

As PM Modi visits Tel Aviv, a history of India-Israel ties over the years

Since PM Modi's first visit in 2017, the geopolitical environment in West Asia has shifted considerably. The latest visit will be closely watched.

Written by: [Shubhajit Roy](#) 6 min read New Delhi Feb 24, 2026 08:47 PM IST



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in New Delhi in January 2018. Photo: Prem Nath Pandey

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be in Israel on Wednesday and Thursday

(February 25 and 26) in his first visit to the country after 2017.

Modi's **July 2017 visit**, the first by an Indian prime minister since the establishment of diplomatic ties, brought the **India-Israel relationship** out of the shadows and placed it firmly in the limelight.

The circumstances of the latest visit are very different. West Asia is holding its breath over the prospect of a potential US-Iran conflict, even as a fragile ceasefire remains in effect in the war-ravaged Gaza Strip.

In such times, it is worth looking at how India's ties with Israel have grown over the years, and why **Modi's latest visit** is significant.

A slow build-up

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India recognised the state of Israel soon after it was created in 1948. The establishment of full diplomatic relations would take four more decades — but not before a defining moment involving an unlikely figure.

Palestinian President Yasser Arafat was in India on January 19-20, 1992. During a meeting with Prime Minister P V Narsimha Rao, he was told that India's establishment of the relationship with Israel would be helpful for the Palestinian cause. New **Delhi**, he was told, could exert its influence on Israel only if it had an ambassador in Tel Aviv. Arafat came on board.

He then famously told a press conference in New Delhi: “Exchange of Ambassadors and recognition (of Israel) are acts of sovereignty in which I cannot interfere... I respect any choice of the Indian government”.

This would prove to be a game-changer. India formally established diplomatic ties with Israel on January 29, 1992, around 10 days after Arafat’s public approval.

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The military relationship, meanwhile, also gradually evolved over the years. India had sourced Israeli weapons during the war with China in 1962, but the support was rather episodic.

By the time of the Kargil war in 1999, the full diplomatic ties came in handy. The Indian Air Force (IAF) desperately needed precision bombs to target Pakistani intruders hiding in the caves and bunkers in Kargil’s mountains. After political approvals, IAF leaders reached out to their Israeli counterparts, who wasted no time. Israel is understood to have dug into its emergency stockpiles and shipped them to India’s air bases within days.

India responded to this decisive show of support by organising a series of high-profile visits to Israel in 2000, with external affairs minister Jaswant Singh leading the first-ever Indian bilateral visit to the country. Home minister L K Advani also visited that summer.

To counter criticism from the Left and minorities, the BJP-led NDA government also organised visits by Jyoti Basu, the West Bengal chief minister and CPI(M) leader, and Najma Heptullah, the Congress leader and deputy chairperson of [Rajya Sabha](#), the same year.

Since then the defence and security relationship picked up pace, as was evident during Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s visit in September 2003.

In between, during the Congress-led UPA government’s stint, external affairs minister S M Krishna visited Israel in 2012. The conversation, then, revolved around

cooperation on science and technology, agriculture and commerce. The strategic areas of defence and security were avoided in public.

After 2014

After coming to power in 2014, Modi has made the relationship much more visible. He met Netanyahu in New York on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September 2014 — the first such meeting in a decade. The Israeli defence minister also visited India the next year to openly talk about defence cooperation.

Home minister [Rajnath Singh](#) visited Israel in November 2014, followed by President Pranab Mukherjee in October 2015 (the first-ever Presidential visit from India) and external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj in January 2016. A number of Indian ministers and parliamentarians have visited the country in the last 10 years.

But what set Modi's 2017 visit apart was him skipping the stop at Palestine that was part of previous official visits. This time, too, Modi is making a standalone visit to Tel Aviv.

Netanyahu made a return visit to India on January 14-19, 2018.

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In the last three years, since Netanyahu was re-elected for the sixth time, Modi and Netanyahu have spoken at least 10 times. In November 2025, [pacts on defence](#) and launch of free trade negotiations were signed. The two sides have been cooperating on a range of sectors, from AI to agriculture.

They have also developed close strategic cooperation in defence, as was seen during the recent Operation Sindoor, and cyber security, as was revealed during the Pegasus disclosures.

The changing region

In the years since Modi's first visit, the geopolitical environment has shifted considerably.

Israel and the Arab world have been attempting to normalise their ties under the Abraham Accords signed during [Donald Trump's](#) first term as US president.

The October 7, 2023 Hamas attack triggered a two-year war in which Israel killed around 70,000 people in Gaza and left much of the territory in ruins. An uneasy truce now prevails in the territory under [Trump's peace plan](#), which now faces a crucial test — disarming Hamas.

Then there are the spiralling tensions in Iran as the US masses its forces around the country. This comes after the [12-day war](#) in June 2025 between Israel and Iran during which the US bombed Iranian nuclear facilities.

Clearly, the Indian government and Modi are taking the risk of travelling to Israel at a time when the region is in turmoil.

For New Delhi, this is a tricky diplomatic situation where it has to weigh the cost and the benefit of the visit.

Israel is not only a key defence and security partner, it is also an important economic partner in the [India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor](#). And Tel Aviv is a political player with whom many countries in the region are willing to have bilateral ties.

On the other hand, Iran and other nations in West Asia are closely watching New Delhi's close relationship with Israel and weighing what impact it would have on their respective equations with India.

Israel PM [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), who is facing political pushback from the Opposition, is also showcasing the visit as one of his key achievements.

The visit by the Prime Minister will be one of the most watched visits in the region by partners on all sides.

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