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**India's Abstention at the UNHRC:
Implications for Indo-Israeli Relations**

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On July 3, 2015, in a manner uncharacteristic of its longstanding position on the Israel-Palestinian issue, India abstained from voting on a UN Human Right Council (UNHRC) resolution that censured Israel for “alleged war crimes” during the 2014 Gaza conflict. Traditionally, India has almost unfailingly supported resolutions condemning Israel’s alleged violations regarding the Palestinian issue. On this occasion though, India joined Kenya, Macedonia, Ethiopia, and Paraguay in abstaining. Of the remaining 42 members of the UNHRC, 41 voted for the resolution, and only the United States voted against it. Almost immediately, international and domestic political circles were abuzz with the idea of India’s changed stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Officially, the Indian government defended its move, claiming that it was the resolution’s reference to the International Criminal Court (ICC) that led to the abstention. The government’s statement clarified that not being a party to the Rome Statute of 1998, India’s “general” approach has been to abstain “whenever” a UNHRC resolution directly referred to the ICC, and that India still supports the Palestinian cause. In what appeared as another balancing act, only a week later, on July 10, India signed a BRICS declaration in Ufa, Russia, which rejected “the continuous Israeli settlement activities in the Occupied Territories, which violate international law and seriously undermine peace efforts and threaten the concept of the two-state solution.”

While these are confusing signals for the Israel-India bilateral relationship that is burgeoning into a strong strategic and economic partnership, they are typical of the Indian predicament. Although successive Indian governments have maintained a robust relationship with Israel, they have found it difficult to support Israel on international platforms, finding themselves committed to the Palestinian cause on historical and moral grounds. Decisions have also been influenced by domestic politics in a country that according to census data of 2011 is home to over 0.17 billion Muslims, whose sentiments

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are a major political concern for incumbent governments. India has also had to placate Iran, another key strategic ally in the Middle East, and the Arab world at large, in order to avoid hostilities over Pakistan and the Kashmir issue.

While the same international constraints still remain, the current domestic situation is different. The surprising results of the 2014 general elections gave India its first majority government (as opposed to coalitions that comprise smaller political parties with loyal Muslim vote banks) in 25 years. The fact that the Bharatiya Janata Party, better known as India's largest "right wing" party, rose to power under Narendra Modi, a charismatic leader who as Chief Minister of Gujarat (a state in western India) courted massive Israeli investments and maintained warm relations with the administration, augured well for relations between the two countries. As soon as it became clear that he would be appointed India's next Prime Minister, Modi received a congratulatory call from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Since then, despite India's votes against Israel at the UNHRC in July 2014 and March 2015, bilateral relations have become much warmer. In September 2014, Prime Minister Modi met Prime Minister Netanyahu on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. In November 2014, India's Home (Interior) Minister Rajnath Singh visited Israel, followed by a visit by Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon to India in February 2015. It was subsequently announced that Prime Minister Modi and President Pranab Mukherjee will be the first Indian Prime Minister and President, respectively, to visit Israel.

Read in this context, it is not unreasonable to view India's abstention at the UNHRC as an extension of overt bonhomie. Even the Indian government's official explanation citing the reference to the ICC defies facts. On several occasions in recent years, India has voted for resolutions that directly referred to the ICC: in February 2011 (on Libya); March and June 2012 (on Syria); and October and December 2012 (on Mali). Rather, it was dialogue at the highest level between the two governments that led to the July 3 abstention. That same day, *Haaretz* reported that Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke to Prime Minister Modi, the Kenyan President, and the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, asking them to abstain. Writing for *The Wire*, journalist and political commentator Siddharth Vardarajan alluded to the fact that Prime Minister Netanyahu's call came in wake of India's votes against Israel on Palestinian and Syrian issues in the March 2015 session of the UNHRC.

For its part, the BRICS declaration can best be viewed as a step toward placating other important players, one of them being Iran; indeed, Iranian Prime Minister Hassan Rouhani met Prime Minister Modi on the sidelines of the BRICS/SCO Summit in Ufa. Other probable members of the targeted audience were China and Russia, who need to be reassured that despite these developments, India is in no mood to fully join the US-led geostrategic axis. Finally, although of much less relevance, the impending regional

elections in the crucial states of Bihar (2015) and West Bengal (2016) with sizable Muslim populations may have merited such a balancing act.

Nonetheless, Israel will have to recognize that despite domestic political capital, India's support on contentious issues may or may not be consistent as international dynamics change. That, on the other hand, does not compromise the potential of larger economic and strategic engagement between the two nations. In the Modi-led government, the Israeli establishment has indeed found an Indian partner with minimal ideological baggage that might impede closer ties between the two nations. Even as detractors in India point to the legitimate concerns surrounding India's overt proximity to Israel, this window of opportunity can be exploited to ensure mutual benefits. Israel has well known economic interests in India, and India's strategic interests in a turbulent Middle East will be greatly served through stronger ties with Israel, which has stood as one of the very few islands of internal stability in the midst of severe intra-regional security threats. And yet, this may just be the beginning of a relationship that unlike in the past is not shrouded by a veil of mutual symbiosis.

