

Mukherjee's Middle East Visit: Setting a New Template?

P. R. KUMARASWAMY

ABSTRACT President Pranab Mukherjee's visit to Jordan, Palestine and Israel in October was different for its content and long-term implications. A careful analysis of his statements and speeches in Amman, Ramallah and Jerusalem indicates a new Indian template for its engagement with the Middle East. While some of his observations were a reiteration of the traditional Indian positions since the early 20th century, they also signal a more nuanced approach to the turbulent region.

INTRODUCTION

Indian President Pranab Mukherjee's visit to Jordan, Palestine and Israel in October this year has been radically different not only for its content but also for its long-term implications. Presidential visits normally involve a solitary public speech before the official banquet. However, during Mukherjee's six-day visit to the Middle East, in addition to four briefings by his delegation, the President made four public statements in Jordan, four in Palestine, and three in Israel, in addition to an extensive interaction with members of the media at the conclusion of the visit. Besides, officials in the Presidential delegation gave two media briefings in Jordan and one each in Palestine and Israel. The Ministry for External Affairs (MEA) also separately issued lists of agreements signed in Amman, Ramallah and Jerusalem. A careful analysis of these events

indicates a new Indian template for its engagement with the Middle East. While some of his observations were merely a reiteration of positions taken historically by the Indian leadership since the early 20th century, a closer reading suggests that his engagements signal a more nuanced approach to the turbulent region.

Further, the coverage itself of Mukherjee's visit was novel and highly unprecedented. Over the years, as overseas visits by Indian presidents have been nothing more than symbolic and ceremonial, they have evoked little interest within the Indian polity, including the media. Such visits are considered "necessary" to nurture high-level political contacts and reiterate India's interests and commitments to these countries. Often, state visits rarely make it to the media besides the president's departure from India and arrival

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home. Moreover, domestic preoccupations and increasingly crowded multilateral summits provide a limited window for Indian prime ministers to travel abroad. In the twilight of his term as prime minister, Manmohan Singh was forced to skip a few heads of government meetings due to domestic preoccupations and compulsions. Since assuming office, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has reinvented the concept of high-decibel foreign trips. However, the list of countries with which engagement is critical is far too long to be met only by the prime minister.

THE CONTEXT

Foremost, President Mukherjee's visit to Israel was undertaken with considerable political calculations. This was a return visit from India after the visit of President and former Air Force Chief Ezer Weizman in December 1996. Since then, Israel has been seeking a visit by the Indian President. While K R Narayanan in the late 1990s and early 2000s was reluctant, his successors were a little more willing but were blocked by the Congress-led UPA governments. Thus it has taken nearly two decades to organise a reciprocal Indian visit to Israel.

Organising a presidential visit to Israel appears more sensible and feasible than a visit by Prime Minister Modi. As the Lok Sabha votes were being counted on 16 May 2014, an impending Indo-Israeli bonhomie became clear. As trends indicated a landslide victory for the BJP, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu became the first world leader to place a call to Narendra Modi and congratulate him for his election. As Chief Minister of Gujarat, Modi had visited Israel in 2006 and both leaders met thereafter in New York in September 2014. The fact that Netanyahu was the only leader Modi met bilaterally during the UN General Assembly session did not go unnoticed. During the funeral of former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in March 2015, Modi met Israeli President Reuven Rivlin and has since been exchanging messages, greetings and phone calls with Netanyahu. This was in contrast to the general apathy and indifference with which much

of the Middle East responded to the regime change in New Delhi. Hence, since 16 May 2014, many have observed and commented upon an impending upsurge in Indo-Israeli relations; some expressed hope in view of the cold reception Israel received during the decade-long UPA rule when bilateral visits were less frequent and more difficult to organise. Even National Day celebrations failed to attract high-level representation from the UPA governments.

