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## **Policy shifts and discursive Modi-fications: An exploration of India's foreign policy discourses on Palestine and Israel since 1998**

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# Policy shifts and discursive Modifications:

An exploration of India's foreign policy discourses on  
Palestine and Israel since 1998



# Universiteit Leiden

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## **I. INTRODUCTION:**

*“ India and Israel have proven their friendship over time. Our bond is strong and eternal. I wish that the friendship between our countries will grow and flourish even more in the future”* (Modi 2019). These words of friendship and solidarity, tweeted by India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2019, accurately reflect the state of current Indo-Israeli ties. Today’s amicable relations between both states are even more striking considering the fact that India only established formal diplomatic ties with Israel in 1992 and that their relationship has for long been far from cordial. India recognised Israel shortly after its formation, but only established full-fledged diplomatic relations in 1992, becoming the last major non-Islamic and non-Arab state to do so (Kumaraswamy 2004:255). For up to four decades, India’s continuous pro-Palestine policy was deemed incompatible with the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel, and this moral position hindered the normalisation of ties between both countries. However, since 1992, both countries have grown increasingly close, engaging particularly in defence and security relations but also cooperating in the economic, trade and agricultural realms (Sharma and Bing 2015:621).

India’s growing and increasingly overt ties with Israel in recent years have developed in parallel to the country’s strong backing of the Palestinian state. The policies adopted by Mahatma Gandhi and the country’s first PM, Jawaharlal Nehru, have shaped India’s strong pro-Palestinian stance through the years (Kaura 2019, Blarel 2014:14). Since the normalisation of Indo-Israeli relations, India has sought a delicate balance between its traditional positions on Palestine on one hand, and its burgeoning relations with Israel on the other (Kumaraswamy 2018:3). Domestically, support for the normalisation was and still is not unanimous, with critics accusing successive Indian governments of betraying the traditional Indian consensus on the Palestinian cause (Tripathy 2013:170).

India’s engagement with Israel and Palestine has gone through different phases since 1992. PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s BJP-led government (1998-2004) was marked by a strong rapprochement with Israel, illustrated by the landmark visit of Israeli PM Ariel Sharon to India in 2003. Despite pro-Israel policies and rhetoric, his government did not dilute India’s policy of support to Palestine (Blarel 2014). The following INC-led government of PM Manmohan Singh (2004-2014), concerned with restoring India’s traditional image of a strong supporter of Palestine, regularly took pro-Palestinian stances in multilateral fora while reducing its public

engagement with Israel (ibid.). However, it has been argued that the return to power of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014 under PM Modi had marked a shift in India's foreign policy towards both Israel and Palestine. Various observers have noticed that India's relationship with Israel under Modi has become increasingly more overt and has been accompanied by a more transparent pro-Israel rhetoric than in the past, while criticisms of Israel's policies have been toned down (Ghosal 2016:86, Shah and Tabraz 2020:877, Kumaraswamy 2019:2).

### **A. Problem statement, research questions and contribution to literature:**

While the literature is rich and provides valuable information as to how India's foreign policy towards Israel and Palestine has changed over the years and why PM Modi's approach reflects a policy shift, it overlooks an equally important aspect of India's engagement, which is *how* India has framed and attempted to legitimise its relationships with both Israel and Palestine through the use of specific narratives. India, who until 1992 had justified non-relations on the basis of the incompatibility of such relations with its policy of support to Palestine, has developed through the years an overt relationship with Israel while maintaining its policy of support to the Palestinians (Kumaraswamy 2010:267). This raises the question of how India managed to reconcile this apparent contradiction and legitimise the expansion of ties with Israel while maintaining a pro-Palestine stance. India's relationship with Israel and Palestine has gone through different phases and has dramatically evolved since the normalisation of ties in 1992, not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively, in terms of India's narratives supporting these relationships. However, by overly focusing on the causal variables shaping India's policies towards Israel and Palestine, the literature fails to explain how the discourses supporting India's changing engagement with these two countries are constructed and have evolved through time. Studying the ways in which a state's foreign policy discourse is constructed allows to understand how state leaders can frame, describe, legitimise and delegitimise foreign policy choices (Dunn and Neumann, 2016:4).

Therefore, the research question guiding this thesis is: *How do PM Modi's foreign policy discourse toward Israel and Palestine from 2014-2021 compare to the previous BJP-led (1998-2004) and INC-led governments (2004-2014)?*

In order to provide a detailed and holistic answer, this paper has identified three interconnected sub-questions:

- How are Israel and Palestine represented in PM Vajpayee's government's foreign policy discourse (1998-2004)?
- How are Israel and Palestine represented in PM Singh's government's foreign policy discourse (2004-2014) ?
- How are Israel and Palestine represented in PM Modi's government's foreign policy discourse (2014-2021) ?

Through the use of discourse analysis, this paper will study the ways in which India's foreign policy discourses on Israel and Palestine are constructed and how they have evolved. The aim of this paper is to understand how meanings, identities and ideas are discursively employed to create specific representations of reality and thus rationalise and make certain foreign policy choices seem as acceptable and possible. This paper is thus not concerned with exploring *why* India's policies towards Israel or Palestine have evolved or *why* Modi has adopted specific actions resulting in a shift of foreign policy. Rather, this paper examines how meanings and identities are produced and reproduced and how successive Indian leaders and elites constructed specific discursive assemblages to make possible their engagement with both countries. A close examination of India's foreign policy discourse and its evolution is thus necessary to understand how it has been possible for India to create its self-image as both a historical supporter and vocal defender of Palestine, and in parallel as a close friend and partner of Israel. By making apparent the role that different understandings of 'self' and 'other' play in India's framing of Israel and Palestine, this paper will track how India's representations of these countries have evolved through the Vajpayee, Singh and Modi administrations and how foreign policy changes under Modi were legitimised and sustained by discursive shifts.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW:**

This review is organised into two main sections. The first will survey the rich but mainly descriptive and atheoretical literature on India's relations with Israel and Palestine, focusing on the discussions surrounding the drivers of these relationships in the post-and pre-normalisation period. The second section will review the main debates surrounding the influence of ideational forces over India's Israel and Palestine policies and will engage with

the two main dominant and competing national discourses in India: secular and religious-cultural. A large part of the literature has argued that India's identity and foreign policy have for long been shaped by a secular Nehruvian ideology, which was later challenged by a religious-cultural discourse, as the BJP, the Hindu nationalist party, rose to power in the 1990s. Reviewing the debates surrounding these discourses and their impact on India's foreign policy will provide the necessary background upon which this thesis will draw.

### **A. India's relations with Israel and Palestine**

Most of the literature on India's foreign policy choices vis-à-vis Israel and Palestine has emerged following the normalisation of India and Israel relations in 1992, and subsequently, the scholarship has tended to view India's foreign policy towards both countries in two main phases: pre and post-normalisation (Blarel 2014:9). Recent literature tends to focus on the new overt friendship between India and Israel and the nature of these ties, specifically since Modi came to power. It is within this literature that analysts have looked at India's Palestine policy and the impact that its relations with Israel had on Indo-Palestinian bilateral relations.

The decision to normalise ties with Israel in 1992 led most of the scholarship to look at the variables responsible for such a change in India's foreign policy, as well as to understand the forces responsible for non-relations until then. Looking at international and structural factors hindering the early normalisation of relations with Israel, analysts often highlight India's concerns about maintaining good relations with Arab states in the Middle East (Blarel 2016:324, Kumaraswamy 2010, Rubinoff 1995:487). They argue that by supporting Palestine, India was hoping to get Arab countries' diplomatic backing on the Indo-Pakistani issue, while its dependence on Arab states for energy contributed in guiding its pro-Arab policy-choices (Pate 2020:10, Pant 2004). As a result, India could not risk jeopardise its traditional links with Arab and Muslim partners by engaging with Israel.

Another key factor shaping India's policies has been the domestic environment. India's policy of rejecting Israel's overtures for nearly forty years was shaped to a great extent by Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi, who rejected the partition of Palestine at the UN in 1947 (Gordon 1975:225, Inbar and Ningthoujam 2012:2). Nehru was morally and ideologically opposed to state creation on religious grounds, as it was on this basis that he also previously rejected the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. India's strong backing of the Palestinian state has thus been an important obstacle to the normalisation of ties with Israel. Several analysts

attribute the dominance of Nehruvian ideology in India as the main driver of support for the Arabs in Palestine, which was based on anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and solidarity with Third World countries through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) (Smith 2012:385, Tripathy 2013:159, Kaura 2019:219). The influence of these moral principles in India's foreign-policy circles allegedly contributed to the impossibility to establish relations with Israel. Several other analysts have argued that the fear of antagonising India's Muslim population, the largest in the world, discouraged successive Indian governments from cooperating overtly with Israel (Blarel 2016:323, Ghosal 2016:66, Kumaraswamy 2008:577).

