

# What Israel can learn from Modi: National honor as strategic asset

written by Prof. Zaki Shalom | 06.09.2025

In recent months, US-India relations have been mired in a severe trust crisis. The background to this lies in a deep dispute over tariff policy, India's special ties with Russia, and the US administration's approach to India's border clashes with Pakistan.

President Donald Trump repeatedly emphasized his dissatisfaction with the high tariffs that New Delhi imposes on imports from the United States - "among the highest in the world," as he put it - and responded by raising his own tariffs to a cumulative level of about 50%.

Still, that was only one front. India, which maintains close relations with Russia and is considered the largest consumer of Russian crude oil, found itself subjected to a harsh verbal attack by Trump: he called the economies of Russia and India "dead economies," claimed they were "crushing each other," and accused their trade of fueling Moscow's war machine against Ukraine. He went so far as to say that Prime Minister Narendra Modi "doesn't care about the dead in Ukraine," a statement that was a personal insult and an affront to India's emerging power status.

In the border clashes with Pakistan, Trump tried to position himself as a neutral mediator. He allegedly applied heavy pressure, threatened sanctions on both sides, and led to a ceasefire. However, eventually Pakistan praised his mediation to the extent of proposing to award him a Nobel Peace Prize. New Delhi, on the other hand, chose to downplay Washington's role - another expression of the deepening distrust between the two states. Modi's severe response was not only rooted in economic and military tension, but primarily stemmed from a sense of personal and national honor being offended. He declined four phone calls from President Trump. In this context, Israel can learn something important.

## The Khan Yunis incident

On August 25, an Israeli shell hit Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis. Some twenty people were killed, including journalists. Within hours, the IDF spokesman, the chief of staff, and the prime minister rushed to respond. The IDF spokesman issued an apology in English for harming "innocent civilians." The chief of staff announced there would be an immediate investigation. The prime minister referred to the event as a "tragic incident" that would be investigated thoroughly.

These three statements conveyed not only a desire to calm international public opinion but also a notable degree of anxiety – and perhaps even panic – about the incident's consequences. In their actions, the leaders transmitted a message of taking some responsibility for the killing of uninvolved civilians, a message that could set a dangerous precedent in terms of international law.

As events later revealed, the reality was far more complex: many of the victims belonged to Hamas. However, instead of waiting for complete information, Israel projected outward a message of acceptance of responsibility – one that weakens its diplomatic and legal standing.

## **The lesson from India**

This is precisely where we should return to Modi's example. Faced with unprecedented verbal assaults from Trump, Modi did not rush to apologize; instead, he chose to respond forcefully, upholding national honor.

Perhaps his approach came across as harsh, but it sent a clear message: India will not accept treatment as a subordinate or inferior state.

Israel, in contrast, tended during the Khan Yunis incident to display excess transparency and anxiety – an approach that may have been aimed at mitigating short-term damage but potentially harms long-term strategic interests.

The conclusion is that a country must defend its national honor even when facing difficult and complex situations. A hasty assumption of responsibility may be interpreted as weakness and exploited by adversaries. It is precisely in such moments that caution in expression and firmness in principle are required.

From India, we learn that national honor is not a luxury but a far-reaching strategic asset. If Israel desires to secure its standing and security, it must project firm resilience to the world. This would imply delaying expressions of apology, even when international pressure is intense. Published in The Jerusalem Post, September 7, 2025.