At the press conference called by External Affairs Minister (EAM) Sushma Swaraj to mark the first anniversary of NDA rule on 31 May, she remarked, "So far as the Prime Minister is concerned, he will also be visiting. Israel will also be visited. No dates have been fixed." This then sparked off extensive media debates; some were happy, while many others had misgivings. Palestinians have had an unpleasant experience with Modi. During the earlier NDA rule, their ambassador to India was recalled following his unflattering remarks about the then Chief Minister Modi over the anti-Muslim riots. Unlike the 1982 incident involving the expulsion of the Israeli Consul in Mumbai over a media interview, this time, the Vajpayee government quietly asked Palestinian Chairman Yasser Arafat to recall his envoy. Over the years, many have rationalised the BJP-Israeli bonhomie by attributing it to ideological convergence.

At the same time, political exchanges at the level of the Prime Minister would not be easy and might send a wrong and unintended message. While engagement with Israel is necessary, it should be nuanced; therefore, the visit by the President. As the media were anticipating the follow-up to Swaraj's May statement, the President's visit to the region was announced.

LOGISTICAL IMPERATIVES

Stand-alone visits to Israel or Palestine is wrought with controversies and problems. Indeed, in the wake of the Oslo process, foreign leaders have made it a point to visit both, especially when the situation in the Gaza Strip (then the administrative headquarters of Arafat) was

relatively stable. Countries which did not have diplomatic relations with Israel, have coordinated their visit to the PNA-controlled areas; for example, the tacit Israeli approval facilitated the visit of Qatari Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani to the Gaza Strip in October 2012. The refusal of then Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto to 'coordinate' her visit to the Gaza Strip in 1994 led to its eventual cancellation. In June 2000, the then Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani attempted to maintain the balance but in November 2014, Home Minister Rajnath Singh skipped Ramallah and visited only Israel.

But treading the political tightrope is not the only imperative; there are logistical compulsions as well. Though recognised by a vast majority of countries, Palestine is not a sovereign entity in the legal sense of the term, as it does not have control over entry into or egress from its territories. While the Palestinians control the Rafah crossings into Egypt, since the militant takeover of the Strip by Hamas in June 2007, the other part of Palestine is outside the control of the West Bank-centric PNA. The entry into the West Bank is controlled by Israel on all sides. Indeed, during the UPA era, the junior EAM and Indian Union Muslim League leader E Ahamed visited Ramallah without meeting any Israeli leaders but tacit Israeli acquiescence was necessary. Partly to avoid this logistical challenge, India has been including Jordan in some of its political engagements with Israel and Palestine. The visit of EAM S M Krishna in January 2012, for example, began in Jordan before he proceeded to Palestine and Israel.

The scheduling of Mukherjee's October visit is also interesting. The three-nation visit began in Jordan (10-12 October), then moved to Palestine (12-13 October), and ended in Israel (13-15 October). Given the traditional Indian position, any other sequence of visits would have placed Israel at great disadvantage, virtually pushing the clock backwards on its relations with India. Flagging the past is logical in Palestine and reflects India's traditional position but vis-à-vis Israel the focus has to be the future. After hailing the trajectory of bilateral relations since 1992 in Israel, the Indian President going back to pre-

1947 Indian positions on the Palestine question would be seen as backsliding.

Interestingly, the President's visit to Palestine began in the Ben-Gurion airport near Tel Aviv. Rather than taking the King Hussein Bridge earlier known as the Allenby Bridge, Mukherjee took the aerial route from Amman and then drove overland to reach Ramallah. This perhaps was a response to the deteriorating security situation in the West Bank since the Jewish holiday season in late September and the spate of knifing attacks within the Green line.

Unlike the Prime Minister, who represents the largest political party or block in the Lok Sabha, the President represents the entire nation and hence Mukherjee's delegation included "different political parties and constituencies." President Mukherjee repeatedly harped on him being the "Visitor of 114 institutions"; the inclusion of Vice-Chancellors of three New Delhi-based Central Universities and Director of the IIT-Kharagpur in the delegation was also noteworthy. The visit also took care of certain protocol issues. In terms of exercise of powers, heads of state play more pivotal roles in Jordan and Palestine than their prime ministers: King Abdullah-II and Mahmud Abbas are the principal decision-makers and their cabinets play a secondary role. The situation is reverse in Israel, where the President occupies a largely ceremonial position. Thus in two of the three countries, Mukherjee's hosts and interlocutors represent the real power centres. This would not have been the case had Modi undertaken the visit and his meetings with Abdullah and Abbas would have remained mere courtesy calls. Though he represents the entire nation, Mukherjee is not the decision-maker and all his major statements and pronouncements, especially on foreign-policy matters, are approved by and reflect the sitting government. Mukherjee was thus only articulating Modi's policies and priorities.