Similarly, scholars have emphasised the importance of international developments when explaining India's change of foreign policy in 1992. At the structural level, the transformation of the international order ushered by the end of the cold war, coupled with regional developments, are argued to have enabled Indian PM Rao to modify its traditional pro-Arab policy and to subsequently normalise relations with Israel (Kaura 2019:225, Tripathy 2013:171). The normalisation was widely perceived as a pragmatic and realist redirection of Indian foreign policy, allegedly now freed from its traditionally held ideological principles (Shah and Tabraz 2020:878, Tripathy 2013:160, Blarel 2014:3).

In the post-1992 phase, while an important body of scholarship has looked at the expansion of relations between India and Israel, most of these studies have been descriptive and have mostly focused on outlining the new different areas of cooperation between both countries. These not only include economic and military spheres, but also cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism, agriculture, trade and water management (Ghosal 2016:66, Naaz 2000). Indo-Israeli ties have grown considerably since the normalisation of relations in 1992, and multiple studies have consequently looked into how successive governments since 1992 have engaged with Israel and how this has impacted India's Palestine policy. Since PM Modi's election in 2014, a growing number of analysts has highlighted an increasingly overt relationship between India and Israel, and has particularly focused on the impact that this relationship had on Indo-Palestinian bilateral relations. Many experts have argued that India had taken more overt pro-Israel positions, reflected in the toning down of its reactions to Israel's policies in Palestine and in the marginalisation of the Palestinian issue in its regional policy (Kumaraswamy 2019, Osuri 2020:350). Overall, most of these analyses agree that Modi has ushered a shift in the way India deals with Israel and Palestine, as he has endeavoured to maintain an independent rapport with both states (Shah and Tabraz 2020:875, Ganguly and Blarel 2021).

## **B. Indian foreign-policy and identity**

This section will now survey current debates in the literature surrounding the influence of ideational factors over Indian foreign policy, before focusing on the role of identity in India's relationship with Israel and Palestine. Drawing from constructivist insights positing that identities are social constructions providing states with a sense of 'self' as well as specific sets of interests, a part of the scholarship has argued that different conceptions of what India is and of what role it should play in the world have competed since independence to shape the formulation of India's foreign policy (Blarel 2014:9, Commuri 2010:13). There is a consensus that India's foreign policy has for long been dominated by a secular nationalist discourse, best exemplified by Nehru and the Congress party, which was later challenged by a religious-cultural discourse, exemplified by the BJP and Modi (Smith 2012:386, Sagar 2009). It is argued that India's identity in the post-independence era was greatly shaped by the country's first PM, Jawaharlal Nehru, who constructed a national identity characterised by moral exceptionalism, secularism and pluralism (Commuri 2010:19, Wojczewski 2019:406, Smith 2012:374). Drawing upon India's large civilisational heritage and against the backdrop of the legacy of British colonialism, Nehru sought to construct India's self-image as a democratic, tolerant and plural nation, inclusive of all religions and identities. A close link was established between the state's special moral identity and its foreign policy, as India espoused a policy of non-alignment, characterised by anti-colonial stances and support to Third World countries through the NAM (Kaura 2019:220, Smith 2012). This secular nationalist identity and postcolonial sensitivities are argued to continue to inform India's discourse and actions, and are best exemplified by the Congress party (Wojczewski 2016:148).

However, with the rise to power of the BJP in the 1990s and the party's domination of India's political life since 2014, India's secular identity became increasingly challenged by a Hindu nationalist ideology, triggering debates in the literature over the impact of this discourse on India's domestic and international practices. At the core of this Hindu nationalist narrative is the concept of Hindutva ( "Hindu-ness"), an ethno-cultural ideology seeking to (re)-establish an exclusive Hindu nation in India (Shani 2021:265, Omar 2021). This discourse correlates Indian identity to Hinduness and aims to create a representation of India as a fundamentally Hindu civilisation (Wojczewski 2019:408). Hindus are understood to be the rightful and original inhabitants of this rich and ancient nation, who were throughout history deprived of their land and subjugated to foreign invaders. Hindutva is the ideological core of the BJP, and

this Hindu nationalist discourse has been particularly embodied and projected by Modi (Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017:185).

Today, the significance of Hindutva as a potential factor influencing India's domestic policies is widely accepted, but the literature is more circumspect regarding its actual impact on foreign policy practices (Haynes 2007:370). There seems to be a consensus that despite Modi's ideological embrace of Hindutva, he has not deviated from the foreign policy trend established by previous governments (Chiriyankandath 2007:11, Basrur 2017:13, Gupta et al. 2018:7). However, from a rhetorical standpoint, Filkins (2019) finds that Modi has managed to recast the national narrative from a secular to that of a Hindu nation while Shani (2021:265) argues that Modi's BJP has endeavoured, especially since his re-election in 2019, to implement a domestic Hindu nationalist agenda based around Hindutva.

Looking specifically at the role of ideational forces in India's foreign policy towards Israel and Palestine, some observers have highlighted the ideological convergence between Hindutva and Zionism to explain India's growing relationship with Israel, although these works have tended to be overtly descriptive and atheoretical (Jangid 2017, Sen 2020). The deep admiration held by successive generations of Hindu nationalists for Israel, from Vinayak Savarkar (Hindutva's main ideologue) to Modi today, is often presented as a facilitating factor in India-Israel relations (Sen 2015, Tharoor 2014). The similarities between Hindu and Jewish nationalisms, such as the indivisible link between faith and nation, is also deemed to contribute to Modi's bonhomie towards Israel (Purayil 2020:478).

This review has presented the state of the rich but mostly descriptive literature on India's relations vis-à-vis Israel and Palestine. While it offers essential insights into the drivers of these relationships as well as the changing nature of these ties today, it has also overlooked the ways in which the narratives supporting India's relations with Israel and Palestine are constructed. Since non-relations with Israel were justified through a moral binary for over four decades to the Indian population and the world, it begs the question of how successive Indian governments have, in the post-normalisation era, legitimised and rationalised their growing bilateral relations with Israel while continuing to support Palestine. The review has also highlighted how different discourses, namely secular nationalist and Hindu nationalist, have interacted with India's foreign policy practices. The literature has offered various explanations to explain *why* India's relationships with Israel and Palestine have changed and evolved, for instance by establishing causal connections between India's post-colonial identity and its support for

Palestine, or between Hindutva and India's ties with Israel. While these explanations offer valuable insights, this paper argues that they leave the analysis incomplete, in the sense that they leave out *how* these identities, meanings and ideas were discursively constructed and produced in the first place such that it became possible and acceptable for India to engage in these relationships.

Therefore, this research paper will seek to address this gap and will examine how the discourses supporting India's relationships with Israel and Palestine are constructed and how successive Indian governments have sought to rationalise and frame their relations with both countries through the use of specific discursive assemblages. This will be done through the use of discourse analysis, which will be outlined in the following section.

### **III. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

This section will outline the theoretical and methodological frameworks selected. It will discuss the suitability of adopting a critical constructivist approach for the study of foreign policy discourses, and will explain how this theoretical framework is closely interlinked with the analysis of foreign policy discourses.

#### **A. Critical constructivism**

Drawing on Van de Wetering's work, this paper adopts a critical constructivist approach to the study of foreign policy discourses, which is concerned with "how subjects, objects and events are socially constructed by underlying discourses" (Van de Wetering 2016:11). Sharing the basic assumption of constructivism that ideas and identities are not "given" but socially constructed, a critical constructivist approach aims to draw special attention to the role of discourses in the intersubjective construction of reality (Hopf 1998:184, Wojczewski 2016b:24). While conventional constructivism treats identities as causal forces, in the sense that they seek to explain *why* certain identities lead to certain interests and actions, critical constructivism, being grounded in post-structuralism, is more concerned about examining *how* certain practices are made possible through the specific constructions of subjects, objects and interpretive dispositions (Doty 1993:298, Hopf 1998:184). This approach contrasts with more

conventional types of constructivism, which see language as a neutral or transparent way of describing the world (Wojczewski 2016b:24). As language is key to how state officials interpret, make sense of the world, create reality and thereby rationalise and legitimise their policies, a critical constructivist approach aims to examine and unpack the underlying structures of meanings and representations that enable the actors' self-understanding and to reveal "how the institutions, practices and identities that people take as natural, given, or matter of fact, are in fact, the product of social construction" (van de Wetering 2016:467, Hopf 2000 cited in van de Wetering 2017:15). This approach is closely interlinked with the study of foreign policy discourses.

