



► **The Indian socialist leader**

Jayaprakash Narayan meets Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion in Tel Aviv in 1958.

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## History

# BLOOD BROTHERS

India's socialists and Hindu nationalists have been friends of Israel right from May 1948, openly supporting its expansionist policies and pressuring governments to establish diplomatic relations with the Zionist state. **QURBAN ALI**

**M**uch before the establishment of Israel in May 1948, the Indian National Congress had opposed it. Mahatma Gandhi famously said that he sympathised with the Jews but opposed the creation of Israel. He believed that the Arabs were the “rightful owners” of Palestine and that the Jews should return to their original countries.

In his article on Jews in *Harijan* on November 26, 1938, Gandhi wrote: “All my sympathies are with the Jews, but sympathies cannot turn a blind eye to the demands of justice. The cry for a national homeland for the Jews has no appeal for me. Palestine is the property of

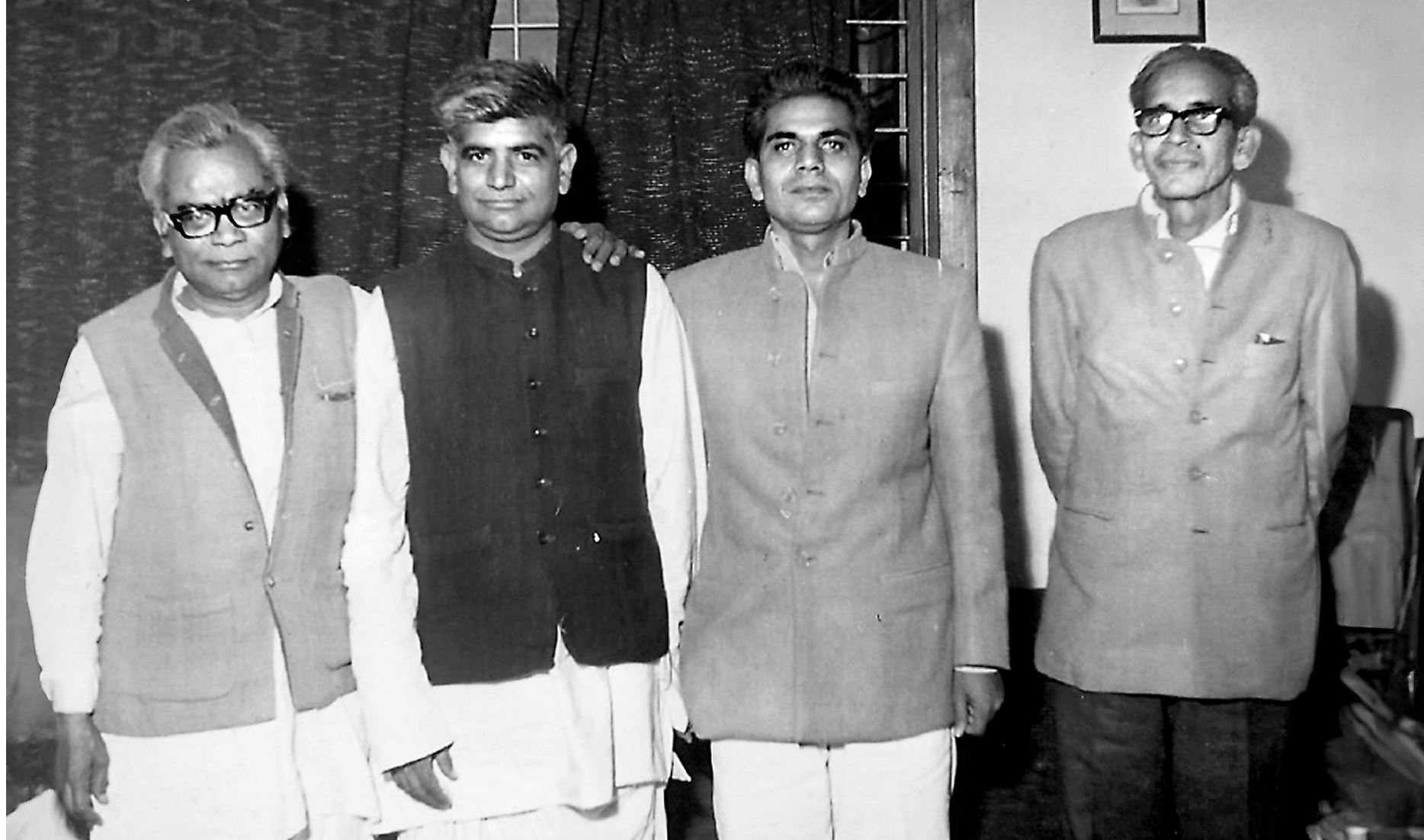


the Arabs just as Britain is the property of the British and France of the French. It is wrong to impose Jews on the Arabs. If you think in this way, then you will not find the talk of ‘Arab-Israel Federation’ or the acceptance of the existence of the State of Israel to be justified. Hitler’s attitude towards the Jews has been of great cruelty and barbarism, but I do not see the justification for the Arabs to be displaced from their homes to settle them. Please pay fresh attention to this problem.”

However, the Congress Socialist Party, an avowedly “secular” socialist bloc within the Indian National Congress that Congress members founded in 1934, went against Gandhi’s declared policy on the Palestine issue to support Israel after his assassination in 1948. The Socialist Party ran campaigns to establish friendly and diplomatic relations with Israel right from the time of its formation in May 1948, and helped the Zionist state through the Socialist International.

**T**HE DELEGATION OF Indian socialist leaders hosted by the Zionist regime in Israel include Jayaprakash Narayan (JP), J.B. Kripalani, Rammanohar Lohia, Asoka Mehta, N.G. Gore, H.V. Kamath, Prem Bhasin, Nath Pai, Karpoori Thakur, George Fernandes, Madhu Dandavate, Surendra Mohan, Rajwant Singh, Pradeep Bose, Anusuya Limaye, and Kamala Sinha. These leaders not only supported Israel’s expansionist policies but also pressured the Indian government to establish diplomatic and friendly relations with Israel.

When Lohia first visited Israel in 1950, he was full of praise for the country: “If anywhere in the world I have seen the spirit of fighting to the last man, it is in Israel. When I told an enthusiastic young man in Israel that there was no possibility of two million Jews standing against 80 million Arab enemies and that someday the Arabs would have as many weapons as the Jews, he frightened me with his calm reply. He said there was no place for them to go. It is surprising that in this country where every girl can operate a machine gun, every young man I met has read Mahatma Gandhi’s autobiography. Israel is an Asian country. It has so many human resources and talents that no other country would have. It is experimenting with a new way of life, especially in agriculture. Israel’s partnership in the



