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Israel's New Friendship Arch: India, Russia and Turkey

P. R. Kumaraswamy

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187 Oud Metha Tower, 11th Floor,

303 Sheikh Rashid Road,

P. O. Box 80758,

Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Tel.: +971 4 324 7770

Fax: +971 4 324 7771

E-mail: sales@grc.ae

Website: www.grc.ae

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Abdulaziz O. Sager
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Israel's New Friendship Arch: India, Russia and Turkey

P. R. Kumaraswamy

The end of the Cold War and the inauguration of the Middle East peace conference in Madrid in October 1991 dramatically changed Israel's diplomatic fortunes. These developments and the emergence of the United States as the undisputed global hegemon compelled a number of European as well as Third World countries to re-examine and reverse their erstwhile hostility toward the Jewish State. Of all such countries, India, Russia and Turkey (IRT) occupy a prime position. A constellation of global changes and regional compulsions not only made these countries move away from the policies of the past, but also compelled them to forge closer ties with Israel. Changes in their foreign policies benefited Israel as they normalized relations without the latter making any political concessions.

An attempt is made here to examine salient features of Israel's newly found friendship with the three countries in question and the common concerns shared by these four countries. Ironically, as would be discussed, the collapse of the Oslo process, the outbreak of the *al-Aqsa intifada* in September 2000 and the emergence of Ariel Sharon as the principal figure in Israel only furthered Israel-IRT relations.

Background

The end of the Cold War significantly altered Israel's fortunes. By allying itself with the victors of the Cold War, it reaped considerable political, diplomatic, economic and military dividends. It is in this context that one has to examine Israel's newfound relations with three regional powers, namely, India, Russia and Turkey. The unparalleled hegemony of the US and the need to forge closer ties with Washington drove many states to abandon their prolonged unfriendliness, if not hostility, toward Israel. The new global realities thus fundamentally altered the policies of these countries.

Israel's political fortunes began to improve in October 1991, when the then-Soviet Union restored the full diplomatic relations that were broken off following the June war of 1967. This move paved the way for the Madrid conference later that month. Two months later, Turkey, which maintained low level diplomatic relations with Israel since the early 1950s, upgraded the relations to the ambassadorial level.¹ On January 29, 1992, India became the last major non-Arab and non-Islamic state to normalize relations with Israel. Undoubtedly, the end of the Cold War played a decisive role in these three countries' establishment of closer ties to Israel.

Fall of the Iron Curtain

The end of the Cold War brought about a strategic shift in the Middle East and ended the limited Soviet political influence in the region. While the June 1967 war and the October 1973 war exposed the limitations of Soviet military power, the Egypt-Israeli Camp David Accords underscored its limitations in securing peace in the region. Soviet support proved to be insufficient to ensure either an Arab military victory over Israel or a political settlement with it.

1- For a background discussion see, Cagri Erhan, *Turkish-Israeli relations in a historical perspective, Ankara Paper 6* (London: Frank Cass, 2003); and Efraim Inbar, *The Turkish Israeli Entente* (London: King's College, 2001).

Pre-occupied with internal turmoil, Moscow remained a mute spectator when the US-led force reversed the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1991. The inauguration of the Middle East Peace Conference in Madrid in October 1991, which was primarily a result of the US-led military victory over Iraq and the post-war diplomatic initiative of US Secretary of State James Baker, further marked Moscow's limited regional standing. The Soviet Union, which had no say in the format, composition and agenda of the conference, was asked to co-chair the inaugural session merely due to its erstwhile global status.

Even this ceremonial status was only possible because Moscow assented to a prime Israeli demand: full normalization. Israel was adamant that the participation of any country in the Middle East peace process was conditional upon that power maintaining normal ties with Israel as well as its Arab adversaries.² Moscow thus had no choice but to comply. Yet, this only had limited benefits; even though Moscow was asked to host the inaugural session of the multilateral talks in January 1992, the Soviet Union/Russia was systematically excluded from the Madrid peace process as well as the Oslo process.

Moscow's preoccupations with post-disintegration reconstruction, domestic turmoil and political uncertainties and its growing dependence upon the West for economic largess meant that it was no longer in a position to play a meaningful role in the Middle East. The Syrian 'strategic decision' to go to Madrid and to seek a political settlement with Israel was largely attributed to the disappearance of its erstwhile patron. Indeed, until the unveiling of the Quartet's Roadmap in April 2003, Russia remained a marginal player in the Middle East peace process.³ One could go the extent of suggesting that a number of Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan

2- This was one of the reasons for India establishing diplomatic ties with Israel on the eve of the multilateral talks, which began in Moscow in January 1992.

3- The European Union, the United Nations and the US were the other three players.

and Saudi Arabia have made more contributions to the peace process than has Russia.

The dwindling fortunes of Russia in the Middle East and elsewhere also affected the policies of two other countries, namely India and Turkey. It is essential to remember that the Cold War was not a factor in the prolonged absence of diplomatic relations between India and Israel. Historically, the Indian nationalists adopted a pro-Arab position on the Palestinian question and were unsympathetic toward the Zionist aspirations for a national home in Palestine.⁴ Over the years, however, a number of other factors such as India's rivalry with Pakistan, its political and economic dependence upon the Middle East and Israel's identification with the West have contributed to India adopting a strong pro-Palestinian, if not an anti-Israeli foreign policy.

This Indian policy also benefited from its close ties with Moscow. At the height of the Cold War, anti-Israeli postures became a sign of 'progressiveness' and as a result, India joined the Soviet Union and its allies in working toward various Third World gatherings adopting anti-Israeli positions. In the domestic arena, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's initial dependence upon the communist parties provided an ideological basis for anti-Israeli postures.

The end of the Cold War significantly undermined this Indian legacy. At one level, the anti-Israeli posture became internationally unpopular and strategically suicidal for India. The disintegration of the Soviet Union brought down the ideological basis for hostilities toward Israel. At the same time, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait not only diverted international attention away from the 1987 *Intifada* but also identified President Saddam Hussein as a new source of

4- For discussion on the background and prolonged absence of diplomatic ties see P.R. Kumaraswamy, "India's recognition of Israel," *Middle Eastern Studies* 31, no.1 (January 1995), 124-38; "India and Israel: Prelude to normalization," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 19, no.2 (Winter 1995), 53-73; "India and Israel: Emerging partnership," in *Journal of Strategic Studies* 25, no.4 (December 2002), 192-206.

threat to regional stability. Moreover, the role of the Palestinian leadership during the crisis earned them more Arab enmity than friendship. As a result, India was no longer able to promote its interests in the Middle East by relying exclusively on its support for the Palestinians, especially the PLO. The inauguration of the Madrid Conference marked the first time that it was possible for India to develop good relations with Israel without abandoning its support for the Palestinian cause.