COMMON STRANDS

Coinciding with the Jewish holiday season, since late September, Jerusalem has witnessed a spate

of knifing attacks, increasing tension in the city. Partly due to this growing anger and disappointment, on 30 September, President Abbas told the UN that the Palestinians “will not remain the only ones committed to the implementation of (Oslo) agreements, while Israel continuously violates them.” Mukherjee undertook the visit despite such a climate, in the process setting a precedent. This tension partly explains why he went to Ramallah from the Ben-Gurion airport near Tel Aviv instead of taking the Allenby Bridge across the Jordan River.

One could notice certain common features, contents and strands in Mukherjee's engagements in Jordan, Palestine and Israel. As he frequently reminded his three interlocutors, his was “the very first visit” by an Indian President. Till date, none of these countries had hosted an Indian prime minister, including Jordan, with which India established diplomatic relations in 1950. The need for 'balance' was reflected in many ways. In all his public pronouncements, Mukherjee harped on the positive aspects of the bilateral relations and eschewed any negative vibes.

Mukherjee periodically reminded his host about him being the 'Visitor of 114 central institutes of higher learning' and that his delegation included the Vice-Chancellors of three Delhi-based Central Universities. Partly reflecting this and partly as a coordinated balancing, premier institutions conferred honorary doctorates upon the Indian President—the Amman-based University of Jordan, East Jerusalem-based al-Quds University in Palestine, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel. He invited all his hosts to visit India and in Israel, the invitation was extended to Prime Minister Netanyahu.

At the same time, one could notice significant and nuanced differences in his engagements and statements. In Jordan and Palestine, Mukherjee paid rich tributes to personalities who are held dear by his hosts—King Hussein in Amman and Arafat in Ramallah. Conscious of the deep political divisions within Israel, he did not go beyond recognising the vision of the 'Founding Fathers'.

He addressed the parliaments in Jordan and Israel, but not in Palestine. This is primarily due to the deep divisions within the Palestinian society and the political divide between the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip and Fatah-dominated PNA rule in the West Bank. His engagements in Israel began with the customary visit to Yad Vashem where he “offered prayers in memory of all the men, women and children commemorated” in the Holocaust memorial. Likewise, unlike in Jordan or Palestine, in Israel he met the leader of opposition, Issac Herzog and his colleagues.

In all the three places, he made fleeting references to Mahatma Gandhi, but with different emphasis. In Jordan, he referred to the Mahatma's November 1938 statement wherein he had observed: “Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English and France to the French.” In his engagements in Ramallah, Mukherjee reminded his audience that Mahatma Gandhi “had raised the strongest voice” in support of the Palestinians. The visit coincided with the naming of streets after Gandhi. The absence of a similar move in Israel indicates the tension between the two countries over the Mahatma's perceived lack of sympathy towards Jewish nationalism. Yet, he told the Israeli Parliament, Knesset, “I was pleasantly surprised to learn that Mahatma Gandhi is the only world leader whose photograph had been kept by former Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion in his desert home.”

Both in Jordan and Palestine, Mukherjee reiterated the decade-old Indian position regarding the two-state solution, namely, “a negotiated solution regarding a sovereign, independent, viable and united State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, living within secured and recognized borders.” In Amman, he also added: “We have called upon both sides to exercise restraint and work towards a comprehensive resolution of the Palestinian issue” and in Ramallah, he said that India “would like to see the people of Palestine living ... side by side and at peace with Israel.” Interestingly, he mentioned 'East Jerusalem' as the capital of the

future Palestinian state in his statements in Amman and Ramallah, but not in Jerusalem.