▼ **Rammanohar Lohia**, with fellow members of the Samyukta Socialist Party Mani Ram Bagri, Madhu Limaye, and S. M. Joshi, a file picture. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

work of peace and reconstruction will benefit the whole of Asia, including the Arabs. The Indian government should not delay in recognising Israel.” (“An Asian Policy”, *Fragments of A World Mind* by Rammanohar Lohia, Maitrayani, 1953)

This was also when the Socialist International published a pamphlet praising the achievements of Israeli socialism. The foreword, written by Kripalani, chairman of the Praja Socialist Party (PSP), denounced all those who had boycotted Israel, including India. The leaders of the PSP were vocal in their demands for India-Israel cooperation and the establishment of close relations with Israel. In July and August 1953, several Asian socialists visited Britain to drum up support for Israel and attended the congress of the Socialist International in Stockholm. Among them was Bhasin, joint secretary of the PSP.

In September 1958, JP, who had abandoned socialism to lead the Sarvodaya movement, visited Israel. He, too, praised the Israeli people

and appealed to the world for cooperation and friendship with Israel. He was particularly impressed with the kibbutz, Israel’s voluntary agrarian community programme.

**A**SOKA MEHTA, general secretary of the PSP, spoke on the topic “Tasks of Social Democracy in Asia” at a conference of the Socialist International Council held in Haifa, Israel, from April 27-29, 1960. Mehta also attended the meetings of the Socialist International held in Rome and Vienna on behalf of the PSP and visited Western Europe and the US to further garner support for Israel. (*Janata*, Volume 18, 1961)

In 1963, the PSP criticised the Indian government for not “recognising” Israel’s sovereignty. In June 1967, when Israel fought the Six Day War with Egypt, Syria, and Jordan and illegally occupied a large part of Palestine, George Fernandes formed an organisation called “Friends of Israel” aimed at drumming up public support for the Zionist regime. His state-

ment in support of Israel was published prominently in major newspapers and the June 1967 issues of *Jan* and *Mankind*, both magazines edited by Lohia. Most leaders of the PSP, the Socialist Party (Lohia group) and, later, the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP), barring a few exceptions such as Raj Narayan and Madhu Limaye, not only sympathised with Israel but also ran strong movements in its favour.