## **B. Discourse and foreign policy**

The concept of 'discourse', central to this paper, can be defined as "structures of signification which construct social realities", and as "the space where humans beings make sense of the material world, where they attach meaning to the world and where representations of the world become manifest (Milliken 1999:229, Holzscheiter 2014:144). Discourses thus enable actors to imagine the world from a specific perspective and to make sense of it by ascribing meanings, ideas and identities to different social subjects and objects. It is through discursive constructions and socially constructed concepts and categories that state officials can rationalise, frame, legitimise and make certain foreign policy choices seem as natural or essential, while simultaneously excluding other courses of action (Milliken 1999). Indeed, different policies would be followed by a state depending on whether it describes a phenomenon as a "genocide" or as "tribal warfare" for instance, as the latter is not connoted with the same moral obligation to intervene as the former (Ripley 2017:3, Weldes 1999). As it is a crucial concern for governments and foreign policy-makers to justify why certain policies are necessary and others are not, they need to create a context in which these policies both appear legitimate and also resonate with domestic audiences (McDonald 2005:301). Foreign policy discourses thus rely upon particular representations of the world and of the country or threat they are addressing, as well as upon certain representations of the 'self' that carries out these policies (Hansen 2016:96). Indeed, in critical constructivist and post-structuralist frameworks, identities are relational, consisting of a dynamic process of differentiation of the 'Self' from the 'Other'. Accordingly, Hansen argues that there is a close interconnection between foreign policy and identity, as "foreign policies rely upon representations of identity, but it is also through the formulation of foreign policy that identities are produced and

reproduced” (Hansen 2006:1). Therefore, a discourse analysis requires a close investigation of the discursive interplay between identity and policy, which often appear natural and consistent with each other.

### **C. Discourse analysis**

This paper will use discourse analysis as a methodology. The aim of discourse analysis is to closely examine and identify the various discursive structures which make up foreign policy texts, so as to reveal and “denaturalise” the main representations, identities, and meanings that sustain them (Hansen 2016:102, Van de Wetering 2017:464). “Denaturalising” foreign policy discourses consists in revealing the socially constructed aspect of knowledge, by analysing “how an elite’s regime of truth makes possible certain courses of action by a state while excluding other policies as unintelligible or improper” (Milliken 1999:229). This fits the aim of this paper, which is to understand how India discursively framed and legitimised its relations with Israel and Palestine through the years. In order to reveal the underlying discursive representations in Indian foreign policy discourses and to structure the analysis, different discourse analytical methods will be employed.

First is the question of which texts are selected and why. Drawing on Hansen’s research methodology, this paper will analyse texts selected on three criteria, namely that “they are characterised by the clear articulation of identities and policies; they are widely read and attended to; and they have the formal authority to define a political position” (Hansen 2006:53). The primary sources studied in this paper will thus consist of over 150 discourses discussing India’s relations with Israel and/or Palestine produced by high-level Indian government officials from the Vajpayee, Singh and Modi governments. These include amongst others discourses by the Prime Ministers themselves, ministers of external affairs, India’s president, ambassadors, home affairs minister or national security advisors. Specifically, the texts collected will consist mainly of speeches given during official visits to Israel or Palestine or while receiving Israeli or Palestinian officials in India, interviews and official statements to the media, official policy statements, political debates at Parliament, election manifestos and statements at international fora. Secondary literature by scholars and historians will also be used to add depth to the analysis and to provide background information on certain events.

Second, the analytical concepts of “subject-positioning”, “articulation”, “predication”, and “interpellation” will be used to analyse foreign policy discourses and to reveal the underlying meanings and representations.

- “**Subject-positioning**” refers to the “multiple forms through which a social actor is constructed” (Van de Wetering 2016:21). Subjects can be ascribed various roles, meanings and identities, and various relationships can be established between subject and objects. Milliken (1999:307) identifies opposition, identity, similarity and complementarity as the most important kinds of relationships that subjects can take vis-à-vis objects.
- “**Articulation**” refers to the process through which “meaning is created and temporarily fixed by establishing chains of connotations among different linguistic elements” (Weldes 1996:283). Through this process, specific representations of the world, of objects or social relations are created and presented in such a way that they seem to accurately reflect reality and be naturally connected.
- “**Predication**” refers to the process of attaching certain attributes, features, or properties to particular subjects (Milliken 1999:232). They play an important part in constructing the subjects’ identities.
- “**Interpellation**” is a mechanism through which common sense is created through the “hailing” and “interpellation” of subjects into the discourse (Weldes 1996:304). Once meanings are articulated in the discourse, individuals will then recognise and identify themselves into these particular representations of the world: they are thus ‘interpellated’ or ‘hailed’ into the discourse (Van de Wetering 2016:24). For instance, Hindu nationalism constructs subjects as belonging to a “nation”, through a process of interpellation (Shani 2021:271).

These different analytical mechanisms work together to create certain representations of reality upon which foreign policy discourses rely and which in turn legitimise certain actions. Identifying such representations as well as the continuities and changes in the official discourse will allow to understand how India has discursively framed and legitimised its relationships with Israel and Palestine since 1998. Furthermore, the use of these analytical mechanisms will help to highlight clear patterns in the discourse and will allow to track the development of the discourse through the years, namely how these representations have evolved in the period

1998-2021 to create an image of India as both a historical supporter and defender of Palestine and as a close friend and partner of Israel.

This research enquiry will be structured into three qualitative case-studies, as this study focuses on the analysis of Vajpayee's, Singh's and Modi's governments' foreign policy discourse from 1998 until the present days. The choice to start the analysis in 1998 with the first BJP-led administration was made as it was the first government to openly and extensively engage with Israel and thus provides a basis upon which to assess the changes and continuities in the official Indian discourses. Case-studies provide the opportunity to conduct in-depth empirical investigations of these three governments' discourses using theoretical tools – critical constructivism – and thus allow for a thorough investigation of the evolution of these discourses, their changes and continuities. The data collected will consist of the abovementioned discourse, and the method of collection will be discourse analysis. The next section will start with the first case-study of Vajpayee's government.

## **IV. ANALYSIS**

### **A. 1998-2004: BJP-led government under PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee**

The BJP first took office in 1998, forming a majority-coalition in Parliament under PM Vajpayee. During this first stint in power, the BJP-led government considerably engaged and strengthened its bilateral relations with Israel. It was during this period that India constructed a particular narrative, laden with references to shared perceived security concerns as well as historical and emotional experiences, that served to frame and legitimise its increasingly overt relationship with Israel. The articulation of India's foreign policy towards Israel put forth three main interconnected representations of Israel: Israel as a victim of terrorism, sharing the same threat of fundamentalist ideologies as India; Israel as a democracy, sharing similar values and ideals as India; and Israel as a great civilisation, sharing a common history with India. However, despite this rapprochement with Israel, India also articulated a competing discourse, which simultaneously constructed Israel as an illegal occupier of Palestinian territories. India's policy discourse constructed Palestinian people as being subjugated and dominated and as struggling to achieve their legitimate national rights. Such representations served to legitimise

India's policy of support to Palestine and allowed it to re-produce its identity as a moral force, standing up for peace in world politics and to thus perpetuate Nehru's and Gandhi's foreign policy. This chapter will first analyse Israel's three main representations, before looking at representations of Palestine.

### **1. Representations of Israel: sharing similar threats, values and history as India**

India's engagement with Israel under Vajpayee was marked by an increasingly close cooperation in defence and counter-terrorism. India's foreign policy during this period was sustained by representations of both Israel and India as victims of fundamentalist terrorism and as facing similar threats, thus providing an important common element of self-identification for both states. In 2000, becoming the first Indian senior cabinet minister to visit Israel, Home Affairs Minister LK Advani declared: "*We share with Israel a common perception of terrorism as a menace, even more so when coupled with religious fundamentalism (...) our mutual determination to combat terrorism is the basis for discussions with Israel, whose reputation in dealing with such problems is quite successful*" (Advani 2000). Through processes of predication whereby positive meanings and attributes - such as "successful reputation" - became attached to Israel's subject-position, the policy discourse helped constructing a particular Israeli identity as an efficient counter-terrorist actor. Such representations contributed to rationalising and legitimising their defence cooperation through the creation of a shared identity with Israel based on common tragic experiences, which could resonate with both countries' domestic audiences.

