, the UAE and Oman from 9 to 12 February 2018. It was a significant visit to India's extended neighborhood' with which the country has long historical, deep cultural and extensive economic ties. The Prime Minister reached Palestine on February 10 via Jordan as there is no direct air connectivity between Palestine and the outside world. The King of Jordan Abdullah II provided his own helicopter to PM Modi to visit Ramallah, the seat of the Palestinian Authority. It was a historic visit as it is for the first time that an Indian Prime Minister visited Palestine. A 'grand' welcome was extended to the Indian delegation.² The Palestinian Authority President, Mahmoud Abbas accorded the highest civilian honour of Palestine *Alqilad al Kubra* (the Grand Collar) to the Prime Minister.

In recent years, high-level political visits between India and Palestine have increased. In May 2017, President Abbas came to India on his fifth visit. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj visited the country in January 2016. The first President of India to visit Palestine was Shri Pranab Mukherjee in 2015.

During his visit, the Prime Minister expressed the hope that Palestine would soon become a sovereign and independent country in a peaceful manner. He extended support to the Palestinian people and said that "Our incessant and steadfast support to the Palestinian cause has always been on top of our foreign policy."³ President Abbas apprised him of the peace process and recent developments in this context.

During the visit, six MoUs worth about US\$ 40 million were signed in various areas of bilateral cooperation for the benefit of the Palestinian people. The MoUs are for: (i) setting up of an India-Palestine Super-speciality hospital at Beit Sahour in Bethelhem Governorate; (ii) construction of India Palestine Centre for Empowering women, ‘Turathi’; (iii) setting up of new national printing press at Ramallah; (iv) construction of a school in Muthalth Al Shuhada Village; (v) construction of a school in Tubas Governorate; and (vi) expansion of Jawahar Lal Nehru School for Boys at Abu Dees.⁴

Certainly, the fledging Palestinian state needs international assistance in all areas of development, including technology and research, as well as in deepening international relations with other nations and multilateral organizations. India has been providing substantial cooperation assistance to the Palestinian people and the government in areas vital for the development of the Palestinian state. It has focused on building and sustaining the necessary institutional capabilities. The cooperation is in varied fields including education and training, IT, agriculture, project assistance and budgetary aid. India has established a technology park in Ramallah to increase the employment skills of the people. New Delhi will set up an Institute of Diplomacy in Ramallah to train the future diplomats of Palestine. India receives a number of Palestinian students, and the seats for them have been increased in various prime Indian educational institutions, including in finance, management, rural development and IT.⁵ Cooperation in the field of education has intensified. During the President’s visit in 2015, five out of six MoUs signed by the two countries were between educational institutions. India has extended e-visa facility to Palestinian nationals, which is likely to increase economic and people-to-people relations.

Trade and economic relations between India and Palestine are relatively low (estimated to be about US\$ 40 million) and it is ‘channelized’ through Israel.⁶ The Palestinian people see India as a rising economic power and want to increase bilateral economic engagement.⁷ Certainly, potential exists in various areas, including agriculture. Palestine is known for producing high-quality olive oil. It also produces dates and nuts in substantial quantities. With growing income and health consciousness, in India the consumption of olive oil, particularly for cooking, has been growing.⁸ Trade in this area can be further explored as Palestine’s National Export Strategy of Olive oil (2014-2018) also calls for the expansion of its export market.⁹ Nevertheless, peace and stability in Palestine is necessary for attracting investments from India.

As far as India's Israel and Palestine policies are concerned, New Delhi has 'de-hyphenated' its policy not only for the two countries, rather, towards the region as a whole. Along with other countries of the region, India has strengthened its ties with Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran focusing on bilateral engagement independent of each other. The relationship with the countries of the region has been in a growing mutually exclusive manner but definitely not at the cost of giving preference to any one over the other.

The seemingly intractable Arab-Israel dispute or the sectarian fault-lines in the region should create no hindrance in developing relations with any side, which is based on the country's different reciprocal necessities. India has security and defence relations with Israel and has wide economic relations with Arab countries. The Persian Gulf is important for India's energy security and remittances sent by Indian diaspora in the region. Iran, on the other hand, is important for energy supply and providing vital connectivity to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia.

Indian diplomacy has successfully pursued its policy towards the region independent of external factors. In December 2017, it was once again manifested in the stance adopted towards the US initiative to alter the internationally accepted status of Jerusalem. India did not support the unilateral US decision to declare Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. India voted along with more than 125 countries to adopt the subsequent UN resolution 'Status of Jerusalem', declaring 'null and void' any actions intended to alter Jerusalem's character, status or demographic composition.¹⁰

India's policy options and decisions are based solely on national interest, pragmatism and national ethos, and aligned with international consensus. Prime Minister Modi's visit to Palestine and his tribute at the Arafat mausoleum are strong indications that India stands by the side of its long-standing friends in the region.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes

¹ Ministry of External Affairs, "Transcript of Media Briefing by Foreign Secretary of India at Abu Dhabi on Prime Minister's visit to Jordan, Palestine & UAE (February 10, 2018)," 11 Feb 2018, <http://www.mea.gov.in/media->

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² Ministry of External Affairs, “English Translation of Press Statement by Prime Minister during his visit to Palestine (February 10, 2018),” 11 February 2018, <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29474/english+translation+of+press+statement+by+prime+minister+during+his+visit+to+palestine+february+10+2018>

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⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “List of MoUs/Agreements signed during visit of Prime Minister to Palestine,” 10 February 2018, http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29468/List_of_MoUsAgreements_signed_during_visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Palestine

⁵ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, “Press Statement by Prime Minister during his visit to Palestine (February 10, 2018),” 11 February 2018, <http://pib.nic.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1520257>

⁶ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “India – Palestine Relations,” August 2017, http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India_-_Palestine_Bilateral_Brief_August_2017.pdf

⁷ Business Standard, “Palestinians await Modi’s historic visit to Ramallah: official,” 29 January 2018, http://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/palestinians-await-modi-s-historic-visit-to-ramallah-official-118012900971_1.html

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⁹ “The National Export Strategy of the State of Palestine,” <https://www.paltrade.org/upload/multimedia/admin/2014/10/5448e7bfb7b6d.pdf>

¹⁰ United Nations, “General Assembly Overwhelmingly Adopts Resolution Asking Nations Not to Locate Diplomatic Missions in Jerusalem,” 21 December 2017, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/gau1995.doc.htm>