The end of the Cold War also placed India on the 'losing side' and forced it to come to terms with the US-dominated new international order. Overnight, its tilt toward Moscow became dated and redundant, thereby forcing it to revisit and reexamine a number of its policies. The precarious domestic economic crisis and the need for international economic aid added additional impetus for a decisive foreign policy shift toward the US. The Congress government headed by Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao viewed normalization of relations with Israel as an important instrument for ushering in a new Indian response to the post-Cold War world. The decision to normalize ties with Israel was announced on the eve of Rao's visit to the US to attend the summit meeting of the UN Security Council. Also, the disintegration of the Soviet Union exposed India's dependence upon Moscow for military supplies. This in turn worked in favor of Indo-Israeli normalization.

The Turkish case is slightly different. The disappearance of the Soviet Union, the prime rationale for the Turkish-American strategic ties, compelled Ankara to reinvent its regional importance. "Throughout the Cold War" argued a Turkish scholar, Ankara "was a distant outpost on the European periphery, a barrier to Soviet ambition in the Middle East and a contributor to the security of Europe."⁵ The end of the Cold War brought about a major shift in Turkey's regional role. Apprehensions over Turkey's diminished importance to the West and especially to NATO compelled

5- Mustafa Aydin, *Ten Years after: Turkey's Gulf Policy (1990-91) Revisited, Ankara Paper 3* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 2

President Turgut Ozal to hastily shift from traditional Turkish neutrality and adopt an activist Middle East policy during the Kuwait crisis. Even though Turkey's involvement in "Middle Eastern uncertainties" failed to yield the anticipated dividends, its newly-established relations with Israel was a significant offshoot of this policy.

Unlike India, Turkey had maintained low-level diplomatic relations with the Jewish State since the early 1950s. Without much publicity or formal arrangements, Turkey became a part of Israel's 'peripheral diplomacy' whereby the latter sought to befriend and forge closer ties with non-Arab states and groups in the Middle East. Turkey's close politico-military ties with the West and its animosity toward the Arabs due to their 'betrayal' of the Ottoman Empire provided the necessary ambiance for Ankara's Israel policy. Turkey's Islamic credentials, historical legacy and its regional importance made it an attractive preposition for Israel. At the same time, however, periodic tensions emanating from the Arab-Israeli conflict precluded Turkey from opting for an overt friendship toward Israel, forcing it to wait until December 1991 at which time both countries raised their diplomatic relations to ambassadorial level.

Thus by early 1992, Israel had forged normal diplomatic relations with all the three major – and by now regional - powers. Since then, Israel's burgeoning relations with the India, Russia and Turkey have rooted themselves in a number of shared concerns and interests. If the end of the Cold War led to normalization of relations, the ushering in of the US-dominated international order forced these three countries to look for ways of befriending the sole superpower. This strategic shift in the international order prompted them to seek closer political and economic ties with Washington and thus necessitated normalization with Israel. The regional security situation, especially for India and Turkey, resulted in these countries looking to Israel as a potential supplier of military hardware.

The menace of terrorism became the third component of the Israel-IRT relations with the latter trying to benefit from Israeli expertise and experience. Although the newly established Israeli-IRT relations were not an alliance against any third party, all the three countries slowly recognized the diminishing value of the Palestinian question within inter-state relations in the Middle East. Unlike the Cold War era, they were now able to befriend Israel without alienating any major Arab and Islamic countries in the region. Finally, the bilateral relations also benefited from growing economic relations between Israel and India, Russia and Turkey.

Strategic Shift

The post-Cold War reshaping of the foreign policy of India, Russia and Turkey, especially toward Israel, was partly influenced by the US factor. Indeed, their new rapprochement has been an integral part of their American policy. The timing of the reversal and the manner in which these countries perceive and present their new friendship indicate the American component to their Israeli policy. In fact, in all the three countries under consideration, relations with Israel are seen as an effective means of strengthening and consolidating ties with Washington. They view closer ties with Israel as a means of consolidating their relative power, position and influence vis-à-vis Washington.

In May 2003, speaking before the American Jewish Committee, Brajesh Mishra, National Security Adviser of India, candidly remarked:

India, the United States and Israel have some fundamental similarities. We are all democracies, sharing a common vision of pluralism, tolerance and equal opportunity. Stronger India-US relations and India-Israel relations have a natural logic.

This statement soon led to widespread attention both in India and elsewhere over the possibility of a triangular axis involving India, Israel and the US. The visit of the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to India in September 2003 intensified the debate and

generated negative reactions from a number of states, most notably Pakistan.

In the short turn, the Indian desire to co-opt the US in its bilateral ties with Israel appears to have been motivated by its desire to not follow the Chinese example in dealing with Israel. Since the late 1990s, Israel-US relations were marred by frequent controversies over Israel-China military ties, which culminated into a massive showdown over the sale of Phalcon advanced airborne early warning systems to China. Under intense American pressure and threats of sanctions, Israel canceled the deal in July 2000. India perhaps wished to avoid such costly disputes with the US over its burgeoning military ties with Israel and thus saw the necessity in a subtle and sophisticated formulation of a trilateral cooperation, if not triangular axis, comprising Israel, India and the US.

The American angle figures prominently in Turkey's new fondness for Israel in a similar manner. Both Israeli and Turkish scholars periodically refer to the utility of Israel and its supporters in the US in promoting Turko-American ties. The American angle, however, is more pronounced in Israel than in Turkey. In the words of Efraim Inbar, Turkey

... faces problems in its relations with the US, particularly on Capitol Hill. The Greek and Armenian lobbies in Washington have been successful in imposing restrictions on arms transfers, in delaying deliveries, and in focusing attention on Turkish human rights violations, ... Turkey realized that Israel was better positioned in Washington, and hoped that Israel's influence and particularly its lobby could be harnessed to further Turkish interests, such as arms transfers.⁶

In a bid to reciprocate the Turkish friendship, toward the end of 1990s, "Israel conducted a concerted effort to instruct American Jewry on the strategic significance of Turkey [and] American-

6- Efraim Inbar, *The Israeli-Turkish Entente*, (London: King's College, nd), 40.