While such representations sustained their security cooperation, the discursive articulation of Israel and India as seeking to promote peace and progress contributed to further legitimising their relationship by creating an image of both countries as standing for similar universal moral values and aspirations. As such, Israel was constructed as a "*young nation with democratic values, seeking economic progress*" (Vajpayee 2003b), sharing a great number of ideals with India, including "*a common vision of pluralism, tolerance and equal opportunity*", according to National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra (2003). Both countries were further depicted as sharing the common aspirations of "*advancing peace, security and stability*" and standing for a "*new and better world of prosperity and welfare*" (ibid.). By consistently attaching Israel's subject-position to the above meanings of "*tolerance*", "*democracy*" or "*peace*", a connotative

chain was created in the discourse through a process of articulation, whereby the invocation of Israel would simultaneously carry with it these meanings. Such representations of Israel, constructed as incredibly similar to India, with both countries sharing similar moral, democratic and peaceful ethos, contributed to creating a naturally favourable condition for the development of relations between them.

The naturalness of their relations was further strengthened through discursive mechanisms of interpellations. Through the use of collective personal and possessive pronouns, such as “*we*” and “*our*” which helped creating feelings of identification and recognition, the Indian population became hailed into the discourse as members of an imagined Indian community (Weldes 1999:289). Consequently, the interpellations of India’s population contributed to justifying foreign policy choices, as the identities and representations of India and Israel became naturalised and came to embody the national interest. In other words, since the discourse stated that “*we share with Israel a common perception of terrorism*” (Advani 2000), “*we have a lot to share with each other*” (Vajpayee 2003a) or that “*our peoples*” have “*shared values*” (Mishra 2003), it made sense that India and Israel increased their cooperation to face their common challenges and work together to advance their stated shared goals of peace and progress.

Finally, India’s growing relationship with Israel was also sustained by a discourse which attached images of greatness and exceptionalism to both nations and constructed Israel as sharing a common history and civilisational bonds with India. The particular discursive representations of Israel and India’s history, cultures and religions contributed to the creation of a deep sense of kinship between both states and to the creation of a certain social reality in which the cooperation between both countries, due to their perceived ancient civilisational links, appeared as natural, desirable and rational. As Hansen argues (2016:106), the mobilisation and interpretation of history in policy discourses is not insignificant, as “history is always told in a particular manner and with particular political effects”. PM Vajpayee for instance, using a religious nationalist discourse re-asserting India’s identity as a glorious and ancient civilisation, remarked during Israeli PM Sharon’s visit to India that “*our lands have supported the birth of great and ancient religions and civilisations*” (Vajpayee 2003b). Similarly, the Delhi statement on Friendship and Cooperation between India and Israel (DSFC) noted that “*as ancient cultures and societies, India and Israel have left their mark on human civilisations and history*” (MEA 2003a). These understandings and depictions of both countries’ civilisational achievements are revealing of Vajpayee government’s efforts to

socially construct a shared identity between India and Israel through the use of elements of religious-nationalist discourse. Indeed, a relationship of similarity was established between Israel's and India's subject-positions through their discursive constructions as ancient and glorious ancient nations, further contributing to legitimising their relations.

Overall, Vajpayee's government foreign policy discourse towards Israel was sustained by representations of Israel as being incredibly similar to India, specifically in terms of historical and civilisational bonds as well as common shared values, concerns and aspirations. These contributed to shaping reality and legitimising their full-scale growing relations, notably in the field of defence and counter-terrorism through articulating both countries as facing the same terrorist threat, but also their growing trade relations, by socially constructing both countries to share similar liberal ideals of pluralism, democracy, prosperity and economic progress. Between 1992 and 2002, their trade relations increased from \$202 million to \$1.27 billion, illustrating this growing cooperation (Blarel 2014:296).

## **2. Competing discourse: Israel as an illegal occupier of Palestinian lands**

Despite the rapprochement with Israel, its positive discursive representations and the mobilisation of elements of Hindutva, Vajpayee's government's policy discourse was still influenced by traditional Nehruvian foreign policy representations which articulated India as a supporter of Palestine and Israel as an illegal occupier of Palestinian lands. As such, Indian policy discourse, particularly in joint statements with Arab countries, was critical of Israeli policies and branded Israeli actions in Palestine as "*illegal occupation of Arab territories*" (MEA 2003b). Similarly, in a speech given at a NAM meeting, Minister of State for External Affairs (MSEA) Krishnam Raju identified "*illegal Israeli settlements activities*" as having a "*destructive impact on the peace process*" (Raju 2001a). Such representations were mostly articulated in fora where India had historically held such positions, such as in NAM meetings and with Arab countries, which allowed India to perpetuate its self-image as a supporter of Arab causes (Blarel 2014:295).

However, although Israel settlement activities were articulated as impediments to peace, Israel's and Palestine's subject-positions were not connected, in the sense that such actions were not framed within a wider context of illegal Israeli practices in Palestine and were not

directly articulated as being responsible for the condition of Palestinians, which were – as will be argued below – represented as being subjugated and struggling to achieve their legitimate rights. This is revealing of the ambivalence of Vajpayee government’s foreign policy discourse towards Israel and Palestine, in which competing elements of both religious-nationalist and secular-Nehruvian nationalist discourses were used alongside each other and which sought to maintain a balance between an increased engagement with Israel and support to Palestine. Overall, the ambivalence of these competing discourses was well reflected in the representations of the violence triggered by the second Palestinian intifada, starting in September 2000. While MSEA Raju (2001b) identified the intifada as the “*expression*” of “*the frustration of the Palestinian people from many years of an unfulfilled interim stage of the Oslo Accords*”, thus giving a certain legitimacy to the uprising, the vast majority of the policy discourse simply apportioned blame for the violence to both sides.

### **3. Representations of Palestinians: struggling to achieve legitimate national rights and living under subjugation**

India’s framing of Palestine maintained, albeit toned down, traditional elements of Nehruvian nationalist discourse which articulated Palestinians as being subjugated and as struggling to achieve their national aspirations. The policy discourse repeatedly framed Palestinians as being engaged in a “*struggle to achieve their legitimate rights*” (Raju 2001a) which included, as MSEA Raju stated, “*the inalienable rights to their homeland*” (Raju 2001b). Indian narrative gave credence to the Palestinian cause by systematically stressing its “*legitimate*” aspect, thereby contributing to the creation of a social reality in which India’s support to the Palestinians appeared both as principled and natural. This was also done through attaching emotionally-charged predicates and poignant meanings to Palestine’s subject-position, for instance by talking about “*the distressing plight of Palestinian refugees*” (Raju 2001a) or “*the drastic and unprecedented impoverishment of the Palestinian people*” (Raju 2001b). These played an important role in constructing a particular Palestinian identity as actors struggling to achieve a legitimate cause. However, Palestine’s and Israel’s subject-positions were also de-hyphenated, as the depictions of Palestinians’ conditions were described as independent from and not linked to Israel’s “*illegal occupation*” of Palestinian territories. This contributed to the construction of two distinct representations of Palestine and Israel and illustrated Vajpayee’s government growing bonhomie towards Israel.

Nonetheless, such representations served to legitimise India's traditional policy of support to Palestine and allowed it to assert and re-produce its identity as a moral force, standing up for peace and equity in world politics and thus perpetuating crucial elements of Nehru's traditional non-aligned foreign policy. This idea was best illustrated by India's Ambassador Hardeep Puri at the 60<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on Human Rights, in which he articulated Palestine as a "*glaring and unfortunate exception*" to "*the emancipation of colonial countries and peoples (...) living under alien subjugation, domination and exploitation*", as "*they struggle to realise their inalienable right to self-determination*" (Puri 2004). By articulating solidarity with Palestine and drawing upon India's own colonial struggle, the discourse re-affirmed and re-produced India's self-identity as a post-colonial country committed to the Nehruvian principles of self-determination. Foreign policy discourse thus acted a crucial site for the re-production and projection of India's particular self-image (Wojczewski 2016:171).

Overall, Vajpayee's government's policy discourse was sustained by representations of Palestinians as being engaged in a struggle to achieve their legitimate rights and living under subjugation. However, despite such representations, Israel's and Palestine's subject-positions were de-hyphenated, in the sense that Israel was not directly framed as responsible for the Palestinian peoples' subjugation. As will be argued in the following chapter, the de-hyphenation of both countries stood in contrast to Singh's government's policy discourse, with different consequences on the representations of both countries and thus on the foreign policy options associated with such representations. There was thus a certain ambivalence in Vajpayee's foreign policy discourse which illustrated its growing bonhomie towards Israel, while still perpetuating India's traditional policies towards Palestine.

