

# Driven by technology

## Sushma Swaraj's trip could help connect the academic, industrial and start-up ecosystems of India and Israel



**VIJETA UNIYAL**

AMID GROWING bilateral ties, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj is set to visit Israel on a two-day tour starting January 17. The high-level trip comes just three months after President Pranab Mukherjee's historic visit. Swaraj's presence in Israel is of special significance in light of Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's proposed visit to India later this year, as well as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's much anticipated visit to the West Asian Nation. Swaraj is not unknown to diplomatic and government circles in Israel. The Israeli media had welcomed her appointment in 2014, citing her successful tenure as the chairperson of the Indo-Israeli Parliamentary Friendship Group from 2006-09.

India, traditionally seen as a strong backer of the Palestinian cause, has changed its diplomatic stance since Modi took office. India has consistently voted against or abstained from anti-Israel resolutions at the United Nations and other international fora. Swaraj is set to make a brief stopover in the Palestinian territories on the day she heads to Israel, in an attempt to assure Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas of India's continued support.

Ever since India established full diplomatic ties with Israel in 1992, bilateral cooperation has increased manifold. Since the early 1990s, trade between India and Israel has risen from the base of \$200 million to over \$4.5 billion in 2014-15.

What began as a tight-lipped defence cooperation has now blossomed into a multifaceted partnership, ranging from water technology and agriculture to cancer treatment and space research. Today, technology is redefining a mutual bond between these two ancient civilisations. Over 75,000 Jews of Indian-origin residing today in Israel are a living testament to historic and ethnic ties.

Since Independence, India has often depended on foreign suppliers for critical defence procurement. Modi seeks to reduce the country's dependence on foreign suppliers. As part of the Make in India project, the government has eased restrictions on foreign defence manufacturers willing to set up R&D and production units in India. Many leading Israeli defence companies have been encouraged by easing regulations and have tied up with Indian partners to build manufacturing units. In the last year, leading defence manufacturers, Israel Aerospace Industries and Rafael, have signed agreements with Indian counterparts to develop, manufacture and market cutting-edge defence equipment in India.

This bilateral defence cooperation is a partnership on an equal footing. In early 2008, the Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) placed an Israeli reconnaissance satellite (TecSAR) into orbit. India and Israel

dly countries. Nato-member Poland is evaluating the Barak 8 for induction into its naval arsenal.

Research and technological cooperation is not limited to defence. In recent months, Israel's two leading academic institutions, Tel Aviv University and IDC Herzliya, have signed wide-ranging agreements with prominent Indian academic institutions, such as Mumbai University, the Welingkar Institute of Management, etc.

In recent years, the Indian private sector, too, has shown great interest in Israel's academic research and start-up ecosystem, with Indian multinationals making long-term investments in technology firms and research institutions. The Tata Group is the lead investor in Ramot, the \$20mn technology transfer arm of Tel Aviv University. Last month, Mumbai's Sun Pharma announced a tie-up with Israel's Weizmann Institute of Science to develop treatments for neurological diseases, including brain stroke and brain cancer.

Israeli institutions are also keen to engage with students, researchers and young entrepreneurs from India. With support from the Israeli embassy in India, every year, select Indian start-up founders get a chance to participate in "Start Tel Aviv" and connect with Israeli and international business leaders and venture capital firms.

Israel's Council for Higher Education offers hundreds of scholarships to Indians interested in pursuing higher education in Israel. Additionally, the Israel-Asia Centre offers scholarship and leadership programmes to Indian students. The Jerusalem-based centre also runs an MBA and leadership programme exclusively tailored to Indian women entrepreneurs, providing them the skills and exposure needed to excel in corporate India.

Despite growing cooperation in major sunrise sectors, agriculture cooperation is arguably the most transformative component of the relationship. According to Israel's envoy to India, Daniel Carmon, who earlier headed Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation (Mashav), "agriculture is one of the main pillars of Israel-India relations". Under the auspices of the Indo-Israel Agricultural Project (IIAP), several centres of excellence in agriculture have been set up across India since 2008. These act as a platform for technology transfer to Indian farmers, aimed at introducing new crops, increasing yields and improving the quality of farm produce. At present, 26 such centres are running in nine states.

If implemented, Israeli expertise in water resource management and cultivation of arid land could be valuable in ensuring India's future food and water security. By connecting academic, industrial and start-up ecosystems of both countries, Indian businesses and entrepreneurs have the potential to create the synergies needed for a technology-driven future — technology capable of addressing the emerging challenges of urban development, energy generation, water conservation and food security. The diplomatic initiative to strengthen relations reflects the optimism shared by the Indian tech and business community as a whole.

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