Jewish organizations were induced to add Turkey to the itinerary of many high-level missions regularly sent to Israel.”⁷ Turkish scholars, however, tended to be more cautious in articulating similar arguments. At the same time, Turkish officials frequently meet and interact with pro-Israeli groups in the US, publicly acknowledging their help in warding off criticisms over sensitive areas such as the Armenian question and the human rights issue.

Israel has also been encouraging India and Turkey to pursue friendlier ties with Israel. For example, while Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was visiting India in September 2003, a senior American official observed: “We’re always glad when our friends make friends with each other and work together.”⁸ On the Russian front, meanwhile, the US adopted a muted and indifferent posture. This however, is a considerable improvement from its Cold War tactics, when it imposed sanctions over the Soviet restrictions upon the Jewish immigration to Israel.

Security Calculations

Israel’s policy toward these countries has a strong military-strategic component. Despite the growing political and economic relations, it is the military component which draws widespread interests, controversies and criticisms. While an elaborate discussion on the nature and extent of the relations may not be appropriate here, one can discern a number of broad trends, some of them similar to all three countries and some rather unique.

Assessing the portrayal of Israeli-Turkish relations, one scholar asked: “Is it an alliance, a strategic cooperation or something altogether different?”⁹ There is no unanimity among scholars in characterizing the emerging military-centric relations between Israel and Turkey. One can go the extent of suggesting that the

7- Ibid., 41.

8- *The Times of India*, September 10, 2003

9- Gokhan Bacik, “The limits of an alliance: Turkish-Israeli relations revisited,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 23, no.3 (Summer 2001), 50.

same is equally valid for India as well. If one ignores the nomenclature, it is possible to identify certain broad trends in Israel's military ties with Turkey¹⁰ and India.¹¹

Alternative source of supply

Perceived military advantages influenced the two countries to revise their earlier policies toward Israel. On the eve of the normalization of relations, Turkey's military situation was rather precarious. Despite its prolonged alliance with the West and its NATO membership, such issues as the Kurdish question and Cyprus problem had poisoned the US-Turkish ties. At times, Turkey had difficulties in procuring arms from the US. Turkish regional aspirations were predicated upon its ability to upgrade and modernize its armed forces; thus, Israel became a potential supplier and a possible 'backdoor' to American technology.

India was in a similar situation but for different reasons. The disintegration of the Soviet Union exposed its prolonged dependence upon Moscow for military supplies. Since the mid-1950s when the USSR emerged as its major political ally, India had depended upon the superpower for its military modernization. Closer political relations, affordable prices and the willingness of the Soviets to fulfill its growing demands merely increased the Indian dependency. In some areas, the Indian dependency upon Moscow was total.¹² Even though Israel was not the ideal replacement, it had certain critical advantages, such as upgrading and modernizing the Soviet-built MiGs, which are the backbone of the Indian air force.

10- Efraim Inbar, *The Turkish Israeli Entente*, (London: King's College, 2001).

11- For a detailed but dated discussion on the military cooperation, see P.R. Kumaraswamy, *India and Israel: Emerging Strategic Partnership* (Ramat Gan: BESA Centre for Strategic Studies, 1998).

12- At the time of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the dependency of the Indian air defense missiles was 96%, submarine 85%, fighter and ground-attack aircraft 60%, fighters AD 85% and transport aircraft 70%. Sandy Gordon, "Australia's perspectives on Indian Ocean" in Jasjit Singh (ed.), *Maritime Security* (New Delhi: IDSA, 1993), 68. See also *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 15, 1992, 16.

Military sales

Since normalization, arms sales have emerged as the most important component of Israel's relations with Turkey and India. Israel has been supplying a host of military hardware, avionics, electronic warfare systems, missiles and military training packages to both countries. In 1996, Turkey signed two comprehensive defense agreements with Israel whose contents still remain secret. While Turkey received sensitive Israeli platforms such as Merkava tanks in early 2004, India had signed a billion dollar deal for the supply of Phalcon early warning system, which constitutes a real force multiplier from India's standpoint. According to one Israeli official,

There are currently two layers to our relationship with India. The first is expressed in operative activities in the sphere of night vision systems and communications, which are supplied to them in quantities running into hundreds and thousands, as well as in connection with upgrades and relatively simple things, such as ammunition or simple electronic warfare, which bring in many tens of millions of dollars a year.¹³

For its part, in recent years, India has emerged as the largest market for Israeli arms exports. Even though actual estimates vary, Israel is increasingly seen as the second-largest arms supplier to India after Russia.

Russia is not far behind in forging arms relations with Israel. At one level, there is a commercial competition between the two over upgrading Soviet-designed and built MiGs, especially those in service in India. At another level, the disintegration of the Soviet Union has fragmented the already cash-starved Russian defense industry. Thus, instead of competition, Russia also seeks to forge closer ties with its Israeli counterparts for third party contracts. The

13- Yequti'el Mor's interview in *Ma'ariv*, (*Asaqim supplement*), July 22, 2003, in FBIS-NES.

Phalcon system that Israel sought to sell to China was based on a Russian platform. Though the deal fell through due to American pressure, Israel formally signed a deal in 2004 to sell the early warning system to India.

In a bid to avoid rivalry that could cost both countries dearly, Russia is seeking better collaboration with Israel. In September 2003, a senior Russia official disclosed:

Israeli companies are in competition with us virtually everywhere. The Israelis know our technology perfectly well, especially the Soviet technology, and they have their own ways of modernizing it. We are trying to bring order to this sphere by concluding corresponding agreements. Some of them have already been signed. One more is needed- on cooperation on the markets of third countries, which would make it possible for us to move from competitive struggle and rivalry to cooperation.”¹⁴

It in this context, one should examine the new Russian desire to cooperate with Israel in the lucrative Turkish and South Korean arms market.