## **B. 2004-2014: INC-led government under PM Manmohan Singh**

The INC-led coalition government (the United Progressive Alliance, or UPA) under PM Manmohan Singh first came to power in 2004, and was again able to form a government after winning a majority of seats at the 2009 general election. In contrast to the previous BJP-led government, PM Singh's tenures were marked by a very high political engagement with Palestine, while a certain distancing with Israel was operated, illustrated by limited diplomatic exchanges, prudence in public discussions and very few high-level cabinet visits to Israel (Blarel 2014:296, Ghosa 2016). Driven by the willingness to restore ties with the Palestinians

and the Arab world, which were perceived as having deteriorated as a result of the BJP's pro-Israel policies, Singh's government's policy discourse in this period was particularly rich in representations of Palestine, which served to frame, shape and legitimise its foreign policy. Two key representations of Palestine were articulated in the discourse, which opened up different kinds of foreign policy possibilities. The first key discourse emphasised the suffering of Palestinians in their struggle for independence and articulated them as going through a severe humanitarian crisis. These representations not only enabled and naturalised India's developmental assistance to Palestine and its self-ascribed role as an aid provider, but also allowed India to reinforce its self-image and identity as a moral force, supporting and championing Palestinian and Arab causes. The second key discourse connected India and Palestine through a narrative depicting both states as sharing common historical and religious bonds.

India's policy discourse was also sustained by two main representations of Israel: Israel as a beneficial cooperation partner and Israel as a violent subjugator of Palestinians. While Israel's and Palestine's subject-positions were linked together during UPA's first tenure, discursive changes occurred over the course of Singh's second tenure, illustrated by a growing de-hyphenation of Israel's and Palestine's subject-positions. These discursive changes illustrated Singh's government's ambiguous foreign policy position of striving to maintain its self-image as a vocal defender of the Palestinian cause and thus not overtly seem as pro-Israel, while in parallel deeply increasing economic and defence ties with the latter.

### **1. Key representations: great suffering of Palestinian people in their valiant struggle for independence**

India's open closeness with and support to the Palestinian cause was legitimised and rationalised through the construction of a particular reality depicting Palestinians as enduring hardship in their courageous struggle for independence. India's policy discourse attached rich and laudatory predicates to Palestine's subject-position, endowing the country and its people with a particular identity as courageous and staunch. For instance, Palestine's late leader Yasser Arafat was described by MSEA Ahamed as "*a hero to us*" (Ahamed 2004), while PM Singh referred to "*the brave Palestinian people*" (M. Singh 2005), who were characterised by an "*indomitable spirit*" (Ahamed 2007). By persistently endowing Palestinian subjects with universally well-connoted notions of heroism, the invocation of their struggle also came to carry these meanings through mechanisms of articulation, thus contributing to the creation of

a particular social reality in which brave Palestinians were fighting to achieve their legitimate rights. Consequently, India's support to these people's cause appeared as morally righteous and appropriate.

India's discourse simultaneously constructed Palestinians as the victims of historical injustices who were now suffering great hardship. Through processes of predication, diverse poignant and emotional images emphasising struggle and adversity were linked to Palestine's subject-position, who were described by MEA Natwar Singh as "*enduring inordinate suffering*" (N. Singh 2004a) and facing "*misery and hardship*" (MEA 2008). Similarly, the situation during the second Intifada was described as "*horrible, just terrible*" by MSEA Ahamed (2004b), and was articulated as a "*continuing humanitarian crisis*" by Ambassador Sen (2005). Therefore, by articulating particular images of courage, hardship and suffering to Palestine's subject-position, the discourse humanised the Palestinians and stimulated feelings of compassion among the audience while constructing a particular context in which India's foreign policy appeared consistent with those representations.

## **2. India as a developmental assistant and aid donor in Palestine**

As Hansen (2016:96) argues, "foreign policies are dependent upon the representations of the countries, places and peoples that such policies are assisting or deterring". Accordingly, the discursive construction of a particular social reality in which Palestinian people were experiencing a harsh humanitarian crisis legitimised India's growing involvement in development assistance and aid provision to Palestine. On top of consistent political support to Palestine at multilateral fora, Singh's government got actively engaged in economic aid and contributed more than \$50 million to the Palestinian National Authority (Ghosa 2016:84). Following the critical constructivist theoretical framework of this study, the aim here is not to ask *why* India decided to engage in such development efforts in Palestine but rather *how* such practices were framed and how Palestinian subjects and interpretive dispositions were socially constructed in the first place such that India's practices were made possible and acceptable.

Therefore, the policy discourse articulated India's assistance to Palestine as necessary in order to contribute to the reconstruction of the country. India's assistance was directly articulated as a way to alleviate the "*suffering*" of the Palestinians, as stated by the MEA's official spokesperson in 2008: "*We stand ready to extend additional assistance to help the people of*

*Palestine to overcome the suffering they are facing*” (MEA 2008). Similarly, by articulating Palestine’s subject-position as a country in need of “reconstruction” and “development”, as stated for instance by MSEA Ahamed (2007): “*India is willing to work further with the PA in the reconstruction of their nation*”, and “*India has extended assistance towards development of Palestinian institutions*”, the policy discourse made India’s cooperation with Palestine seem as necessary, natural and appropriate. India’s and Palestine’s subject-positions thus became linked together in a relationship of complementarity that seemed desirable, and in which the hierarchy between Palestine, the aid recipient, and India, the aid provider, seemed natural and accepted. Therefore, the discursive construction of a particular context in which Palestinians were enduring hardship and going through a humanitarian crisis enabled, naturalised and legitimised India’s self-ascribed role as a development assistant and aid provider.

### 3. India as a moral force in international politics

This paper makes an assumption that foreign policies are not only dependent upon the discursive representations of the country or crisis they seek to address, but also on “representations of the national self that undertakes these policies” (Hansen 2016:96). In that regard, the articulations of Palestine as enduring hardship not only served to frame India’s development assistance as necessary, but also allowed India to project and re-produce its identity as a moral and responsible actor in international politics, standing for peace, tolerance and justice. By consistently attaching India’s subject-position to predicates related to morality, justice and compassion, India’s support to Palestine - through processes of articulation - came to be understood as a natural outcome of its identity as a moral and righteous country committed to principles of peace and justice. For instance, India was consistently constructed as a human-like entity capable of having “*empathy*”, “*sympathy*”, “*friendship*” and “*solidarity*” (Ahamed 2008<sup>1</sup>) for the Palestinian cause, as well as feeling “*shock*”, “*dismay*” and “*abhorrence*” towards the violence inflicted on Palestinians (M. Singh 2008). Similarly, the policy discourse regularly articulated India’s support to Palestine as a moral obligation, as stated for instance by MEA N. Singh (2004a): “*The Palestinians are enduring inordinate suffering and the international community has a moral duty to demonstrate solidarity with them*”. In that regard, India also often ascribed itself the role of “redressing” injustices made to the Palestinians, as expressed for instance by MSEA Ahamed: “*India will be a front-runner in*

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<sup>1</sup> MSEA Ahamed’s statement at the 20<sup>th</sup> Summit of the League of Arab States: “*India’s empathy with the Palestinian cause and its friendship with the people of Palestine is an integral part of our foreign policy*”

*the international effort to redress the historic injustices done to the Palestinian people”* (Ahamed 2004).

Overall, the discursive representations of valiant Palestinians fighting for their rights allowed Singh’s government to reassert and project India’s identity as a responsible and moral member of the international community. Through attaching images of empathy, righteousness and justice to India’s subject-position, the policy discourse contributed to the creation of a context in which India’s support to the Palestinian people appeared as being driven by morality and ethics. Singh’s government’s policy discourse thus perpetuated traditional elements of Nehruvian nationalist discourse, such as the articulation of India as having a special capacity for moral leadership in world affairs and as struggling for a more just and peaceful world (Wojczewski 2016:169).

#### **4. Construction of a shared identity between India, the Arab world and Palestine**

India’s foreign policy towards Palestine was also sustained by a narrative articulating both countries as sharing deep historical bonds. As such, India’s policy discourse sought to connect both countries together through a socially constructed narrative depicting them as having shared similar anti-colonial struggles. As Wojczewski (2016:148) argues, India’s struggle against colonialism has created a bond and “common awareness” among its people, and has thus served as an important source for its national identity. As a result of this shared experience of subjugation, the Nehruvian discourse became particularly informed by “post-colonial sensitivities”, which notably included moral aspirations of striving for equality and justice in world affairs (ibid.). In that regard, India’s policy discourse on Palestine during Singh’s tenure mobilised and relied on similar elements of Nehruvian discourse, which had important effects in terms of foreign policy possibilities. The discourse attributed a particular identity to India as a moral force striving for a more just and peaceful world and as a post-colonial country “*at the forefront of initiatives for self-determination*” who “*played a leading role in the historic struggle for de-colonisation*” (Puri 2004). Similarly, the interpellation of the Indian population (“*the people of India exercised the right to self-determination*”, “*they recognised the importance of efforts to universalize this basic right*” (ibid.)) contributed to the legitimisation and common-sense aspect of the discourse, as the audience could identify themselves as belonging to this great and exceptional Indian community.