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**Mahatma Gandhi**



The politician and writer Sibte Mohammad Naqvi, a resident of Akbarpur-Faizabad and a close friend of Lohia's, wrote a strongly worded letter to him in Hindi on July 3, 1967, expressing his displeasure: "Yesterday or the day before I saw a statement by George Fernandes in favour of Israel in the newspapers and I was very sad. And today when I read *Jan*, that sadness increased further and I regret that in this context, the ideology that you have propounded in the Parliament, I consider not only wrong but also unjust."

**I**N HIS REPLY to Sibte Mohammad's letter Lohia wrote: "To some extent you have rightly written that every reform has two forms, one possible and the other complete... but Mahatma Gandhi perhaps made a little mistake and played an opportunistic role in the matters of Hindus and Muslims. When the Turkish Muslims were ending the Khilafat, the Muslims and Hindus of India were also singing '*Boli Amma Mohammad Ali se / Jaan beta Khilafat pe de do* [Thus spake the mother of Ali / My son, lay down your life for the sake of Khilafat]' under the leadership of Gandhiji. I don't know how good it is to gather a crowd in these ways.... You have quoted Gandhiji about Israel. If you keep raising old issues like this, then people will start saying that the mosque near Gyanvapi (Varanasi) should be repaired and brought back to its old form and a temple should be built because after all there was a temple there."

"Many things of history have to be digested... in the same way Israel, if you think about it, Israel cannot be destroyed without killing 15-20 lakh Jews. Many communities have said that we will fight till the last drop of blood, but there has not been such a community in history till now and probably never will be. But if there is any community that can reach that level, then it is this Israeli." (*Lok Sabha main Lohia*, Volume 15, pages 234-242)

**Albert Einstein wrote a four-page letter to Jawaharlal Nehru in June 1947 to persuade India to support the establishment of Israel, a request that Nehru politely ignored.**



▼ **Asoka Mehta** speaks at the Socialist International Council held in Haifa, Israel, in April 1960. AP

The Forward Bloc leader H.V. Kamath, who later merged a faction of his party with the Socialist Party and became a founding member of the PSP along with JP, Kripalani, and Lohia, raised the issue of cooperation with Israel in the Constituent Assembly debates several times between March 1949 and December 1949. On each occasion, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru clarified that cooperation with Israel was not possible due to the policy in place since Gandhi's time, which was to cooperate with Palestine.

Albert Einstein wrote a four-page letter to Nehru in June 1947 to persuade India to support the establishment of Israel, a request that Nehru politely ignored. Moreover, India voted against the United Nations Palestine Partition Plan of 1947 and Israel's entry into the UN.

On the other hand, in 1949, various supporters of Hindu nationalism supported the creation of Israel and expressed their solidarity with it. The Hindu Mahasabha leader V.D. Savarkar supported the creation of Israel on

both moral and political grounds and condemned India's vote against Israel in the UN. Praising Jewish nationalism, the RSS leader M.S. Golwalkar said: "Palestine is the natural territory of the Jewish people, which is essential for their aspirations of nationhood."

**H**.V. KAMATH CLAIMED that India's policy towards Arabs was not due to any love for the Arabs but was politically motivated and this exposed India's duplicity. Raising this issue in the Lok Sabha on April 17, 1964, he said that India ought to have more sympathy for Israel than for the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is also worth mentioning that apart from the RSS and the Jana Sangh, parties like the PSP, the SSP, and the Swatantra Party were among those who openly supported Israel. Workers of the Jana Sangh were even given political training in Israel.

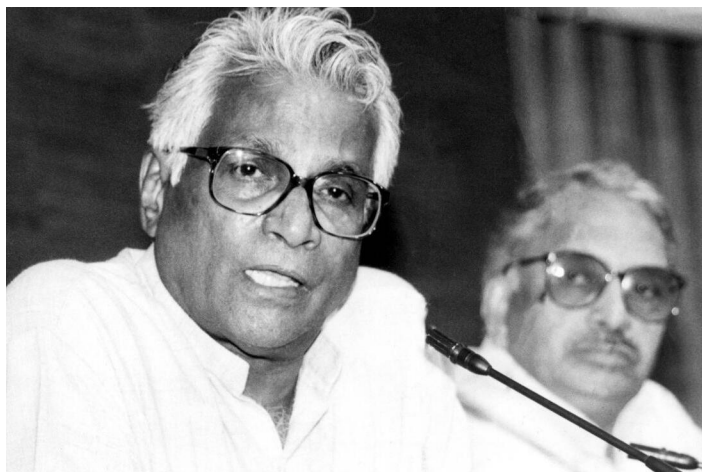
Through the 1950s, Mapai, Israel's ruling political party, maintained close relations with the PSP. Members of both parties were asso-