Even though expressions such as ‘strategic partnership’ are also used vis-à-vis India, they are more appropriate for Turkish-Israeli relations. The nature of the military ties between the two states goes far beyond commercial transactions. In the words of one, the relations “can be called a strategic partnership since it reflects a convergence of views on a wide range of global and regional issues.”¹⁵ Even those who take exception to the usage of the term

14- Itar-Tass, September 26, 2003 in Foreign Broadcasting Information Service-Near East and South Asia (FBIS-NES). All FBIS-NES materials are taken from the electronic version. The author is grateful to the Library staff of the Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace, Jerusalem for their invaluable help.

15- Efraim Inbar, “Regional implications of the Israeli-Turkish strategic partnership,” *Turkish Studies* 3, no.2 (Autumn 2002), 22.

‘strategic’, accept that both countries have or are at least working toward a common strategic understanding.¹⁶

Terrorism

In recent years, all four states have become victims of the politically-motivated killing of unarmed civilians by individuals and groups. Here, it should be noted that neither India, Russia nor Turkey shares Israel’s portrayal of Palestinian resistance or the *al-Aqsa intifada* as ‘terrorism.’ Strong political calculations and domestic compulsions also preclude these countries from sharing Israeli concerns about ‘Islamic terrorism.’

However, they find a common cause with Israel’s concerns about the pre-mediated killing of the civilian population. India, Russia and Turkey are faced with militant groups who pursue their political agenda through various acts of terror. In some cases, terrorists use Islam to justify and promote their political objectives. Religion plays an important role in the ongoing militancy in the Indian state of Kashmir with Pakistan; the latter offered the militants prolonged support, projecting them as Jihadis. The infiltration of militants from the Pakistan-held Kashmir - or cross-border terrorism - figures prominently in India’s foreign relations.

The formation of a joint working group on terrorism is the most significant development in Indo-Israeli relations. The visit of Home Minister L. K. Advani to Israel in the summer of 2000 underscored the role of counter-terrorism in the new friendship, as he was accompanied by a number of senior officials specializing in counter-terrorism. Also, significant quantities of Israeli military exports to India consist of such defensive mechanisms as border fencing, night vision equipment and other electronic devices to detect infiltration. Because of these developments, India, especially

16- Among others see, Mustafa Kibaroglu, “Turkey and Israel strategize,” *Middle East Quarterly* 9, no.1 (Winter 2002), 61-65; Cevik Bir and Martin Sherman, “Formula for stability: Turkey plus Israel,” *Middle East Quarterly* 9, no.4 (Fall 2002), 23-32; and Raphael Israeli, “The land of many crossroads: The Turkish-Israeli odd couple,” *Orbis* 45, no.1, 65-77.

during the administration (1998-2004) of the rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was less critical of Israel's policy of targeted killing. Even the assassination of Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin elicited only a muted response from New Delhi.

The Russian case is no different. Terrorism by Chechen rebels fighting for independence figures prominently in Israeli-Russian relations. Unlike the US and its allies, Israel has been sympathetic toward Russia and its military campaign against the Chechen militants. Distancing itself from Washington, Israeli leaders repeatedly expressed understanding of and support for Russia's anti-Chechen policies. In February 2000, Prime Minister Ehud Barak told then-Acting President Vladimir Putin that Russia's efforts to fight terrorism in Chechnya served the interests of the rest of the world.¹⁷ Another leader, Avigdor Lieberman, who emigrated from former Soviet Union, was more candid. Expressing support for Russia's anti-terrorist operation in Chechnya, he declared that "Russia's fundamental decision to combat terrorism is of great importance. No compromises or agreements are possible here, no matter how hard the situation may be." According to Lieberman "at this particular stage of affairs in Chechnya, no other method of combating terrorism would have worked."¹⁸ Other Israeli leaders have expressed similar positions. The hostage crisis in the North Ossetian town of Beslan in September 2004 evoked strong Israeli condemnation. In return for its sympathetic position, Israel hopes to elicit Russian support for its campaign against Palestinian militancy.

The place of Turkey in counter-terrorism is rather mixed. In the 1990s, terrorism by various Kurdish groups, especially the PKK, compelled Turkey to look to Israel as an ally. The strong security cooperation between the two countries was perceived and projected through the terrorist prism. But following the capture of Abdullah Ocalan in 1998, Kurdish violence decreased considerably. As a

17- Tass News Agency, February 16, 2000 in FBIS-NES.

18- Tass News Agency, February 8, 2000, in FBIS-NES.

result, Turkey has been less willing to endorse Israel's counter-terrorism policy. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan described Ahmed Yassin's assassination as 'state terrorism.' As the opposition leader, in April 2002 he went on criticize that the Jews "who at one time were the oppressed, have now become the oppressors.... We cannot remain insensitive on the topic of Palestine... it is the duty of the Turkish Republic to bring all its resources to bear on this problem."¹⁹ The anti-Palestinian policies of Israel figure prominently in Turkey and often irritate Israeli-Turkish relations. At the same time, Turkey was not immune from terrorism and in November 2003, massive bomb blasts took place in two synagogues in Istanbul. Despite immediate sympathy and understanding, however, Turkey has been less accommodative of the Israeli position vis-à-vis terrorism than India and Russia have been.

De-linking the Palestinian question

Since normalization, India, Russia and Turkey have consciously avoided rendering their bilateral relations with Israel hostage to the Palestinian question. In opting to re-evaluate their Cold War policies toward Israel, these three countries have made a critical distinction by moving away from viewing their bilateral relations with Israel as a classical zero-sum game. For over three decades, the Arab-Israeli conflict was viewed through an 'either-or' prism and opposition to Israel was made a pre-condition for their support for the Arabs and Palestinians. Thus, all three states sought to promote their national interests in the Middle East by adopting a policy that was vociferously anti-Israeli, where unfriendliness or hostility toward Israel largely characterized their 'support' for the Palestinians. The prolonged absence of Indo-Israeli relations, the rupture of the Russo-Israeli ties in June 1967 and protracted low Turko-Israeli ties were directly related to the Palestinian factor.

19- *Anatolia* (Ankara), 2 April 2002, FBIS-NES.

