

# TRANSFORMATION OF INDIA'S WEST ASIA POLICY: THE EVOLVING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH ISRAEL

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# TRANSFORMATION OF INDIA'S WEST ASIA POLICY: THE EVOLVING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH ISRAEL

Changes in the international system and increasing security concerns directly influence the foreign policy orientations of states. This study examines India's West Asia policy and the political transformation it has undergone, particularly concerning Israel during the Narendra Modi era. Known in its traditional foreign policy for providing diplomatic support to the Palestinian cause and conducting energy diplomacy with Iran, the New Delhi administration has experienced a significant shift in this balance in recent years. Today, India is establishing a much more integrated partnership with Israel in the fields of defense, intelligence, and high technology. Beyond the procurement of advanced missile defense systems and unmanned aerial vehicles from Israel, joint projects in areas such as artificial intelligence and cybersecurity demonstrate that bilateral relations have evolved from a purely commercial nature into a comprehensive security partnership. Accordingly, this study aims to understand the role of other regional and global actors influential in the deepening relationship between India and Israel and to analyze how these geopolitical steps serve India's national interests. Within this framework, the primary research question of the study is: What are the fundamental factors shaping India's Israel policy during the Narendra Modi era?

## Historical Background

Following its independence in 1947, India's foreign policy was shaped for many years by an anti-colonial stance and its leadership mission within the Non-Aligned Movement, which sought to maintain distance from Cold War power blocs. During this period, the New Delhi administration kept a visible distance from Israel to preserve its relations with the Arab and Islamic world and to account for the sensitivities of its large domestic Muslim population (Srivastava, 1970). Although India recognized Israel as a state in the 1950s, the inability to establish formal diplomatic relations was a clear reflection of this ideological reality. However, the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s drove a radical transformation in India's foreign policy. The disappearance of the Soviet umbrella, combined with internal economic crises and the rise of the United States as the sole superpower, caused ideological dogmas to give way to

realpolitik necessities. As a reflection of India's strategy to adapt to these shifting global dynamics, full diplomatic relations at the embassy level were established with Israel in 1992, following decades of diplomatic distance. According to Rubinoff (1995), while an earlier rapprochement might have damaged India's reputation, its cautious progress at a time when Israel was also improving ties with Eastern European countries and China made this transition more acceptable. In the pre-Narendra Modi era, although bilateral relations grew stronger over time, they were generally conducted "behind closed doors" in less conspicuous areas such as intelligence sharing and defense procurement to avoid drawing public or international backlash (Singh, 2022).

## The Modi Era

The ascent of Narendra Modi to power in 2014 marked a definitive shift in India-Israel relations. The most critical doctrinal step of this period has been the "De-

hyphenation” policy, which allowed India to treat the Israeli and Palestinian issues as two independent tracks rather than linking them directly as it had historically (Sharma, 2021). Through this strategy, New Delhi continues its official diplomatic support for the Palestinian cause—such as emphasizing a two-state solution—while simultaneously deepening its relationship with Israel by removing it from the mortgage of the Palestinian conflict.

In the foreign policy vision of the Modi era, Israel has been coded as a strategic partner where personal diplomacy also comes into play. Modi, who holds the distinction of being the first Indian Prime Minister to address the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, does not base his Israel policy solely on geopolitical pragmatism. Behind this strategic rapprochement lies a historical and discursive alignment between Zionism and the Hindu nationalist (Hindutva) line of the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Both states construct a shared threat perception by defining themselves as “democracies under existential threat, surrounded by Islamic radicalism and terrorism” (Irrum & Humza, 2025). Indeed, this shared security concern was articulated in Modi’s speech at the Knesset: “Terrorism, wherever it is, threatens peace everywhere” (The Hindu, 2026).