Echoing these different representations, Palestine's subject-position was constructed in a relationship of similarity and complementarity with India's: both countries were articulated as having experienced common struggles for independence and were constructed as "*partners in the struggle against colonialism*" (Ahamed 2005), who "*fought together the battles against colonialism and imperialism*" (MEA 2005). Consequently, through weaving a particular social reality in which India was represented as a country at the forefront of de-colonisation efforts and Palestine as still "*struggling to attain its inalienable rights of self-determination*" (MEA 2005), India's support to Palestine appeared as a natural outcome of its identity as a moral force. Furthermore, because Palestine was represented as experiencing the same historical struggle against colonialism as India had in the past, their close partnership and India's assistance appeared as natural, necessary and common sensical. India's foreign policy discourse thus served as a site for it to re-assert and re-produce its identity, and in the process, to perpetuate the traditional Nehruvian discourse.

Therefore, the policy discourse further contributed to the legitimisation and naturalisation of India's support to Palestine through representing both countries as anti-colonial allies. Representations of India as sharing deep civilisational and historical ties with Palestine enabled the discourse to appeal to a broad audience and to justify its deep-seated relations with Palestine. It is so far revealing how India's self-image, its perception of "Self" and the discursive mobilisation of its national experiences, have impacted the representations of Palestine and consequently India's foreign policy.

### **5. Key representations of Israel: subjugator of Palestinians and beneficial development partner**

India's foreign policy discourses during both INC-led coalition governments were sustained by two key representations of Israel: Israel as a violent subjugator of Palestinians and Israel as a beneficial cooperation partner. During Singh's first tenure, Israel's and Palestine's subject-positions were hyphenated as they were consistently linked to each other in the discourse: Israel was articulated as responsible for the subjugation of Palestinians, while India's relationship with the former was represented as beneficial, so long as it did not impact India's policy of support to the latter. However, some important discursive changes occurred over the course of UPA's second coalition government (2009-2014), opening up different foreign policy possibilities. Although still represented as an illegal occupier of Palestinian lands, the discourse delinked Israel's and Palestine's subject-positions, which enabled Israel to be constructed as a

more normal actor, engaging in a beneficial partnership with India. These discursive changes enabled Singh's government to treat both countries as individual actors and to start pursuing independent foreign policies towards each. These changes are also revealing of Singh's government's ambiguous foreign policy position of striving to maintain its self-image as a vocal defender of the Palestinian cause and thus not overtly seem as pro-Israel, while in parallel deeply increasing defence and security ties with the latter.

### **UPA's first tenure: Israel and Palestine hyphenated**

Singh became Prime Minister in 2004, one year before the end of the second Palestinian uprising, and his tenure witnessed rapid developments in the region, such as Israel's military assaults on the Gaza Strip in December 2008 and 2012 (Shah and Tabraz 2020). These actions resulted in critical statements from India, which recurrently articulated Israel as dominating and subjugating innocent Palestinians. Israel was endowed with a particular identity as an overtly violent actor, as its subject-position was frequently linked to meanings and predicates related to aggression and domination. For instance, Israel was consistently articulated in a relationship of domination towards Palestine and "*killing innocent Palestinians, including women and children*" in the Gaza Strip (MEA 2006) through "*unprovoked attacks*" (ibid.) and the "*disproportionate use of violence*" (Ahamed 2004, MEA 2008). The invocation of Israel in the discourse came to be connoted with meanings of violence and aggression through a process of articulation and contributed to the creation of a specific social reality depicting innocent Palestinians suffering as a result of Israel's violent actions. Such depictions created a binary opposition between Israel, the stronger party, and Palestine, the weaker party. Consequently, these representations contributed to legitimising India's policy of support and assistance to Palestine through accentuating and re-asserting its self-image as a moral force supporting the rights of people living under domination and oppression.

The second key representation of Israel during Singh's first tenure was that of a beneficial cooperation partner. Here too, Israel and Palestine were connected in the discourse, as any mentions of Israel would also be accompanied by mentions of India's policy of support to Palestine. For instance, India's relations with Israel were articulated as "*valuable*", "*friendly*" and based on "*mutually beneficial cooperation*" (N. Singh 2004a), but opposing each of these representations were articulations of Palestine as a country struggling for its rights. This binary opposition of Israel and Palestine was best exemplified by MEA N. Singh's declaration to the

press: “*We value our relations with Israel. They have a great deal to offer to us, they have a great deal to offer to the world. But our relations with Israel will not be at the expense of sacrificing the legitimate ties and aspirations of the Palestinian people*” (N. Singh 2004b). By constantly connecting both Israel’s and Palestine’s subject-positions together, the discourse enabled India to project itself as a true supporter of the Palestinian cause and to perpetuate its self-image as following a principled and moral foreign policy.

### **UPA’s second tenure: growing de-hyphenation of Israel’s and Palestine’s subject-positions**

However, these discursive representations changed over the course of UPA’s second tenure (2009-2014), as Israel’s subject-position started to be delinked from Palestine’s. Discursive changes sustained India’s evolving foreign policy towards the region, whereby a more pragmatic approach started to be taken towards Israel, which consisted in treating it as an independent partner which was not to affect India’s other engagements in the region, such as its support to Palestine and its involvement in the West Asia peace process (Blarel 2014:320, Kumaraswamy 2008:2). Therefore, the discourse attached new meanings and images to Israel’s subject-position, constructing it as an innovative actor engaging in a beneficial and complementary partnership with India. Particularly, Israel’s subject-position was constructed in a relationship of complementarity with India’s: while India was depicted as a country experiencing a “*continued economic growth*” (MEA 2012a) and facing challenges to “*sustain their growth pattern*” (MEA 2012b), cooperation with Israel seemed natural and advantageous as it was depicted as a country offering “*innovative solutions*” (ibid.) and possessing “*expertise*” (MEA 2012a) in several fields. Although the security cooperation between both countries was increasing, the discourse favoured representations of Israel as a valuable cooperation partner in the fields of trade, agriculture and water-management so as to present it as a benign actor. These discursive changes opened up different possibilities in terms of foreign policy directions, as the growing de-hyphenation of Palestine and Israel and the new meanings attached to Israel’s subject-position made it possible for India to start pursuing independent and closer relations with Israel, detached from its other engagements in the region.

Overall, Singh’s government foreign-policy was strongly sustained by a Nehruvian-influenced discourse, which perpetuated traditional representations of India as having a special propensity for moral leadership in world affairs. Accordingly, representations of Palestinian people as

suffering as a result of Israeli actions helped justify and legitimise India's self-ascribed role as a development and aid provider, but also helped India to project its self-image as a responsible and moral member of the international community, defending the rights of people living under subjugation. While such representations of Palestine and India remained consistent throughout Singh's tenure, the hyphenation of Israel and Palestine that characterised the discourse started to shift over the course of UPA's second tenure, opening different foreign policy opportunities. So far, the analysis of India's discourse has exposed how India has attempted to project its self-image through its foreign policy discourse, and has emphasised how the framing of its relations with both countries was heavily dependent on each government's self-image.

### **C. 2014-2021: BJP-led government under PM Narendra Modi**

The year 2014 marked the return to power of the National Democratic Alliance coalition government (NDA), led by the BJP under PM Narendra Modi. The BJP then won the 2019 general election, further consolidating its majority (Shani 2021). Modi's tenures were marked by an overt consolidation of India's ties with Israel, bringing them out in the open after a decade of more "cautious" engagement under PM Singh. On top of the expansion of their bilateral relations into numerous areas, such as agriculture and technology, India's renewed engagement with Israel was also accompanied by foreign policy shifts. These were particularly reflected in India's changing voting patterns at multilateral fora, from traditional pro-Palestine and anti-Israel stances to more "neutral" and abstentionist positions (Kaura 2019:226). This paper argues, in line with the critical constructivist theoretical framework selected, that underlying and enabling such policy shifts were changes in the ways events, social subjects and objects - namely Israel, Palestine and India - were socially and discursively constructed (Van de Wetering 2017:475). As different meanings, ideas and identities became attached to these actors' subject-positions, new representations were created which enabled to frame, legitimise and justify the BJP's new approaches towards the region.

