

RSTV: India's World
Revisiting India- Israel Relations

Anchor: Frank Rausan Pereira

Guest:

Shashank, Former Foreign Secretary

Prof. Swaran Singh, School Of International Studies, JNU

Harsh V Pant, Head, Strategic Studies, ORF

Larger Background:

- This episode of India's World analyses the election results in Israel and what it means for Indo-Israel ties.
- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party won 36 seats and surpassed the main rival, the Blue and White party in the 2019 Israel election.
- The results were released by the Central Election Committee recently after two days of counting ballots and delays caused by computer malfunctions.
- Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party won 36 seats while the centrist Blue and White, led by an ex-army chief, gained 35 seats.
- Netanyahu now needs to form a governing coalition with at least 61 members in Israel's 120-seat parliament.
- He already said he intends to build a coalition with right-wing and ultra-Orthodox parties.
- His likely partners include Shas, with eight seats, and United Torah Judaism, with seven seats, both Jewish ultra-Orthodox parties.

Analysis by the Experts:

Let's try and analyse and put into perspective the election results in Israel. Your thoughts...

Shashank, Former Foreign Secretary, weighed in with his arguments here.

- Never in the past has a single party won the elections on its own. Somehow, the climate which is there right now is of the right-wing. Before the elections, we find that Netanyahu's party and the other right wing parties, are trying to give more and more concessions to the settlers. They were also getting a great amount of support from the American leadership. So, therefore, they have taken advantage of these elements on one side. And on the other side, the Palestinians do not have the full support at this stage of all the Arab countries. This is because, the Arab countries are having their own differences because of the various things that are going on in the middle east. Hence, the result as it has come out, it is likely that the right wing parties will get together and that they would form a firm coalition, and this coalition would lead the country.

- However, whether this would be a long-lasting coalition or not is a question that would need to be answered.

How do you look at things as they stand right now? What happens to the two-state solution?

Prof. Swaran Singh, School Of International Studies, JNU, weighed in with his arguments here.

- Currently the tilt is not just towards the ultra-right, but also the orthodox right as well.
- One can say that the whole mood is in this direction.
- One can also see a disjointed kind of picture on the Palestinian side. The Palestinian liberation organization (PLO) is often caught Vs. the Palestinian Authority.
- Thus, there are no united voices even within Palestine. Further, the Arab world lately has also been inclined towards engaging Israel. Further, several countries, including India have tapered off that original enthusiasm of the 70's and 80's in pushing the Palestinian cause.
- One notices that Israel and Netanyahu himself are emerging as extraordinarily privileged in that sense. He is going to become the Prime Minister for a 5th term this time. In this sense, there is a growing stature and influence of Israel which is a clear outcome of these elections.
- Even this time, Netanyahu used the plank of national security, projecting himself as the individual who would be the saviour of Israel, protecting Israel from internal and external threats, etc.
- Further, the whole tone of aggressive and assertive posturing, despite all the charges of corruption which in the month of February 2019 were slapped on him, shows that there is an inordinate endorsement of Netanyahu himself and of an assertive and aggressive Israel.
- This narrative of Israel is now becoming increasingly acceptable both inside Israel and also in West Asian (in the neighbourhood). It is also this kind of Israel that is being engaged with by India.

Despite the corruption allegations, the scandals back home, Benjamin Netanyahu has managed to get another term. He has to cobble up some sort of an alliance before that happens, but, are we going to see a Netanyahu who is going to be ultra-right?

Harsh V Pant, Head, Strategic Studies, ORF, weighed in with his arguments here.

Well I think that the politics of Israel has itself shifted considerably towards the right and Mr. Netanyahu has himself been the architect of that policy. If you look at his Prime Ministership entering the fifth iteration now, you also recognize how far Israel has come in terms of its political evolution. You also recognize the shift that is happening within Israeli politics. There has been a dramatic transformation in Israeli politics and Israeli society itself where there is a considerable emphasis on the issues of settlement, on the issues of national security, and on the issue of identity- the latter has always been the case because Israel has been a state premised on a certain ideational belief system.

