

Pakistan and the Question of Recognising Israel: Historical Issues and Future Prospects

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Abstract

Historically speaking Pakistan and Israel are not directly engaged in any hostility or clash with each other. Pakistan did not recognise Israel since its inception because of her consistent support to Palestine issue and its apprehension that India Israel connections are against her security, ultimately shattering sub-continental balance of power. During General Musharraf regime, the debate to recognise Israel was on high side. It had been debated at academic, official as well as public levels. It was believed at that time that if Pakistan accord recognition to state of Israel, the sensitivities associated with the issue might change. The cost and advantage quotient of recognition were kept in mind and discussed openly. During Musharraf regime and onwards, the moot point in Pakistan has been the cost benefit analysis of recognition. The existing world scenario has changed the ground realities and placed Pakistan in a difficult situation that how it can move closer to Israel without abandoning historical stand on Palestinian cause. It is also believed that if the transformation and change in Pakistan's policy is not hasty, only then it might be more productive and successful. The eventuality of recognising Israel might spur the sentiments of public and it may take some time to have popular placement in our society. By analysing different and conflicting view points, this paper will investigate primarily the debate held during Musharraf era in the light of historical background and shall see what course Pakistan should take on in this regard after assessing pros and cons of recognition. After going through different approaches on the subject, this will also contribute whether Pakistan should shift her stance about Israel or otherwise.

Key words: Pakistan, Israel, Palestine, recognition, Arab factor.

Introduction

Legitimacy of Israel as a sovereign state has been a controversial issue since her inception particularly in the Muslim world. They believed that State of Israel was an imposed decision. Pakistan categorically supported the cause of Palestinian on the basis of ideological associations. In this way, Pakistan responded Arabs by not recognising Israel. During initial days of their occurrence on world map, both countries suffered problems and faced difficult situations. Millions were displaced, murdered and raped. No place was given to Palestinians in Israel and Kashmir remained an un-finished agenda of Indian partition (The Kashmir Telegraph, April, 2004). Most part of Pakistan's support to Palestine is due to

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history - that Muslims of the subcontinent in their own independence struggle- identified themselves strongly to the Arab Islamic world. Both, Indian National Congress (Hereinafter INC) and All India Muslim League (Hereinafter AIML) showed their harmony with the Palestinian people during their freedom struggle. It is quite exciting to note that both political parties were against the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine but having different reasons to think upon. Their approaches and positions during independence movement reflected their foreign policy directions on this issue even after their independence in 1947. The Muslims in India had a flavour of the British manoeuvrings and were the first to lift their voice against such deliberate injustice being meted out to the Palestinians. AIML put across its fear for the “safety and sanctity of Holy Places” soon Mr. Balfour proclaimed British help for a national home for Jews in Palestine (Pirzada, 1969, p442). AIML did not ignore Palestinians even during historic session of March 1940 when the Indian Muslims gathered at Lahore and made the remarkable decision about their approaching days. They expressed their worry on “the inordinate delay on the part of the British Government in coming to a settlement with the Arabs in Palestine.” (Pirzada, 1970, p 346). AIML reiterated their support to Palestinian cause whenever they get any chance of doing so. In return, Palestinian leaders always recognized the valuable efforts of Indian Muslims who accorded “great attention to Palestinian cause.” (Telegram, August 23, 1945).

Historical Perspective

Anti-Israel feelings at popular and governmental level remained there even after Pakistan was created. Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, was also very clear on the issue. Pakistan opposed Israel in the United Nations (Hereinafter UN) and Mr. Jinnah believed that “partition plan will be rejected” by the UN otherwise “there is bound to be the gravest disaster and unprecedented conflict, not only between the Arabs and the authority that would undertake to enforce the partition plan, but the entire Muslim world will revolt against such a decision which cannot be supported historically, politically or morally.” He made his intentions clear that “in such a case, Pakistan will have no other course left but to give its fullest support to the Arabs...” (*The Pakistan Times*, October 25, 1947). But when ‘Plan of Partition’ with an ‘Economic Union’ was accepted in the UN, Jinnah had left no other alternative but to condemn that “inherently unjust and outrageous decision” of the UN. (Jinnah, 1989,p114).

On 14 May 1948 the state of Israel was proclaimed. USA, UK and other states recognized it soon. The AIML, ruling party in Pakistan, passed a strong resolution condemning the action of US, and other states who accorded recognition to Israel (*Pakistan Times*, May 18, 1948) A statement of the government declared that recognition of Israel was “ constitutionally wrong and morally unjust”, that it amounts to “ placing a premium on armed aggression and the use of brutal force”, and that the UN partition resolution “lacked legal and moral justification” and was opposed to justice, equity, and the right of self determination”(Keesings,1949, 9774)Pakistan Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan observed that partition and the establishment of a Jewish State was against all canons of justice and fair play(*Pakistan Times*, October 17, 1948).Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Sir Zafarullah

Khan became implicit campaigner of the Palestine cause and that continued for a longer period. This approach and background, conditioned the public opinion and even that of the ruling leaders. Pakistan took up a position identical to that of 'The Arabas' as a way to display its Islamic Credentials. She upheld the policy of non-recognition of Israel from its independence and the people of Pakistan continued their support for 'The Arabas' cause with sincerity. This opposition at mass level multiplied when time passed. According to an assessment no other Arab or Muslim state could have presented a more vocal defence in favour of the Palestinian peoples than did Pakistan at the United Nations debate on partition Palestine (Bishku, 1992, p36 and Burke, 1973 pp137-38). It is also interesting to note that Israeli leadership tried to adjust and modify Pakistan's opposition to it as early as before Israel's creation. Chaim Weizmann drew similarities between Pakistan and Israel, "Our small state in Palestine, that shall soon have to follow you. Many problems will be common to both of us, and it is my earnest hope that it may be possible for us to deal with them together, and in cooperation, for the good of both of our people." (Weizmann,1979,p75).However no effort on Israeli part could amend Pakistani disagreement to creation of Israeli state though Pakistan's policy was not an easy one as it had faced its own internal and external problems and she was fighting her own battle of survival, needed support of western countries badly, yet it did not hang back in supporting the Arab cause with full strength and sincerity ,continued brave steps in pursuing its past pledges and policy of supporting the just cause of Arabs.

