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## India builds closer ties with Israel

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is building ties with Israel

NARENDRA Modi will become the first Indian Prime Minister to make a state visit to Israel. A summit with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would complete the missing piece of a bilateral relationship which has expanded in all directions since India normalised ties in 1992, writes World Review expert Pramit Pal Choudhuri.

No dates have been agreed, but the last quarter of 2015 seems likely.

High-level political exchanges are the only thing lacking in the bilateral relationship. Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, (2001-2006), is the only senior Israeli politician to have visited New Delhi.

Mr Modi's visit to Israel has been one of his foreign policy goals since he was elected prime minister in May 2014.

Mr Modi's foreign and home ministers visited Israel earlier in 2015 while an Israeli defence minister visited India for the first time.

Although India has had a Jewish population going back to Roman or even Assyrian times, modern India and Israel have had little to do with each other. Israel was an uncomfortable fit with India's early attempts to be a leader in the developing world. India also became increasingly conscious of its large Muslim population as Israel's relations with the Arab world worsened.

Relations between India and Israel were restricted to consular-level until 1992.

The end of the Cold War in 1991 saw India begin moving closer to the United States and its allies - including Israel. But there was a hard-nosed reason underlying India's decision to normalise ties with Israel - it wanted an arms supplier after the collapse of the Soviet Union, its main weapons provider.

The defence relationship forged since the mid-1990s has become the most remarkable aspect of Indo-Israeli ties.

Israel initially positioned itself modestly to upgrade India's largely Soviet arsenal. Even today, Israel remains the silent partner to many of India's weapons ventures with Russia - providing avionics and software to Russian fighters like the Sukhoi Su-30MKI and the BrahMos cruise missile.

Today, Israel exports its own equipment to India, including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or drones, anti-missile systems for Indian warships, early warning aircraft and more. India has imported more than US\$10 billion worth of arms from Israel in the past decade.

India bought a third of Israeli arms exports between 2009 and 2013, making it easily the world's largest buyer of Israeli weapons.

But this is not merely about commerce. Israel earned a special status with India by providing laser-guided missiles and other weapons from its own stocks during the 1999 Kargil border conflict between India and Pakistan. Senior Indian officials often mention the esteem Israel earned within India's establishment for its help.

The ultimate measure in bilateral trust is the quasi-secret Indo-Israeli nuclear military understanding which began in the late 1990s.

It remains a technological relationship.

‘Normal’ relations have also meant a much larger economic relationship between India and Israel.

Bilateral trade was US\$200 million, almost all in diamonds, in 1992. But bilateral trade grew to US\$4.39 billion in 2013 with diamonds comprising just over half that figure.

Israel’s greatest success has been to sell itself in different forms to the Indian establishment. It has remarkable outreach among India’s state governments and regional parties for a country its size.

Israel has been good at leveraging its agricultural and water management know-how to win over Indians across the political spectrum. Prime Minister Modi spends as much time on water issues as he does on defence when he meets Israeli officials.

Arguments in India against being more open about the Israeli relationship are waning. Domestically, the Indian left is politically diminished and there has been little in the way of a Muslim backlash. The increasing Islamist hue has made Indians less enthusiastic about Palestinian nationalism.

The Israeli relationship has also created minimal fallout in India’s relations with the Arab world. Many countries, like Saudi Arabia, have actually taken India more seriously as the Israel relationship has grown.

Iran’s realpolitik tendencies have meant it has continued to cooperate with India on those issues where it sees convergence, independent of the Israeli factor.

Israel accepts it will have little influence in the broader trends of Indian foreign policy. India, for example, counts both Israel and Iran as strategic partners.

In the defence sector, Russia’s domination of the Indian market is giving way to many new players, notably the US. Israel has already begun a fierce battle to preserve its share of the Indian defence market from these other arms suppliers.

Israel’s advantage is the trust it has built with the Indian political and security establishment. Its military interventions, counterterrorism assistance and agricultural extension work has meant even many local Indian politicians are favourably inclined to Israel.