This evolving alliance has led to clear changes in India’s foreign policy reflexes during moments of regional crisis. Following the events of October 7, India’s support for Israel reflected a clear choice of axis; Modi announced to the international community that his country stood “resolutely” alongside Israel (Dawn, 2026). New Delhi’s messages of unconditional solidarity with Israel in the post-October 7

process demonstrate that India is breaking away from its historical ‘non-alignment’ reflexes and making a distinct choice of camp.

The Modi government has not limited this geopolitical rapprochement solely to a security axis but has expanded it through civil, economic, and sociological tools. The level of trust reached in bilateral relations is reinforced by the leaders’ emphasis on a “lasting friendship built on trust, innovation, and shared determination.” In this context, relations are also moving toward a dimension of geo-economic integration with the commencement of Free Trade Agreement negotiations (The Hindu, 2026). Alongside economic integration, Modi actively utilizes the diaspora as a soft power element, viewing the Indian-origin Jewish community in Israel as a cultural and sociological bridge between the two nations (The Hindu, 2026).

However, this political transformation is not met with a total consensus in Indian domestic politics. This orientation, which represents a significant departure from the traditional state policy on the Palestinian issue, is being harshly criticized by the country’s main opposition, the National Congress Party, on the grounds that it disrupts the balance of power in West Asia (The Hindu, 2026). The Congress Party describes the government’s pro-Israel stance during a period of escalating regional tensions as a strategic error. Furthermore, prior to Modi’s visit to Israel, the main opposition called for him to “bring up the genocide in Gaza” (The Hindu, 2026). Therefore, while India’s policy toward Israel offers pragmatic gains in foreign relations, it creates vulnerabilities in terms of political

sustainability due to the oppositional discourse encountered at home.

These fluctuations in domestic public opinion and external balances compel India to walk a delicate diplomatic line. While the New Delhi administration justifies the partnership it has established with Israel on the axis of counter-terrorism, it also continues to provide balancing messages to its Arab allies in the Middle East through its support for the Gaza peace plan. This is because India's own national security interests and energy supplies are directly indexed to the geopolitical stability and peace of West Asia. As Prime Minister Modi emphasized during his visit to Israel (The Hindu, 2026), India's perception of cross-border security is no longer limited to South Asia; it now views the regional stability of the Middle East as an inseparable part of its own national security.

### **Pillars of the Partnership: Defense, Technology, and Trade**

The strongest pillar of the India-Israel partnership is undoubtedly the defense and security bureaucracy. While Israel has risen to become India's second-largest arms supplier after Russia, the relationship has evolved beyond a simple buyer-seller dynamic toward a vision of "co-development and co-production." The memorandum of understanding on advanced technology sharing, signed during the 17th India-Israel Joint Working Group (JWG) meeting held in Tel Aviv in November 2025, solidifies the institutional ground for this transformation (PIB India, 2025). Indeed, this institutional infrastructure culminated in a massive \$10 billion defense package during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Jerusalem in February 2026. Under India's "Make in

India" vision, the joint production of critical air defense systems—such as Israel's Iron Dome, Arrow, and Iron Beam—along with SPICE 1000 missiles in India was finalized (The Jerusalem Post, 2026). This strategic move enhances New Delhi's deterrence against regional threats while creating mutual interdependence between the two militaries.

Beyond military cooperation, civilian partnerships in technology and economics are now positioned as tools for geopolitical integration. The elevation of bilateral ties to a "Special Strategic Partnership for Peace, Innovation, and Prosperity" during diplomatic contacts in February 2026, along with the signing of 16 new agreements covering artificial intelligence, quantum computing, semiconductors, and cybersecurity, is the clearest indicator of this deepening (Xinhua, 2026). In this context, the integration of the two countries' digital payment systems is largely dismantling technological borders.

On the other hand, Israeli technologies in arid farming and water management, provided through Centers of Excellence, keep the relationship's civilian base strong against the demographic crises created by India's growing population and climate change (India Today, 2025). With the bilateral trade volume—driven by mutual technology investments and the diamond trade—approaching \$5 billion, the first round of official negotiations for the long-awaited Free Trade Agreement was successfully completed in New Delhi in February 2026 to transform this volume into a full geo-economic bloc (PIB India, 2026). The next phase of the process, scheduled for May 2026 in Israel, demonstrates the parties' goal of carrying their defense and technology-oriented relations onto a geo-economic foundation

that unites the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East.