However, I think that now the politics of the country is heading in a direction which in no short measure is because of Mr. Netanyahu. One would have to give Mr. Netanyahu credit for coming out victorious in the recently conducted elections. Whether or not he becomes even more radical in his approach would depend on what sort of a coalition he engages with, and what sort of a regional environment he gets. At the moment things seem to be going in the favour of Israel. Thus you have a number of Arab countries who are largely behind Israel; also America under Mr. Trump has been quite benevolent on a number of issues. Thus, my sense is that Mr. Netanyahu would be taking a standard line which he has taken throughout these elections,

because it has worked for him, and this is something which he feels would propel his opponents also in a direction where he is more comfortable.

What does the election result mean for the region as a whole?

Shashank, Former Foreign Secretary, weighed in with his arguments here.

- Firstly, we need to keep in mind that the Arabs are totally divided. The Saudi's are very keen to block the advance of Iran. Further, the identity issue is so important to Israel, that they would go all out to ensure that Iran does not get any headway. They might come to some agreements with the Palestinians so that they (the Palestinians) are kept out of the influence of Iran. On one hand, the American's are saying that they would come up with some grand solution for Palestine- however, what that grand solution is supposed to mean is yet to be seen.
- The American's might want to come up with an idea which involves the grant of money/aid for the economic betterment of the Palestinian people so that if they do not get complete sovereignty on the areas on which they are working, at least they get job opportunities, and economic investments. This seems to be the scenario which is building up.
- Further, as we have discussed, Netanyahu is also under investigations for various corruption charges and these corruption charges might come to a head in the next couple of months. At this stage one would have to see as to what would be the stand of the other political parties- whether they would continue to support him or they would continue to put pressure on him and start asking for a bigger say in the running of the country.
- These are some of the issues which we have to keep in mind. There are certain external factors. There is also the question of a likely solution to the Palestinian issue. There are also questions as to what would happen within Israel because of the larger issue of corruption charges.

Do we have challenging times ahead as far as Benjamin Netanyahu is concerned? Or is it going to be easy sailing for him?

Prof. Swaran Singh, School Of International Studies, JNU, weighed in with his arguments here.

- There are challenges of course, for example, the corruption charges on him are certainly not over. They would be pursued in the coming months as well. However, his reelection is an endorsement by the people. Also the fact that the ultra-right, orthodox parties are willing to work with the Likud party and take him as their leader, speaks volumes. He certainly has challenges, but I don't think that those challenges are going to be unsettling his agenda in that sense. He has already announced that he is going to annex the Golan Heights. So, this is something again that would give his nationalist agenda a push and create a national mood which would make the issues such as corruption charges look like small or marginal issues. Thus, the fact that his plank increasingly is national security, this is creating a kind of emotional support for him on the ground.
- Then of course, we have the benevolence of the United States. This apart from his domestic endorsement is his biggest support. The fact that Trump had already shifted the embassy to Jerusalem, and the fact that he has been critical of the anti-Israel resolutions being mooted for at the

United Nations; and also the fact the Mr. Trump is supporting Netanyahu's aggressive policies on the Golan Heights, are all important factors to be considered. This enormous support for Netanyahu as an individual and his national security agenda, will make him overcome several of these challenges in my understanding.

Are we going to see a stronger bond, a stronger partnership now between President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu going forward? And what is likely to happen in the region as a whole? This is indeed a volatile region at the end of the day.

Harsh V Pant, Head, Strategic Studies, ORF, weighed in with his arguments here.

Yes, I think that it is very likely that Mr. Netanyahu would endorse Mr. Trump even more substantively now going forward. On critical issues where there is a debate and where Mr. Trump really went out of his way to make a case to his opponents practically saying, "look, I solidly stand behind Mr. Netanyahu"- thus certainly, Mr. Netanyahu would like to support Mr. Trump's agenda.