Modi's governments' policy discourse were characterised by an increased de-hyphenation of Israel's and Palestine's subject-positions. This enabled India to treat both countries as independent entities and thus to keep pursuing individual policies towards them. Therefore, while both countries were articulated as part of the conflict, there was also a categorical separation of Israel from Palestine when addressing each country individually. As such, the first key representation of Israel linked it to Palestine and constructed both countries as part of the conflict. The second one, completely separate from Palestine, built upon the first BJP

government's discursive assemblage and used elements of religious-nationalist discourse to construct a shared identity with Israel and represent both countries as incredibly similar.

Similarly, India's foreign policy discourse towards Palestine was sustained by two key separate discourses: the first one articulated Palestinian people as seeking to achieve statehood, which enabled India to reassert its self-image as following its traditional policy of support to the Palestinian cause. The second one articulated Palestine as a developing nation, engaging in a mutually beneficial partnership with India. Such representation enabled India to re-define its relations with Palestine from a highly politicised to a more "normal" partnership, based on mutual interests and detached from the conflict. This last section will analyse the representations of Israel and Palestine and will particularly focus on emphasising how the continuities and discontinuities in the discourse enabled and limited Modi's government foreign policy options.

### **1. Israel and Palestine as equal part of the conflict**

Modi's government's policy towards Israel and Palestine was characterised by a growing bonhomie vis-à-vis Israel, illustrated by its evolving voting patterns at international fora. For instance, in July 2014, India endorsed a UNHRC resolution to launch an investigation looking into human rights violations in Gaza. However, a year later, they abstained from voting for the same resolution condemning Israel (Pate 2020). Underlying and enabling such policy shift was a change at the discursive level, whereby Israel and Palestine were now represented as playing an equal part in the conflict. Such representations contrasted with the INC's discourse of the past decade, which clearly articulated Israel as a violent aggressor responsible for the suffering of Palestinian people.

Under Modi, Israel's and Palestine's subject-positions were thus often constructed in a relationship of similarity, so that each was represented as playing an equal part in the conflict and that no side would be articulated as the aggressor. For instance, India's permanent representative at the UN stated in July 2014 during the Gaza war that the "*conflict between Israel and Palestine*" resulted in a "*large number of civilian casualties*", and that "*both sides should exercise restraint*" (MEA 2014). The articulation of a balanced conflict between two even powers equally responsible for the violence was at odds with previous articulations of Palestine and Israel, such as the depictions of Palestine as the "*weaker party*" and Israel as the

“*stronger party*” by India’s special envoy to West Asia in 2005 (Gharekhan 2005). The construction of both countries as similar was best exemplified by S. Swaraj, India’s new MEA and senior member of the BJP, during a meeting of the NAM Committee on Palestine: she expressed her concerns that the violence might be an “*obstacle to the realisation of the legitimate aspirations of both the peoples to co-exist in peace and security*” (Swaraj 2014). Through a process of predication whereby both Israelis and Palestinians were endowed with a similar identity as people legitimately striving to achieve peace, the discourse contributed to the creation of a specific social reality which justified India’s growing neutrality. This contrasted with PM Singh’s government’s policy discourse, in which the dominant discursive representations were of Palestinians as struggling to achieve their legitimate rights. Such representations, in turn, created certain interpretive dispositions which enabled and legitimised the government’s policy of support to Palestine. Thus, through now endowing both peoples with this similar identity, Modi’s discourse facilitated, sustained and legitimised a change of policy.

## **2. Construction of a shared identity between India and Israel**

As India’s engagement with Israel grew exponentially under Modi, the discourse underlying and sustaining this new course of policy also underwent some important changes. The new ways through which India perceived itself in relations to Others, ascribed meanings and identities to different social subjects and objects and re-interpreted historical experiences contributed to the redefinition of some representations of Israel. These representations then opened up new possibilities in terms of foreign policy directions, reflected by India’s growing bonhomie towards Israel. Similarly to Vajpayee’s government’s approach towards Israel, the dramatic expansion of their ties was sustained by a discourse constructing both countries as sharing deep-seated civilisational ties, similar values and facing similar threats.

While Singh’s government, through its policy of support to Palestine, attempted to reproduce India’s identity as a secular and tolerant nation, Modi’s government articulated a more exclusive religious-nationalist discourse based on a Hindu identity. This analysis is based on the critical constructivist assumption that foreign policy is a crucial site for the production and delineation of the ‘Self’ who enacts foreign policy (Hansen 2016:100). This religious-nationalist narrative not only reflected the importance that Hinduism played in India’s new conception of its national identity, but also highlighted the crucial role that religion and culture

now played in constructing a sense of kinship and a bridge of connection with Israel (Bender 2016:131). Indeed, the BJP's discourse articulated India's and Israel's subject-positions as incredibly similar, sharing a common ideological vision of a nation built around a majoritarian culture and religion (Wojczewski 2016:204). For instance, Modi's speech during his historic visit to Israel in 2017 was laden with cultural and religious references: "*India and Israel share a bond of culture, traditions (...). There is an amazing parallel between our festivals. Holi is celebrated in India and Israel celebrates Purim. While India celebrates Diwali, Hanukkah is celebrated in Israel*" (Modi 2017a). Similarly, India's MEA S. Jaishankar mobilised Hindu and Jewish symbols and traditions as a point of connection between both states: "*Our two countries share values of democracy and pluralism. We also share some of our guiding civilisational philosophies: Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam in India, or the world is one family, and Tikun Olam in Israel, or heal the world*" (Jaishankar 2021). By constructing India's and Israel's subject-positions as nations guided by and embodying comparable ancient religions and philosophies - Hinduism and Judaism - such discourse contributed to the creation of a deep-rooted, ideational bond between both countries, with these religious similarities acting as a bridge of connection between them.

Therefore, a re-definition of India's identity and self-image led to new representations of Israel and opened up new foreign policy possibilities. Similarly, new interpretations of history, in which India and Israel were now articulated as sharing a common history of anti-colonial struggles, contributed to the development of a shared identity between them and also sustained India's change of policy. Such representations contrasted with the previous INC-led governments', which depicted Palestine and India as anti-colonial allies in order to legitimise India's traditional policy of support towards them. On the other hand, the policy discourse now constructed Israel into India's self-image when India's President declared that "*both India and Israel made parallel struggles against British rule*" (Mukherjee 2015a) and that both nations "*came into being through the trauma of conflict, division and human suffering*" (Mukherjee 2015b). While re-asserting India's identity as a postcolonial nation, Modi relied on a different interpretation of history than PM Singh to create a particular context and social reality which could resonate with both Indians and Israelis and thus legitimise their growing relations.

Similarly, building upon Vajpayee's government's discursive framing, Modi's policy discourse depicted both countries as fellow democracies, sharing similarities in terms of values and ideals and engaging in a similar struggle against terrorism. Their bilateral defence

cooperation was growing impressively, illustrated by the fact that India bought more arms from Israel in Modi's first nine months in office than Singh's government in the previous three years (Kaura 2019:221). However, while security and defence played an important part in India and Israel's relations, there was also a desire to de-emphasise the security issue and to not let it dominate the discourse. As a result, Israel was articulated as a valued and normal partner, engaging in a wide-range of activities with India. As laudatory predicates related to success, prosperity and exemplarity became attached to Israel's subject-position, the country was endowed with a new identity as a role model, being successful and at the forefront of innovative practices. For instance, Israel was articulated by India's President as a "*thriving, progressive and prosperous society*" (Mukherjee 2015a) that has achieved "*remarkable achievements*" through "*hard work, innovation and rapid progress*" (Mukherjee 2015b). Moreover, such articulations were complementary with India's new self-image as an ambitious country seeking rapid economic and social transformation. Therefore, through processes of articulation, Israel and India came to be connoted as nations sharing similar ideals and seeking similar goals, thus legitimising and normalising their close cooperation. For example, India and Israel were described by Mukherjee (2015c) as "*two leading economies of the world, who have many strengths and much to learn from each other's experiences*".

Overall, representations of Israel as being incredibly similar to India sustained Modi's discourse. The new ways through which India perceived itself as well as the new meanings and identities ascribed to Israel's subject-position led to new representations of Israel as deeply similar to and complementary with India. These new discursive articulations, in turn, sustained India's renewed engagement and deep cooperation with Israel. As part of the de-hyphenation of Israel and Palestine, the latter did not come into the picture and was thus never mentioned in the discourse, which facilitated India's policy of dealing with each country separately.