Seen in this historic context, the post-Cold War normalization of relations between the India, Russia, Turkey, and Israel was radical. These countries recognized that it was possible to establish and maintain normal relations with Israel without abandoning the Palestinians. The willingness of the Palestinian leadership to seek and secure a negotiated settlement with Israel through the Madrid and Oslo processes provided both an incentive and an opportunity. The Palestinian support for Iraqi President Saddam Hussein during the Kuwait war further underscored the limitations of the Palestinian cause. Countries such as India gradually recognized that at times, a pro-Palestinian policy could be a liability in promoting their interests in the wider Arab world. As a result, the diminished importance of the Palestinian factor in the immediate aftermath of the Kuwait war greatly facilitated India, Russia and Turkey moving closer to Israel.

Normalization with Israel, however, did not mean that they had turned their backs on the Palestinians, abandoned the Palestinian cause or no longer supported Palestinian independence. On the contrary, they were careful to pursue a policy whereby their friendship with Israel would not come at the cost of their traditional support for the Palestinians. Despite the internal turmoil and external challenges from Hamas, India, Russia and Turkey continued to recognize the right of Palestinian self-determination and treated Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat as the President of Palestine. Following the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority, they established separate diplomatic missions in the Palestinian territories. The derailing of the peace process, delayed implementation of the Oslo accords and onset of violence, which eventually culminated in the *al-Aqsa Intifada*, only reiterated their long-held view that the amicable resolution of the Palestinian question was central to regional peace and stability in the Middle East.

Since the outbreak of the *al-Aqsa Intifada*, both India and Turkey witnessed strong domestic pressure to re-evaluate their policies toward Israel. In India, such calls came from the marginal but vocal Communists, some of whom even demanded the recall of

the Indian ambassador in Tel Aviv and the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador in New Delhi. Similarly, Turkish domestic opinion has also turned against Israel following the *Intifada* and there are growing calls in Ankara for limiting, if not ending the cozy relations with Israel.²⁰ When Prime Minister Sharon visited Ankara in August 2001, protestors greeted him by chanting “Butcher of Palestine, go home!”²¹ A similar reception awaited him when he visited India in September 2003.

One can notice similar trends in Moscow as well. For much of the 1990s, Russia was pre-occupied with the aftermath of the end of the Soviet Union and the enormous task of defining a new Russian identity and its role in the world. Internal turmoil, troubled relations with its immediate neighbors and the need to redefine its ties with the sole superpower meant that Moscow had little time, interest or resources to play a meaningful role in the Middle East. Ultimately, however, the *al-Aqsa Intifada* and the failure of various US-led initiatives provided an opening for Moscow to re-enter the peace process through the Quartet Plan outlined in April 2003.²²

Russia has had serious and fundamental differences with Israel over a number of issues, such as the importance of Yasser Arafat to the Middle East peace process, Israeli re-occupation of Palestinian territories, the Israeli policy of the targeted killing of Palestinians, massive retaliation against the civilian population and its defiant attitude toward the international community. They have also opposed Israel's decision to build a controversial security barrier in the West Bank.

20- For a background discussion see Mahmut Bali Aykan, “The Palestinian question in Turkey foreign policy from the 1950s to the 1990s,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25, no.1 (February 1993), 91-110; and M. Hakan Yavuz and Mujeeb R Khan, “Turkish foreign policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict: Duality and the development (1950-1991),” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 14, no.4 (Fall 1992), 69-94.

21- Quoted in Gregory A Burris, “Turkey and Israel: Speedy bumps,” *Middle East Quarterly* 10, no.4 (Fall 2003), 72.

22- The complete text of the road map formally handed over to Israel and Palestinian Authority in April 2003 can be found in www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=281192&contrassID=2&subContrassID1&1sbsubContrassID=0&listSrc_Y

Yet, none of these countries allowed their strong support for the Palestinians to impede their friendship with Israel or cooperation in the military-security arena. Instead, they were determined not to make their ties with Israel a hostage to their positions vis-à-vis the Palestinians. Indeed, India, Russia and to a lesser degree Turkey have not allowed the *al-Aqsa intifada* from undermining the bilateral relationships that have flourished since Ariel Sharon came to power in early 2001. Ironically, the person whose controversial visit to the al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount provoked the Palestinian uprising managed to promote Israel's relations with these three states. Moreover, his official visits to India, Turkey and Russia took place against the backdrop of intense confrontation between the Israeli military and the Palestinians.

Economic ties

Since normalization, bilateral trade ties have also increased considerably. As Table 1 indicates, there is a quantum jump in Israel's economic ties with all three countries. While its trade with India and Turkey is fast approaching the \$2 billion mark, its trade with Russia is reaching \$1 billion. These figures, however, do not indicate the complete picture, as figures for the arms trade, the key component of Israel's relations with India and Turkey, are not included in the overall trade figures. Similarly, the impact of Israeli tourists to India and Turkey also contributes to the economy of these two countries. While about 300,000 Israelis annually visit Turkey, India attracts around 50,000 Israeli tourists annually.

The introduction of new commodities into the bilateral trade further improved Israel's economic ties with Russia and Turkey. Since 1998, Gazprom, Russia's largest gas producer, has been trying to export natural gas to Israel. In the past, the Israeli desire to import only about two to three billion cubic meters (bcm) annually made the whole proposal unprofitable for the Russian firm. Yet, as Israel seeks to increase its dependency upon gas-based power generation, demand for gas is expected to increase. In June 2004, senior officials of Gazprom were in Israel to pursue a proposal whereby the company would supply 6-8 bcm of gas though

pipelines.²³ Despite past political differences and tensions, a gas deal between Israel and Russia would not only strengthen the bilateral relations but also provide a strong economic base and incentive for such relations.

Table 1
Israel's trade with India, Russia and Turkey
(in million US\$)

Country		India	Russian Federation	Turkey
1990	Exp.	96.4	-	88.7
	Imp.	69.6	-	36.2
1999	Exp.	536.3	106.4	338.3
	Imp.	455.0	302.4	557.1
2000	Exp.	557.0	146.4	434.4
	Imp.	534.8	472.6	586.3
2001	Exp.	473.5	172.4	316.5
	Imp.	429.5	507.1	683.3
2002	Exp.	613.7	210.5	383.1
	Imp.	653.2	519.6	813.7
2003	Exp.	717.8	220.5	470.3
	Imp.	888.8	618.2	951.5

Source: *Statistical Abstract of Israel* (Jerusalem: Central Bureau of Statistics) various years

In addition, in November 2003, Transportation Minister Lieberman invited Russian firms to bid for the construction market,

23- *Tass News Agency*, (Moscow), June 1, 2004, in FBIS-NES.

including the development and construction of a railway network. Israel is also tapping Russian expertise in satellite launching. In December 2003, the Soyuz booster rocket launched Israel's *Amos* telecommunication satellite; more launches of the type are planned.