Declaring East Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state is problematic as it precludes a negotiated settlement and prejudices the outcome. The Jerusalem question has been the most complex aspect of the Arab-Israeli conflict and any unilateral Indian endorsement of Palestinian claims would only make matters worse. Moreover, since 1966, when the states of Haryana and Punjab were created, India has been unable to resolve the status of Chandigarh. Having had a bitter experience over the contested “capital”, it would be wiser on India's part to eschew prejudging the final outcome on Jerusalem. Emphasis on the “negotiated” solution leading up to the formation the Palestinian state rules out any unilateral moves on either side. Moreover, in Amman and Ramallah, he reminded the Palestinians to co-exist with Israel. However, similar sentiments were missing in his engagements with the Israeli leaders. Indeed, the 'P' word was absent in all his public statements in Israel.

Mukherjee's State visit to Jordan and Palestine clearly addressed the issue of protocol. While Mukherjee holds a ceremonial position, his host heads of state are also the principal decision-makers. Further, if Abbas's Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah has been struggling to form a cabinet, the Jordanian monarch has adopted a revolving door policy vis-à-vis his head of government. Indeed, since Abdullah became the King in February 1999, Jordan has seen as many as five prime ministers. Prime Minister Modi does not have correspondingly strong decision-making counterparts in Jordan or Palestine and his meetings with Abdullah or Abbas would be symbolic and courteous, devoid of substance. Mukherjee's visit to Israel, on the other hand, signaled India's willingness to engage with Israel; while the Prime Minister largely represents the ruling party or coalition, the President is seen as representing the entire nation and hence Mukherjee's visit signaled a more wholehearted and non-partisan Indian embrace of Israel than what a prime ministerial visit could have

achieved. This is perhaps the most defining outcome of Mukherjee's visit and paves the way for more substantial interaction when Modi visits Israel.

Both in Jordan and Israel, Mukherjee acknowledged the help of these countries during critical moments. The former was helpful when India was forced to evacuate 150,000 of its citizens who were stranded in Kuwait following the Iraqi invasion of that country in 1990. It provided similar transit facilities when Indians were fleeing Iraq in 2014 after the onset of ISIS. In his Knesset speech, he acknowledged Israel “rushing critical defense supplies” when India “required them most urgently in 1999.”

Partly to respond to domestic critics that India has “abandoned” the Palestinians, Mukherjee listed India's efforts “at the forefront in promoting the Palestinian cause.” These included:

- Voting against the partition plan in November 1947;
- Recognition of the PLO as “the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in 1974” (sic);
- Being the “first non-Arab country to recognize” the State of Palestine in November 1988;
- Co-sponsoring the UN General Assembly resolution recognizing “the right of Palestinians to self-determination” in August 1998;
- Voting in favor of the UN General Assembly resolution “against the construction of the separation wall” by Israel in October 2003;
- Voting in favor of full membership of Palestinian in the UNESCO in October 2011;
- Spearheading “the campaign for recognition of Palestinian statehood by the UN” in 2012;
- Supporting the UN resolution “flying the Palestinian flag at the UN headquarters” in September 2015.

Besides these political moves, while speaking at the University of Amman, Mukherjee referred to India's commitments to “provide budgetary,

economic and developmental assistance” to Palestine. He also listed India's past, ongoing and planned moves in support of the Palestinians:

- Over the years, around 12,000 Palestinians have graduated from Indian universities;
- Under the ITEC scholarship programme, 760 Palestinians have been provided training in various areas;
- To increase the number of Palestinians under the ITEC programme to 100 per annum;
- Establishment of Jawaharlal Nehru Library at the Al-Azhar University in the Gaza City in 2000;
- Mahatma Gandhi Library-cum-Student Activity Centre at the Palestine Technical College at Deir al-Balah in the Gaza Strip in 2000;
- Setting up of Jawaharlal Nehru Secondary School for Girls in Asira al-Shamaliya;
- To increase the number of ICCR scholarships to Palestinians from 10 to 25 per annum;
- Budgetary support of US\$5 million to the PNA;
- Setting up of a techno park in Ramallah at an estimated cost of US\$12 million;
- Setting up of a Palestinian Institute of Diplomacy at the cost of US\$4.5 million;
- Providing equipment support to seven Vocational Training Colleges in Palestine;
- Inauguration of Jawaharlal Nehru Secondary School for Boys in Abu Dees in the West Bank in October 2015;
- Setting up of the India-Palestinian Centre for Excellence in ICT and Innovation in Gaza at the cost of US\$1 million;
- Support for a PhD programme between Birzeit University and JNU at the cost of US\$21,670 for five years.

The five projects announced during his visit would cost India US\$17.39 million. In addition, the President also announced the setting up of an India Chair in the Al-Quds University; this would be the second such Chair in the entire Middle East

with the other Chair being located in the Tel Aviv University.

The signing of academic MoUs reflected an interesting pattern. While eight academic MoUs were signed in Israel and six in Palestine, Jordan witnessed the signing of 10 academic MoUs. JNU and Delhi University signed agreements with all the three countries. While ground realities precluded IIT-Kharagpur from entering into any agreements with Palestine, political compulsions appear to have prevented Jamia Milia Islamia from seeking any agreements with higher educational institutions in Israel. Though a Central University, Jamia sought to retain its minority character and eschewed any academic cooperation with the Jewish State.

Jordan is emerging as a convenient venue for India to articulate its position regarding the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Mukherjee carefully avoided referring to Palestine during his public statements in Israel and similarly he avoided referring to stronger ties with Israel while dealing with the Palestinians. Such a refrain appeared unnecessary in Amman and, speaking at the University of Jordan, he observed: “Like Jordan, India's traditional support to the Palestinian cause remains steadfast and unwavering while we *pursue strong relations with Israel*” (emphasis added). Mukherjee flagged a number of issues that are critical for Jordan or endorsed its position. He hailed Jordan's willingness to be the safe haven to 1.4 million Syrian refugees “despite its own severe domestic constraints.” He empathised with the Hashemite anger and revulsion at the “brutal killing of Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasabeh” in January 2015 by the ISIS.

Recognising Jordan's non-permanent membership of the Security Council, India flagged its demand for reforming the UN and the need to conclude the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism pending since mid-1990s. Indeed, while it condemned terrorism and extremism, the statements against terrorism were stronger and more vocal in Jordan than in other places. Mukherjee attributed the root cause of terrorism in the region to “the humiliation that has been suffered over the years by Palestinians”

and their statelessness. Such an observation in Ramallah would have been controversial. Recognising the “frontline” role played by Jordan in fighting various extremist groups, India identified “counter-terrorism and defense sector” as the key areas of cooperation. Until recently, counter-terrorism cooperation did not go beyond Israel. However, the emergence of ISIS and similar groups has compelled India to expand such cooperation with countries like Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Mukherjee expressed interest in capitalising on Jordan's FTA agreements with the EU and the US. However, his desire to double the bilateral trade from US\$2 billion to US\$5 billion by 2025 exposes the limited basket of commodities traded between them. Partly to boost trade, India offered a US\$100-million credit line and increased scholarships to Jordanian students from 25 to 50 under 200 training programmes. Keeping in tune with the NDA government's policy of reaching out to Indian communities abroad, the President addressed “Indian Community and Friends of India” in Amman. Around 10,000 Indians are employed in about 20 textile factories owned by Indian companies or in the construction industry. The Indian investment in Jordan is estimated at US\$300 million. The US\$640-million Jordan-India Fertilizer Company (JIFCO) was incorporated in March 2008 and once operational, it would produce 1,500 tonnes of Phosphoric Acid per day, which would be shipped to India to meet India's food security needs. As part of its corporate social responsibility, during Mukherjee's visit, it was announced that JIFCO would give US\$100,000 to the Queen Rania trust for social projects.