Further, if that agenda involves some form of negotiations with the Palestinians, then it would be very difficult to say no to him.

Also the fact that America at this point has a rather interesting relationship with the Saudi crown prince, with America being the only country in the western world standing behind him, also makes it very likely that certain things may come out of this trilateral engagement- because there are three important actors who can jostle and make the Palestinian question go in a certain direction. So I think that these are going to be interesting times and I have no doubt that the relationship between Tel Aviv and Washington is only going to get stronger and Mr. Netanyahu would also respect what Mr. Trump has done for him.

What is the potential impact on India?

Shashank, Former Foreign Secretary, weighed in with his arguments here.

Whoever comes out on top in the Indian elections would have to make sure that the special relations that have developed between India and Israel are carried forward. Even if there are some Palestinian sympathizers in the future government that India elects, they would have to keep in mind that when Pakistan attacked India in Pulwama, it was essentially the Israeli support that was helpful when we took counter action on Balakot. It was the Israeli SPICE bombs which proved to be influential. Otherwise as well, the Israeli's have helped India on the defence side. At the same time, the Israeli's would like India's support towards finding a solution on the West Asian scenario. This is because India has a great amount of goodwill among the West Asian countries. The U.A.E for example gave the highest civilian award to our Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi. At the same time, most of the Arab countries are trying to befriend India. We have also seen that the Russians as well have given one of their highest awards to the Indian Prime Minister, so this means that the situation is in favour of India, irrespective of the leadership that comes to India post the elections. Further, the Chinese have been pushing their agenda so strongly, that there is a feeling that enough is enough, and that China should be put under some restraint.

It is also important to note that India has a large segment of the population which have always given full support to the UN resolutions, and if there is a change, then President Trump and Israel would have to come up with some solution that is acceptable.

Israeli-India relationship has reached new heights over the last few years. How does India keep that trajectory going?

Prof. Swaran Singh, School Of International Studies, JNU, weighed in with his arguments here.

- A recent tweet from the Indian Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi to Netanyahu was to say that ‘we treat you as a great friend of India’, and that with each other, one aims to take bilateral relations to new heights.
- It is worth noting that despite the several decades where India’s relationship with Israel was under wraps, for obvious reasons. (For example, we had a certain public posturing towards the Arab states).
- Across party lines, there have been efforts made towards building stronger relations with Israel.
- Over the past 25 years or so, across party lines, we have seen a constant incremental growth of that relationship taking place. This has culminated to the present where Israel is the second most important defence partner of India after Russia.
- Now, the task at hand is to expand that cooperation into several other areas, i.e. from Education to Science and Technology, to R&D, to trade, development, commerce, connectivity, etc. It is this broad-basing of the relationship that we are now observing. This is a new development which we are currently seeing.
- It is this that increases the possibilities of taking the relationship forward, in an enormous manner.
- From 2013, we have been talking about increasing trade to around 10 Billion dollars. However, this has not shown that kind of traction so far, and should be an area to improve upon.
- Further, there are several niche areas, such as the Centres of Excellence that Israel has opened up, cooperation in the field of agriculture can reach new heights. Water Harvesting is also an area where Israel stands out as a unique partner of India.

Further, India is currently going to expand to an enormous number of new sectors now. This development would give the bilateral relationship between India and Israel a further push.

What areas of the relationship needs special attention?

Harsh V Pant, Head, Strategic Studies, ORF, weighed in with his arguments here.

- Well I think one area where India can perhaps learn a lot and the emergent ecosystem can be taken advantage of. Israeli’s have built a robust startup ecosystem- this can be taken advantage of by India.
- This area as a matter of fact, can become a focal point to engage Israel on, because Israel is not a country with political issues around the county.
- In doing so, it would bring in stakeholders into the relationship who would have otherwise been absent.
- Further, if you want to take the discourse to more practical and pragmatic issues- in doing so, one can propel the relationship in such a way that it goes on an autopilot.