

Israel woos India with technology, but many suspect its motives

by Susan B. Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

The May 17-19 official visit by Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, the highest-level official visit by an Israeli dignitary, has brought to the fore visible resistance within India against forging close security and military ties with Israel. The trip, scheduled for last December but canceled due to the eruption of violence following the demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu radicals, was also overshadowed by the presence of U.S. Deputy Undersecretary of State for South Asian Affairs John Malott at that time.

In January 1992, India established full diplomatic relations with Israel after having withdrawn the privilege following the Six-Day War in 1967. In the mid-1980s, during the tenure of the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, the masonic Anti-Defamation League (ADL) in the United States, which is under investigation there for illegal surveillance of individuals and groups including on behalf of Israel and South Africa, had sent a delegation led by Abe Foxman, director of the U.S. chapter of the ADL, to meet the Indian prime minister. Subsequent contacts in New York and Washington between Indian and Israeli officials, pressure from the United States led by former Congressman Stephen Solarz—who has now been tapped as the next U.S. ambassador to India—and a growing pro-Israel lobby inside India possessing a strong anti-Muslim bias, all helped the foundering government of Narasimha Rao to bring the two countries closer.

Two other factors stand out in the process that led to the Indian change of perspective. First was the visit of Isi Leibler, an Australian underworld figure who, according to Australia's Citizens Electoral Councils, is a top international operator for the ADL. Leibler came to India just prior to the establishment of full diplomatic relations, and made clear that since Mrs. Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv Gandhi were no longer on the scene (both were assassinated by circles tied into ADL and Anglo-American intelligence circles), the prospect of stronger India-Israel relations was now in the cards.

Second, India's growing problems in meeting foreign exchange requirements for imports, debt payments, and other expenditures, had forced the Rao government to look for opportunities to enhance the country's trade and foreign exchange earnings. In this context, a great deal of expectation

exists within India, at least among mandarins in the Finance Ministry, that closer trade ties with Israel would benefit India significantly. Present Maharashtra chief minister and former national defense minister Sharad Pawar, also played a significant role in helping New Delhi to take the plunge and bring Israel closer.

India's pro-Israel lobby

It is this pro-Israel lobby around Pawar, regardless of the fact that Rajiv Gandhi's assassins were trained by Israel's intelligence agency, the Mossad; that was pushing to make the Peres visit a great success. The Maharashtra chief minister led a five-member team to inspect the agro-technology fair in Israel. (Pawar is also a sugar cane farmer who uses Israeli drip irrigation and other high technology on his extensive holdings.) Along with the delegation went another 500 Indian farmers, ostensibly to acquire technological know-how on water management for rainfed agriculture—an area in which Israel is advanced. Though Pawar's visit was not an official one, he is a member of the ruling Congress Party's Working Committee, and was defense minister only a month before his visit. He also represents the lobby for strong Indo-Israeli defense and security ties, an issue which is highly sensitive for India.

Besides Pawar, the pro-Israeli lobby is firmly entrenched among academics, strategic analysts, and the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The argument of the pro-Israel lobby is that getting closer to Israel will not only benefit India financially, but will also send a message to the oil-rich Arab nations which had taken Indian support for granted on the Palestinian issue and other issues concerning the Islamic world. Closer Indo-Israeli relations, they point out, is also a back-door entry to gain favor with Washington. One of the reasons why Washington had always been suspicious of India, they argue, is India's deliberate attempt to keep its distance from Israel. And even among the Arab nations—now deeply divided—there are many who would like to see India forge closer ties with Israel. This again is mostly related to Israel's financial and political proximity to the United States.

Apart from Sharad Pawar's "unofficial" efforts, preparations were made to ensure that Peres's visit reaped results.

Indian Foreign Secretary J.N. Dixit stopped over at Tel Aviv in late March on his way to Cyprus and Greece in order to finalize some of the agreements that were to be signed.