A BREAK FROM THE PAST

A number of observations made by President Mukherjee would have been controversial and hotly debated had they been made by Prime Minister Modi. One can identify three such statements.

Recognising the positive trajectory of the relations with Israel since 1992, Mukherjee

described the relations as “excellent” and declared that “India's consistent policy has been to build strong, substantive and mutually beneficial relations with Israel.” Not shying away from the military dimension of the relations, he stated that India “remembers, with gratitude, the help that the Israeli government provided in rushing critical defense supplies to India when we needed them most urgently in 1999.” Until now, such an open admission of Israeli help has not been made by the Indian government.

Mukherjee repeatedly highlighted the democratic credentials of both countries and their “composite culture” of “different political parties and constituencies.” In spite of being “separated by two seas”, both countries are “joined by their common belief in the power of diversity and democracy.” Reflecting the general mood in Israel, he reminded his audience “whenever the Noble Prizes are announced, we often see names of scientists who have studied in the Hebrew University or Technion. As friends of Israel, we rejoice in your success.” Though “our countries travelled different paths” during the Cold War, Indians “always appreciated Israeli innovation in the fields of agriculture, the kibbutz system and the remarkable achievements of your scientists and engineers.”


In continuation of his visit to Yad Vashem to pay homage to victims of Holocaust, Mukherjee registered Indian admiration for “the will and resolve with which Jewish people have risen from the depths of unspeakable suffering and deprivation with a strong spirit and built their nation to make it what it is today—a thriving, progressive and prosperous society.”

He also traced the parallel paths travelled by both the countries. In the 20th century, he observed, “our two nations came into being through the trauma of conflict, division and human sufferings.” Both countries “weathered many challenges” of nation building because their “leaders kept faith in democracy”, their belief in the “transformative power of education and science” as well as their achievement of “strong and vibrant democracies are committed to the vision of our Founding Fathers.”

However, what could be the most controversial aspect of his speech before the Knesset was his observation: “Both India and Israel made parallel struggles against the British.” This is radically different from the traditional Indian position vis-à-vis Jewish nationalism. Since the Balfour Declaration of November 1917, led by Mahatma Gandhi, Indian nationalists criticised the Jewish demand for a homeland through the anti-imperialist prism. Gandhi's disapproval of the Zionist aspiration was primarily directed at the movement relying on the British to realise its objectives. As Nehru rhetorically asked the Zionist emissary Immanuel Olsvanger in September 1936: “I cannot tolerate this imperialism in India or Palestine and the question I ask everyone is whether he stands for this imperialism or against it.” Thus, while the Mahatma advised the yishuv to abandon relying on “British bayonets,” Nehru demanded that Zionists prove their credentials by siding with the anti-imperialist struggle of the Arabs.

While the Revisionist Zionism led by Ze'ev Jabotinsky were sceptical of the British from the

beginning, the socialist Zionists led by Ben-Gurion were more favourably inclined and worked with the Mandate authorities towards realising the Jewish demand for a homeland as enshrined in the Balfour Declaration. That bonhomie ended with the publication of the MacDonal White Paper in 1939 that announced the British disengagement from the Balfour Declaration. Thus, as they were appreciative of the British efforts against Nazi Germany in Europe, the socialist Zionists joined others in fighting the British in Mandate Palestine.

The UN approval of the partition plan was followed by the unilateral Declaration of independence literally hours before the departure of the last British soldier from Palestine. Yet, until now, no Indian government has admitted to the “parallel struggle against the British.” Such an observation, if made by Modi, would have evoked criticism of revisionism and repudiation of the Gandhi-Nehru legacy towards Palestine. Since it came from the President, a former member of the Congress party, no one even bothered to notice. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prof. P R Kumaraswamy teaches Contemporary Middle East in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He is the author of *India's Israel Policy* (Columbia University Press, 2010) and *Historical Dictionary of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Scarecrow Press, 2015). (On Twitter: @kumaraswamyJNU).



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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-43520020, 30220020. Fax : +91-11-43520003, 23210773

E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org

Website: www.orfonline.org