For Turkey, water is adding an economic dimension to its ties with Israel. After months of intense negotiation, Israel and Turkey signed an agreement in principal on January 5, 2004 that paved the way for the Turkish export of water. According to the deal, Turkey would supply 50 million cubic meters (mcm) of water annually for 20 years from the Manavgat River near Anatolia on the Mediterranean coast. The drinking water from the river, which flows exclusively inside Turkey, would be supplied through supertankers and would be unloaded at Israel's Ashkelon port. While both sides are working out the price mechanism, the deal is seen by many as an effort by both sides to 'offset' part of Turkey's defense deals with Israel. Moreover, a number of Israeli companies are also involved in the Great Anatolia Project (GAP) in southern Turkey. Some estimates indicate that six major contracts at an estimated value of \$1 billion have been awarded to Israeli firms.²⁴

Israel has yet to identify such a strategic commodity vis-à-vis India, where diamonds currently constitute the bulk of bilateral trade. Though the share of precious metals has come down considerably since normalization, it still constitutes over 50 percent of the bilateral trade relationship. This could prove to be an impediment in terms of increasing the real economic value of the bilateral ties.

Political interactions

Ironic as it might appear, the *al-Aqsa intifada*, which adversely affected the Middle East peace process and undermined Israel's image in the outside world, did not affect Israel's bilateral relations with India, Russia or Turkey. On the contrary, the absence of peace

24- For a detailed discussion see George E Gruen, "Turkish plans to export water: Their regional strategic significance," *American Foreign Policy Interests* 26, no. 1 (2004), 209-28.

negotiations with the Palestinians, especially since the February 2001 electoral victory of Ariel Sharon, appeared to give Israel a greater degree of freedom and opportunity to pursue its foreign relations. Indeed, unlike his Labor predecessor, Sharon was not bogged down in the peace negotiations and, having declared Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to be 'irrelevant' to the peace process, he acquired more diplomatic space for external relations and was able to pay greater attention to improving Israel's relations with the outside world.

The inauguration of the George W. Bush Administration in January 2001 and its determination to pursue a close friendship with Israel, especially after the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington, further enhanced Sharon's diplomatic capacities. As a result, he was able and willing to pay personal attention to improving Israel's relations with the three countries. The relative political stability he enjoyed at home and his resounding election victory in January 2003 further enabled Sharon to play an activist role in promoting Israel's interests abroad. Even before he formally took office in February 2001, for example, Sharon sent personal emissaries to Ankara and Moscow to underline the importance of these countries to Israel.

Despite growing international criticisms over his handling of the peace process and Israel's negative image in Europe, India, Russia and Turkey rolled out red carpet welcomes to Sharon. Although his visits to Turkey in August 2001 and India in September 2003 generated widespread attention and local controversies, he became a regular visitor to Moscow. Sharon's state visit to Russia in November 2003 was his third since he became Prime Minister in 2001.²⁵ His statement in April 2004 aptly testified to the new trend: "I have already had several meetings with [President Vladimir] Putin and we got to know each other before he

25- Sharon visited Moscow in September 2001, September 2002 and November 2003.

became president. We speak regularly on the telephone. I regard our relations as friendly.”²⁶

Growing political contacts with Russia also has a domestic dimension. Considering that nearly 1.2 million Israelis have emigrated from Russia since the founding of the state, closer ties with Moscow plays well with the Russian voters in Israel. The support of this segment of the population has been a key to Sharon’s longevity. As a result, ministers such as Avigdor Lieberman and Nathan Sharansky who had emigrated from the former Soviet Union have been frequently paying official visits to Russia. This partially explains Benjamin Netanyahu’s trips to Russia even when he was not holding any official position. Israeli President Moshe Katsav has also visited both Russia and Turkey.

Even the return of the Congress-led coalition in India did not impede the continuing political contacts and visits. After weeks of anxiety over any possible shift in Indian policy, in December 2004 Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert visited New Delhi and met senior Indian leaders.²⁷ The growing political contacts are becoming routine, especially at the professional level. For example, Israel holds periodic ministerial level consultations with its Indian counterparts in addition to the annual meeting of the joint working group on terrorism. At the same time, it is essential to recognize that political and security situations in Israel have precluded similar high profiled visits from all three states.

Regional implications

Neighbors of Turkey (Syria) and India (Pakistan) have been apprehensive over the military relations that these two countries forged with Israel. Despite formal denials by Israel and its newly found friends, both Syria and Pakistan view the military ties as

26- ITAR-TASS News Agency, Moscow, April 21, 2004, in FBIS-NES electronic edition.

27- See P.R. Kumaraswamy “Indo-Israeli ties: The post-Arafat shift”, *Power and Interest News Report*, March 9, 2005, in

http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=277&language_id=1

directed against them and often present the Turkish-Israeli and Indian-Israeli ties as a threat to regional peace and stability. Certainly, tensions in the Middle East are more acute than in South Asia.²⁸ The Israeli-Turkish joint military exercises, Israeli use of Turkish airspace for training and their mutual antagonism toward Syria have made Damascus extremely wary of the Israeli-Turkish friendship.

Even though neither side expects the other to fight its wars, there is a general agreement that both would 'coordinate' their policies against their common adversaries. Israeli scholar Efraim Inbar went so far as to identify Syria as "the country most affected by the new alignment" between Israel and Turkey.²⁹ Moreover, the Syrian willingness in October 1998 to comply with Turkish demands vis-à-vis the PKK was partially due to perceived Israeli backing.³⁰ In short, there is a consensus among Israeli, Turkish, Arab and other scholars that Israeli-Turkish relations, especially the military/security component, have unsettled and undermined Syria. Despite its numerous efforts, Syria has been unable to construct 'a counter-alliance' against its adversaries.