ciated with the Socialist International at the global level. After establishing bilateral relations with other Asian countries, including India, Israel attended the first Asian Socialist Conference (ASC) held in Rangoon in January 1953. Several Indian socialists had a prominent role in organising this conference. (*India and the Middle East* by Prithvi Ram Mudiam, British Academic Press, 1994)

In November 1959, the PSP hosted the second edition of the ASC at the its silver jubilee conference in Bombay. Mapai sent a large delegation led by former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett. After Sharett spoke in praise of the PSP, the next speaker, JP, returned the compliment, saying: "Socialists in Israel have come to power only a few years ago. But they have been carrying forward the work of constructive socialism for decades. Their Kibbutz... are an example of how the socialist movement has really done constructive

**"Socialists in Israel have come to power only a few years ago. But they have been carrying forward the work of constructive socialism for decades."**

▶ **Rammanohar Lohia**  
Indian socialist leader



work there.” (*Janata*, November 22, 1959)

In February 1966, Israeli President Zalman Shazar made a brief stopover at Calcutta en route to a state visit to Kathmandu. The Indian government did not extend him the usual official protocol since it was a private visit. The issue erupted into a controversy in Parliament. Led by H.V. Kamath, who called an attention motion in the Lok Sabha on March 24, 1966, the MPs of the PSP and the SSP vociferously protested the lack of a courtesy reception to Shazar.

Lohia demanded: “When India has given de jure recognition to Israel, what is the stand of the Indian government from a legal point of view? Can the President of a respected country be prevented from meeting the citizens of other countries?” Deputy Foreign Minister Dinesh Singh responded: “We did not stop any welcome. I have already said that we do not have diplomatic relations with Israel, but we have given it legal recognition. Diplomatic relations with countries are made according to the interests of the country. We believe that our

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**George Fernandes**  
addressing a press conference in New Delhi on June 26, 1998. Several agreements for purchasing weapons from Israel were signed when Fernandes was Defence Minister in the NDA government.  
THE HINDU ARCHIVES

**In June 1967, when Israel fought the Six Day War and illegally occupied a large part of Palestine, George Fernandes formed an organisation called “Friends of Israel” aimed at drumming up public support for the Zionist regime.**

country’s interests with Israel should remain as they are at present.”

**A**FTER THIS EPISODE, the PSP and the SSP intensified their advocacy for normal relations with Israel. The PSP even mentioned the need for India to build friendly ties with Israel in its election manifesto in October 1966. (*Janata* Volume 21, No. 39, October 16, 1966; *West Asia and India’s Foreign Policy* by Verinder Grover, 1992: page 503)

After the merger of the PSP and the SSP in 1972 and the formation of the Socialist Party with Fernandes as president, a high-ranking delegation of Israeli labour leaders, including the Deputy General Secretary and Israel’s Consul-General in Bombay, met the socialist leaders in the Hind Mazdoor Panchayat office in Bombay on October 20.

When Fernandes was Defence Minister in Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s National Democratic Alliance government from 1998-2004, this policy of cooperation with Israel continued; several agreements for purchasing weapons from Israel were signed. At the same time, his relationship with the Socialist International, too, endured. Even today, some of Fernandes’ disciples travel abroad to promote Israel’s interests through the International Union of Socialist Youth, the youth wing of the Socialist International, although the Socialist International itself has stayed away from making public statements in support of Israel.

Both JP and Lohia were considered the blue-eyed boys of Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru during the Indian national movement. Interestingly, it was Lohia who drafted the Indian National Congress’ foreign policy in 1936 when he served as the Secretary of Foreign Affairs during Nehru’s presidency. While it is perplexing why JP and Lohia, along with their colleagues, extended support to Israel shortly after Gandhi’s assassination, their stance may be attributed to a deliberate opposition to Nehru and the Congress, coupled with their affinity to right-wing parties such as the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and the Swatantra Party. Either way, their support of Israel remained steadfast. ■

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