### **3. Representations of Palestine: India as a historical supporter of Palestine and Palestine as a normal developing country**

In parallel to these representations of Israel, India's discourse articulated two separate representations of Palestine: one articulated Palestine as seeking to achieve statehood, which enabled India to re-assert its identity as a moral force that played a crucial role in anticolonial struggles. The second one, completely separate from the former, now constructed Palestine as a normal economic and developing country. Whereas under PM Singh the depiction of

Palestine as suffering hardship as a result of Israeli actions legitimised India's support and aid provision, Palestine's subject-position was now separated from Israel: the country was now framed as a developing nation, without Israel getting in the picture, seeking cooperation with India based on similar interests. These new representations sustained India's re-definition of its relations with both Israel and Palestine, from highly politicised interactions to more narrow and selective partnerships (Blarel 2014:317).

The new remarkable momentum in Indian-Israeli relations under Modi, illustrated by the dramatic expansion of their bilateral cooperation into several new fields, renewed public political contacts and high-profile visits, did not however lead to the abandonment of India's support to the Palestinian people. While the policy discourse now articulated both countries as playing an equal part in the conflict, it maintained historic representations, albeit toned down, of Palestinians as seeking to achieve statehood. These representations enabled India to project itself as a historic supporter of the Palestinian cause, thereby re-asserting and re-producing its self-image as a great power, acting as a moral force in world affairs (Wojczewski 2019). Indeed, through the articulation of India's subject-position as a human-like entity capable of compassion and empathy, the discourse maintained India's self-image as a longstanding supporter of the Palestinians. For instance, India's relationship with Palestine was articulated as being built on "*solidarity and friendship*" (Modi 2017a), while also being represented as "*having always stood beside Palestine*" (Mukherjee 2015d) and being "*committed to take care of the interests of the Palestinian people*" (Modi 2018). As a result of the de-hyphenation of Israel's and Palestine's subject-positions, Palestine was separated from Israel in the discourse and Israeli actions were for instance not framed as being the impediment to the Palestinian people's struggle, as they used to be under PM Singh. This enabled India to pursue an independent policy of support towards Palestine as well as to project and re-produce its self-image as a moral force, without risking it harming its relations with Israel.

Further discursive changes sustained and facilitated India's change of policy towards the region. Modi sought to pursue independent and separate relations with both countries so as to normalise them, without letting these relations be harmed by the conflict. As such, an important difference between Modi's and Singh's policy discourse was the loss of predicates as well as meanings traditionally attached to Palestine's subject-position, which in the past, through processes of articulations and connotation, contributed to the creation of its specific identity. Under PM Singh, the discursive invocation of the Palestinian people came to carry with it a

rich mix of meanings related to struggle, heroism, courage, but also suffering and hardship, which helped to sustain and legitimise India's policy of aid provision and support to Palestine, as well as its self-image as an exceptional, benevolent power. On the other hand, these meanings disappeared under Modi and were replaced by new articulations of Palestine as a country engaging in economic and developmental cooperation with India. These new discursive representations enabled India to de-emphasise the security issue and to thus re-define its relations with Palestine from a highly politicised partnership to a more normal cooperation, based on shared interests and detached from the conflict.

As such, the policy discourse now constructed Palestine as a nation seeking to develop, as predicates and meanings related to development and aid recurrently became attached to Palestine's subject-position: the discourse now referred to the "*developmental aspirations of the Palestinian people*" (MEA 2016), while India was articulated as a development assistant, "*supporting the development and capacity-building effort of Palestine*" (Modi 2017b) and being committed to "*help strengthen the economy in Palestine and improve the lives of the people living there*" (MEA 2017). These representations, on top of contributing to the construction of a specific Palestinian identity as a developing nation, enabled India to re-assert its self-image as a great power playing a unique role in world politics and acting as a moral force supporting developing countries. In addition to these representations, Palestine was also interchangeably constructed in the discourse as an ordinary and valuable economic partner seeking similar goals as India. As such, Palestine was often articulated in a relationship of similarity to India, with both countries sharing a "*belief in peace, prosperity and development*" (Mukherjee 2015e) and working together "*for closer political interaction, deepening economic engagement and wider cultural contacts*" (Mukherjee 2015d). Palestine's new status as a country sharing similar ideals and goals as India helped de-emphasising the security issue and thus contributed to the de-politicisation of their relations, as their cooperation was separated from the conflict and Palestine was now depicted as a normal economic actor, without Israel getting into the equation.

Overall, Modi's government's policy discourse was marked by the de-hyphenation of Israel's and Palestine' subject-positions, which sustained India's new policy of treating each country as independent entities and thus enabled it to pursue individual relations with them. While both countries were now represented as playing an equal part in the conflict, which sustained India's

changing voting patterns at international fora, the discourse still articulated India as a historical supporter of the Palestinian cause, enabling India to maintain its self-image as a moral force. New meanings and identities ascribed to each country's subject-position led to new discursive representations, which facilitated and legitimised policy changes. Modi's engagement towards Israel further built on Vajpayee's government's discursive framing, for instance using elements of religious-nationalist discourse to depict both countries as being incredibly similar, which sustained India's expansion of ties with Israel and their deepening relations. Similarly, new identities and meanings fixed to Palestine's subject-position opened up new foreign policy opportunities, which consisted in treating it as a normal developing country and economic partner, without letting the conflict get in the equation.

## V. CONCLUSION

While the literature on India's relations with Palestine and Israel is rich, it has overtly focused on explaining *why* India's foreign policy has evolved and changed over the years, thus overlooking an equally important aspect of India's engagement with the region: the discursive framing of its relations. Since India followed a continuous moral policy of support to Palestine for more than forty years, it begs the question of how successive Indian governments have, in the post-normalisation era, legitimised and rationalised their growing bilateral relations with Israel while continuing to support Palestine. This paper has sought to address this gap by looking at the discourse utilised by successive Indian governments to frame their changing relations with both countries. Drawing upon critical constructivist assumptions that foreign policy is dependent upon representations of the country or crisis that it seeks to address and upon the representations of the "Self" that undertakes these policies (Hansen 2016:96), this paper has examined how India's foreign policy discourse facilitated, legitimised and made possible certain courses of action towards the region. To achieve this, a discourse theoretical methodology was employed, which served to analyse how different social subjects, objects, meanings and identities were constructed so as to create specific interpretive dispositions and thus make certain practices possible (Doty 1996:298).

This paper has found that changing policy discourses legitimised and enabled policy shifts. Starting with the first BJP-led government under Vajpayee, India considerably strengthened its relations with Israel, which were sustained by a specific discursive assemblage articulating

both countries as natural allies against terrorism, sharing a common history and values. India's relationship with Israel being dominated by defence and security exchanges, the representations of both states as victims of terrorism legitimised such cooperation. Despite this growing bonhomie towards Israel, the representations of Palestinians as struggling to achieve their rights legitimised India's traditional policy of support to Palestine and enabled it to reproduce its identity as a moral force, standing up for peace and equity in world politics and thus perpetuating crucial elements of Nehru's and Gandhi's traditional non-aligned foreign policy. The reproduction of such identity has been found to be a crucial concern throughout all the governments.

Particular identities, meanings and attributes attached to Palestine's and Israel's subject-positions enabled the INC-led government to pursue different policy options and to repair its ties with Palestine. The representations of Palestinians as suffering hardship not only legitimised India's policy of aid and developmental assistance, but also enabled it to project its self-image as a great power, being at the forefront of anticolonial efforts and playing a benevolent role in the world. Furthermore, the growing de-hyphenation of Palestine and Israel over the course of Singh's tenure enabled India to treat both countries as independent entities and to start pursuing independent relations with each, without them being harmed by the conflict.

Finally, the re-definition and de-politicisation of India's ties with both Israel and Palestine under Modi was facilitated by discursive changes: Israel and Palestine were now completely separated from each other in the discourse, and India's relations with one should not impact its relations with the other. The expansion of India's relations with Israel and the normalisation of its ties with Palestine were further facilitated by attaching new identities and meanings to both countries' subject-positions. Finally, Modi's use of religious-nationalist discourse not only revealed the importance of religion in constructing a bridge of connection with Israel, but also reflected the prominent role that Hinduism now played in India's new conception of its identity.

Overall, this paper has found that the framing of India's relations with Israel and Palestine through the years reflected the image of itself that India was attempting to project, as depending on the governments, India, Israel and Palestine were represented as incredibly similar. The use of critical constructivism and discourse analysis made apparent the role that foreign policy played as a site for the re-production of India's identities, of what India is and what it stands for (Wojczewski 2019). While India's identity and its foreign policy have been widely studied,

the notion of identity has too often been used as a causal explanation. Conducting this research has thus revealed a broader gap in the literature, which is how the study of foreign policy not only reflects identities at play within a country, but also highlights how such identities are constructed and can be re-produced or modified through discourse. An fascinating yet larger project would be to research the historic articulations of Israel and Palestine in India's foreign policy discourse since independence, and how such representations have evolved into and influenced the current framing of these countries.

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