For its part, Pakistan was equally concerned about the growing military ties between India and Israel and unsuccessfully sought American intervention to block the Phalcon deal. At the same time, despite its past rhetoric about Indo-Israeli conspiracy against the Islamic world, Pakistan has been less vocal than Syria on the military connection. One can ascribe a number of reasons for this pattern, including the limited nature of Indo-Israeli military ties, Pakistan's close strategic relations with Washington and Pakistan's

28- The limited nature of Indo-Israeli military ties and Pakistan's closer ties with Washington partly explains this.

29- Efraim Inbar, "Regional implications of the Israeli-Turkish strategic partnership," *Turkish Studies* 3, no.2 (Autumn 2002), 28. See also, Nabil Kaylani, "Israeli-Turkish alliance may prove to be new destabilizing factor in Middle East," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, January-February 1999, 47 and 94.

30- For a different assessment of this development see Yuksel Sezgin, "The October 1998 crisis in Turkish-Syrian relations: A prospect theory approach," *Turkish Studies* 3, no.2 (Autumn 2002), 44-68.

willingness to reexamine its erstwhile opposition to and seek normal ties with the Jewish state.³¹ Thus, unlike Syria, Pakistan has not sought any counter-alliance against the Indo-Israeli military cooperation. In turn, even the disclosures of Pakistani scientist A.Q. Khan's role in the nuclear programs of Iran and Libya - states that are formally hostile to Israel - did not elicit any strong response from Israel.

The emerging military ties between Israel and India, Russia and Turkey also underscore the absence of alternatives not only for these three countries but also for their critics. In recent years, Egypt has emerged as the principal critic of Israel's growing military ties with India and Turkey. At the same time, however, Egypt has been unable to persuade other Arab countries to endorse its position or to dissuade India or Turkey to abandon their military ties with Israel. This naturally leads to the question of whether Israel's relationship with these three states represents an alliance against the Arab and Islamic world.

An Alliance Against the Arab and Islamic World?

There is a popular belief held in certain sections that the friendship of India, Turkey or Russia with Israel is an anti-Arab or anti-Islamic alliance. Such a posture would be suicidal for all three countries given that they have strong economic, political and strategic interests in the region. Also, given their sizable Muslim populations, they could not afford to adopt such a position without destroying their national cohesion, unity and character. The policies of India and Turkey toward Israel have also been influenced by third party calculations; Pakistan in the case of India and Syria in the case of Turkey. The apprehensions of Pakistan and Syria tend to give a sinister design to India and Turkey seeking closer ties with Israel.

31- For a discussion on the Israel-Pakistan ties see P.R. Kumaraswamy, *Beyond the Veil: Israel-Pakistan Relations* (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2000).

Before and after the normalization of Indo-Israeli relations, Pakistani leaders and commentators viewed the relations between the two as a conspiracy not only against Pakistan but also against the entire Islamic world.³² In recent years, however, a marked shift has taken place in the Israeli-Pakistani relations, with a number of Pakistani leaders, including the current ruler General Pervez Musharraf, publicly calling for a re-examination of Pakistan's policy toward the Jewish state.³³ India has appeared to have recognized the inevitability of an eventual Israeli-Pakistani normalization.³⁴

In the case of Turkey, the emergence of closer security ties with Israel was also influenced by their shared concerns over Syria. Despite the absence of any mutual assistance clause in their security agreements, there is a widespread speculation that both countries perceive Syria to be their common adversary. Syria views the development as "the most dangerous alliance ... since the Second World War."³⁵ Its efforts to elicit an Arab response to the Israeli-Turkish ties proved to be a nonstarter.³⁶ The Syrian compliance with Turkish demands over Abdullah Ocalan in 1998 was partly attributed to the Israeli factor. Confident of its new strategic ties with Israel, Turkey was able to adopt a more determined stance on

32- For example, see Muhammad Hamid, *The Unholy Alliance: Indo-Israeli Conspiracy Against the Muslim World* (Lahore: Islamic Book Centre, 1978).

33- P.R. Kumaraswamy, *Beyond the Veil: Israel-Pakistan Relations*, op.cit; and P.R. Kumaraswamy, "Israel and Pakistan: Public rhetoric vs. political pragmatism," in Efraim Karsh and P.R. Kumaraswamy (eds.), *Israel and the Islamic World* (forthcoming).

34- This perhaps explains the absence of any reference to the Kashmir issue or Pakistan in the New Delhi Declaration issued at the end of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's visit to India in September 2003.

35- Quoted in Efraim Inbar, "Regional implications of the Israeli-Turkish strategic partnership," *Turkish Studies* 3, no.2 (Autumn 2002), 29.

36- For a broader discussion see Ofra Bengio and Gencer Ozcan, "Old grievances, new fears: Arab perceptions of Turkey and its alignment with Israel," *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no.2 (April 2001), 50-92.

Syrian support for PKK and eventually resolved the crisis to its advantage.³⁷

At the same time, it is essential to recognize that despite their secular orientation founded on the principles of Nehru and Kamal Ataturk respectively, the Middle East policies of India and Turkey are not immune from strong Islamic undercurrents. Indeed, the interests shown by Israel in both countries were partly due to the Islamic dimension. Contrary to earlier fears, however, the normalization of relations with Israel did not evoke any major negative response from the Indian Muslims. It is often forgotten that normalization was announced when the secular Congress Party was in power in New Delhi and most of the defense negotiations were initiated long before the rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in 1999. The majority of Indian Muslims appear to have reconciled to the idea of maintaining closer ties with Israel.

However, things have changed following the outbreak of the *al-Aqsa intifada* in September 2000. An interesting religious-ideological coalition made up of Muslim organizations and left-wing groups has emerged and has been highly critical of the pro-Israeli policies of the right-wing government headed by the BJP-led NDA coalition. The domestic protests did not prevent Sonia Gandhi, then-leader of the opposition, from meeting the Israeli leader. Notwithstanding its anti-Israeli rhetoric, Iran, for example, has shown greater understanding of India's ties with Israel and has not allowed the Israeli dimension to prevent it from pursuing closer political and economic ties with New Delhi.