During Peres's visit, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding to promote bilateral economic cooperation. This envisages greater contacts between public and private sector organizations in industry, agriculture, solar energy, research and development, natural resources, tourism, and transport. The two countries will encourage the establishment of joint ventures and projects in agriculture, agro-industries, telecommunications, medical equipment, non-conventional energy, and computers. The memorandum, which went into effect on May 17, will be valid for one year, and can be renewed for another year unless either party wishes to terminate it, according to official releases.

Peres also met with the Indian finance minister and architect of India's economic reforms, Dr. Manmohan Singh. Peres reportedly showed a great deal of interest in establishing close contacts between commercial banks of India, which are mostly nationalized, and those of Israel, in order to promote economic cooperation between the two countries. Peres also suggested creation of a joint fund for research and development along the lines of similar funds in other countries. He offered assistance to India for rural development, particularly in the area of desert farming in the state of Rajasthan.

Following the trip, it has been reported that India and Israel are working toward signing an agreement whereby both nations will bestow Most Favored Nation (MFN) status on each other. The Counsellor for Economic Affairs in the Israeli Embassy, Samy Ofri, told the *Economic Times* that two ventures are already under way: construction in India of a solar power plant and of manufacturing facilities for drip irrigation equipment.

Israel, 'the friend of India'?

Besides promoting trade between the two nations, Shimon Peres was also making a pitch to project Israel as a friend of India. During his talks with Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, Peres made it clear that India's "territorial integrity" must be preserved—an indication that his country considers Kashmir as part of India, and that no purpose would be served by reopening the history of the partition of the sub-continent.

Peres expressed support for India's fight against fundamentalism and terrorism, but wanted India to respond to the new chapter in bilateral relations by reviewing its voting pattern in the United Nations on matters concerning Israel. He argued that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world had lost an enemy, but that it is now faced with many more poorly identified enemies and problems. He said he hoped that India's vote at the U.N. in the future would be in accordance with the new-found relationship between the two countries.

Although the Peres trip was centered around development of economic ties and having each express their respective concerns about the world as they see it, there were reports of Israeli interest in offering India a range of high-tech military hardware. The list includes runway destruction bombs and advanced electronic warfare equipment, gun-locating radar, a search-wave radar, a gun system for ships to counter low-flying missiles, forward looking infrared for helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, laser-guided bombs and kits, and rockets and missiles.

Not exactly lovey-dovey

Though the Peres visit can be described as a cordial one, it did not go without hiccups. The *Sunday Mail* reported on its front page on May 23 that Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Ghulam Nabi Azad created a major diplomatic crisis when he refused to sign a tourism protocol with Israel right on the eve of Peres's visit. Azad was reportedly forced to toe the line when an irate Prime Minister Rao sent him a message that Azad had "no option" on this matter.

The most scathing attack on Peres came from Mani Shankar Aiyer, a member of parliament who had strongly opposed the resumption of full diplomatic relations with Israel. In an article in the June 6-12 national weekly *Sunday* titled "Chutzpah," Aiyer, who is identified as a close associate of the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, took exception to Peres's offer to India to join Israel to fight terrorism. Describing Peres as a "shiny star of Zionist terrorism," Aiyer went on to document Peres's own terrorist past, and cited the motto of Theodore Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement, to establish Israel as a "colonial state." He also pointed out that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi) was grievously hurt by the terrorist acts of the Haganah and other Zionist operations used for establishing Israel.

Moreover, the Indian military was reportedly not particularly impressed with the Israeli attempt to aggressively sell its hardware. The military's main objection is that the purchase-oriented approach may take the wind out of India's own well-developed domestic defense industry. Faced with such bargain-basement prices for off-the-shelf items, domestic industry would lose its foothold. Instead, they argue, the government's thrust should be to update and upgrade the domestic defense industry to the required level. There is also recognition that many of the products that the Israelis are offering, have already been researched and developed by Indian scientists and engineers.

Underlying these objections are even deeper apprehensions. Israel's long-term contact with China's military establishment, and the help it offered in providing China with hardware and technologies—not all of which were developed in Israel—is widely known. Israeli espionage's acquisition of highly secret U.S. military documents for the purpose of selling them to the Soviet Union, also did not escape the notice of Indian military intelligence.