### **The Role of Other Actors and Geopolitical Balances**

The strategic rapprochement between India and Israel has evolved beyond a bilateral dynamic into an element influencing the macro-geopolitical balances of the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East. In this context, one of New Delhi's primary motivations is the threat originating from the China-Pakistan axis. The military capacity and real-time intelligence support provided by China to Pakistan concretize the security risks India faces (BW Businessworld, 2026). Consequently, Israel's high-tech defense systems serve not merely as arms procurement for India, but as a "strategic insurance" against regional encirclement (The Jerusalem Post, 2026).

The facilitating role of the United States in this geopolitical equation is undeniable. The Washington administration actively encourages the strategic triangle between India and Israel to balance Chinese hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. However, India maintains its strategic autonomy by refusing to fully integrate into the U.S.-led Western camp, projecting an image of a power capable of resisting external political pressures. This growing self-confidence allows India to approach Israel without the historical fear of a potential backlash from Arab and Muslim-majority states. India's shift in its Israel policy, while remaining deeply connected to Gulf countries for energy supplies, is also empowered by the fact that the Arab world no longer forms a monolithic and unified diplomatic block against Israel. Thanks to the diplomatic flexibility created by the

Abraham Accords and India's "Act West" policy, the IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor) project is maintained as a strategic alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative despite regional crises (GMFUS, 2025).

Finally, this geopolitical and military partnership is fortified by the structural ideological overlap between Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Netanyahu's Likud party. Both right-leaning political movements achieve majority consolidation in their domestic politics through nationalist discourse; one utilizes narratives of grievance to justify securitist and exclusionary policies toward Indian Muslims, and the other toward Arab citizens. While using their identities as democracies as a shield in the international arena, these two leaders follow similar hardline policies domestically. This ideological convergence welds the India-Israel axis together not only through state interests but also through the shared worldview of their respective governments.

### **Conclusion**

Under the leadership of Narendra Modi, India's Israel policy has completely moved away from Cold War-era ideological constraints and the understanding of "behind-closed-doors" diplomacy, evolving into a multidimensional and publicly transparent strategic partnership. The fundamental factors triggering this structural transformation include the need for deterrence through Israeli and U.S. technology against the dual security threat originating from the China-Pakistan axis, the goal of localizing the defense industry and advanced civilian technology in line with the "Make in India" vision, and the

ideological convergence between the BJP government's Hindu nationalism and the Israeli right. The unconditional support displayed by New Delhi toward Tel Aviv following the October 7 operations proves that India has moved beyond the flexibility of its "De-hyphenation" policy, experiencing a significant break from its traditional foreign policy and making a clear choice of axis.

It is anticipated that this integration between India and Israel will create an interdependent structure by deepening in critical areas such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, space technologies, and joint weapons production. On the geopolitical level, with the active encouragement of the United States, this bilateral partnership is expected to transform into a broad Indo-Pacific–Middle East bloc encompassing Gulf Arab countries through new geo-economic corridors like I2U2 and IMEC. However, this new regional architecture is not without risks for India. The prolongation of Israel's conflicts in the region or their evolution into a wider regional war carries the potential to deeply shake the delicate balance New Delhi has established with its Arab allies, who are vital for its energy supplies. Ultimately, by increasing its military and technological capacity through its partnership with Israel, India will be positioned as the most important U.S.-supported actor in balancing China's growing influence in Asia and the Middle East, and New Delhi will continue to be one of the fundamental factors determining the course of global power competition.

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[between India and Israel as well as the diverse nature of our bilateral relations. India deeply values the enduring friendship with Israel, built on trust, innovation and a shared commitment to" / X](#)

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