The Turkish situation is somewhat different. Despite the recent upsurge in the popularity of Islamist parties and groups, the military perceives itself to be the ultimate guardian and guarantor of the Kamalist tradition. As such, the controversy between the military

37- For a detailed discussion see Yuksel Sezgin, "The October 1998 crisis in Turkish-Syrian relations: A prospect theory approach," *Turkish Studies* 3, no.1 (Autumn 2002), 44-68. See also Robert Olson, "Turkey-Syria relations, 1997-2000: Kurds, water, Israel and 'undeclared war'," *Orient* 42, no.1 (March 2001), 101-17.

establishment and the Rafah government headed by Necmettin Erbakan eventually led to dismissal of the government and the proscription of the Refah party in 1997.³⁸ This has led to widespread suspicion in Turkey, especially among Erbakan's supporters, that "he was scarified in order to tie... [Turkey] closer to Israel."³⁹ Some even argue that "A Muslim country that pursues an Israel-based foreign policy may bring relief to Israel, but it would isolate that country both in the region and in the international system."⁴⁰

Pitfalls

In the end, a scrutiny of possible pitfalls is essential for a more balanced understanding of the Israeli-India, Russia and Turkey relations. On the central issue of the Palestinian question, fundamental differences exist between the two sides. Even while expressing sympathy for Israel on the question of terrorism, the three countries in question have been demanding recognition from the government of Ariel Sharon of the political rights of the Palestinians and need to facilitate Palestinian statehood. While Sharon has managed to promote the bilateral relations despite the demise of the peace process, it is unlikely that this will be the case in future. There were signs that the new Congress-led government in India would not be as favorable as its predecessor was and might even revert to a pro-Palestinian policy. At the same time, the demise of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in November 2004, further eroded traditional reluctance within the Congress Party toward Israel. In recent months, Turkey has emerged a vociferous critic of Israel's anti-Palestinian policy.

38- For example, initially Prime Minister Erbakan refused to meet David Levy when the Israeli Foreign Minister visited Turkey in April 1997 but was forced to do so by the military establishment.

39- M Hakan Yavuz, "Turkish-Israeli relations through the lens of the Turkish identity debate," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 27, no.1 (Autumn 1997), 31.

40- Quoted in *Ibid.*, 33.

Because relations between Israel and India, Russia and Turkey are greatly influenced by the US, any shift in American policy toward any of these countries can undermine that country's relations with Israel. As highlighted by the Phalcon controversy with China, Israel is also unable to withstand certain American demands and dictates.

Any noticeable change in Israel's policy toward the adversaries of these three states would also affect Israel's relations with them. For example, while India might accept political relations between Israel and Pakistan, it would be concerned about Israeli-Pakistani defense ties. Similarly, Turkey is extremely apprehensive of reports of Israeli involvement with the Kurdish elements in northern Iraq.

On the question of Iran, serious differences exist between Israel and its partners. Iran has evoked a strong negative response from Israel due to its radical pronouncements against the Jewish state, its support for militant groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, its perceived involvement in acts of terror against Israel and its interests in developing non-conventional weapons and delivery systems. While visiting India, Prime Minister Sharon called Iran 'the nerve center of international terrorism,' causing a minor diplomatic row. India, Russia and Turkey are not prepared to share this Israeli position on Iran. The reasons are not difficult to fathom, as these countries have strong economic, political, geo-strategic and energy interests in Iran. A cooperative relationship with Iran appears more logical and inevitable for these countries than sharing the adversarial approach of Israel. Iran's regional importance, its access to and from central Asia, and its moderate position in comparison to Pakistan on Taliban-ruled Afghanistan were of critical importance to India, Russia and Turkey. In the case of India, Iran could emerge as a strategic energy supplier and a potential counterweight to Pakistan in the Islamic world. For Russia, Iran offers an opportunity to actively re-engage the Gulf region and a prospect for oil and gas exploration. When Necmettin Erbakan was in power, Turkey tried to establish closer ties with the Islamic world, especially Iran. In that context, delays over Turkey's

membership in the European Union would only accentuate Ankara's desire to look to the Middle East for allies.⁴¹

Conclusion

The end of the Cold War and the inauguration of the peace process opened new diplomatic avenues for Israel and enabled it make new friends without making any substantial concession or compromise. Relations with India, Russia and Turkey fall into a category, with Israel being able to find a number of common grounds to overcome prolonged non-relations and unfriendliness. The common desire of these three countries to seek better ties with Washington and the favorable attitude of the US toward these countries moving closer to Israel thus worked in tandem.

Both sides were quick to recognize the potential for security-related cooperation and managed to conclude highly lucrative defense deals. The menace of international terrorism emerged as a further key area of cooperation, as India, Russia and Turkey sought to benefit from Israeli experiences and expertise even if they disagreed with Israel's policies toward the Palestinians. Indeed, they were quick to recognize the diminishing value of the Palestinian factor in promoting their interests in the Middle East and began pursuing a delicate equidistance policy towards Israel and the Palestinians. Growing economic relations added a new dimension to the bilateral relations and the emergence of water in Turkey and gas in Russia as new trade commodities could only enhance existing ties.

What is significant is that rapid progress in bilateral relations occurred against the background of the *al-Aqsa intifada*, the demise of the peace process and increased Israeli isolation in the international arena. The fact that India, Russia and Turkey were able to push forward their relationship with Israel did not evoke any strong negative response from other Arab and Islamic countries in

41- Bulent Aras, "Turkish-Israeli-Iranian relations in the nineties: Impact on the Middle East," *Middle East Policy* 7, no.3 (June 2000), 151-64.

the region. Therefore, one could conclude that at least in the short run, Israel's relations with these three countries are stable and mutually beneficial.

About the Author

Dr. P.R. Kumaraswamy is an Associate Professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University's School of International Studies in New Delhi, India, where he teaches courses on the domestic and foreign policies of Israel. His research interests include the politics and foreign policy of Israel, minorities in the Middle East, and arms proliferations and regional security. His recent monographs include *The Strategic Partnership between India and Iran* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars: 2004), *India-Israeli Relations: Humble Beginnings, a Bright Future* (American Jewish Committee: 2002) and *Beyond the Veil: Israel-Pakistan Relations* (Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies: 2000). He is also the author of a number of articles that have been published in such journals as *Israel Affairs*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *Middle East Policy*, *Middle East Quarterly* and *Middle Eastern Studies* and the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* and has contributed chapters to numerous books. Dr. Kumaraswamy can be contacted at kumaraswamy@mail.jnu.ac.in.

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