A Discourse on Recognising Israel

It is argued that Islamabad has chosen a dual policy while coping with Israel. In public there is clear hate towards it. Pakistan usually do not officially speak regarding any contact or relations with Jewish state. It was, however, in General Musharraf period of governance when intellectual and academic discussion started in official circles whether to have any kind of relations/contacts with Israel (Kumaraswami, Israel Affairs, Issue 1, 2006, pp 123-135). Historically speaking, hatred and provocation has been hallmark and main cause in Israel Pakistan 'away from each other' relations. Religious structure of our society and curriculum at educational institutions are considered to be two main reasons of hatred and repulsion, resultantly for a lay man Israel holds top position when it comes to 'enemies of Islam'(The Express Tribune. 27 April 2013).Anyhow, lack of relationship between two countries did not prevent them to conduct contacts, discussions, and sharing on national issues. Due to various factors, now a day, question of recognising Israel is not a taboo in Pakistani society(Ma'oz, 2010.2011, pp 186-211). Unfortunately, in previous years, whenever Pakistani leadership hinted that Pakistan might recognise Israel, it had not gone down well with the public opinion in Pakistan(Qureshi, 2004). But now, there is by no means any consensus for 'no recognition' of Jewish state, and many known figures are pointing towards a subtle policy shift on Pakistan side.

It is further believed that to some extent, undercover relations between the two countries remained there at official levels. There have been exchange of messages on important issues to avert any misconception.USA also engaged ambassadors of two

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countries and provided forum for direct contacts. Dr. Yegar, a retired diplomat of Israel, analysed that the “main reasons for Pakistan’s policy toward Israel are: (1) religious solidarity with the Arab-Muslim countries; (2) fear of an adverse response by radical Islamist groups throughout the Muslim world; and (3) concern that establishing diplomatic relations with Israel may cause instability within Pakistan.” (Yegar, <http://jcpa.org/article/pakistan-and-israel/>).

Keeping in view above discussion, the post-cold war state of affairs lead Pakistan to a compromising-table because ‘The Arabas’ seemed more inclined towards Israel with a flexible policy. The state of Israel wished to establish cordial relations with Pakistan in the hope to further extend her diplomatic ties with the Muslim Ummah. Few leaders in Israel considered Pak-Israel ties as “bridge between Israel and Muslim world”(Israel Today, 28 December 2007) By recognising new tone in the Middle East, it was in mid 2003 when General Musharraf softened stance and initiated an internal discourse whether to establish diplomatic relations with state of Israel though possibility of formal recognition was ruled out for the time being.(BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3040632.stm retrieved 5 July 2012). The initiation of debate was relevant as states which had clashes with Israel were moving towards reconciliation, and accepting it as a reality. Alliances were being encouraged and formed. It was right time for Pakistan to make a definite decision concerning Israel so as to uphold its status as a power in the region. On the other hand we see an Indo-Israel alliance which is working to its disadvantage so there were suggestions if Pakistan move towards recognition then definitely the said Indo-Israel nexus may be countered. Pakistani establishment will have to ultimately try to consider this pragmatic approach. Indo-Israel alliance might force Pakistan to recognize Israel. A report considered that for an embattled country, which was once nearly cut off within the region, Israel’s nexus with India present a variety of strategic opportunities. It is this fundamental shift in alliances that will ultimately guide Pakistani leaders to recognise and in the long run set up diplomatic ties with Israel(*Jane’s Intelligence Digest*, <http://www.jid.janes.com>).

Some analysts suggest that even if Pakistan make opening to Israel even then the expected results may not be as good as we want them to be. India may still be able to exercise a great deal of influence in Israel on what become available or offered to Pakistan. There has been no fair indication to this stage as to what Pakistan could get if it moves toward Israel. Other compulsion is the Arab factor. While the Arabs did not really resent or do very much about India’s decision to form diplomatic relations with Israel in January 1992, Pakistan may not be exactly in the same position as the Arab expectations from Pakistan are much higher and since Pakistan is more vulnerable, there may be a strong Arab reaction, at least in the ‘Arab streets.’ Pakistan will have to keep in mind adverse response and attitude of the Arab governments. So Pakistani case of recognising Israel is different which calls for cautious approach and better diplomacy. It must have to make sure that there is a dividend attached to the move. Despite compulsions as discussed above, however, Pakistan’s idea about reappraisal of its Israel policy at any suitable stage in future will not be an inopportune affair. Pakistan, already suffering from terrorism and internal disorder, will ultimately require some friends at international level. Friendship of Israel or at least neutrality of it will ultimately beneficial for Pakistan. On the other hand having cordial

relations with Pakistan are important for Israel too for the reason that Pakistan is the heavily populated and important Muslim state, and setting up of relations may diminish hostility with Israel in other Islamic states. Officials of Israel government also suppose that good ties with Islamabad may possibly start out a “chain reaction” in the area, with states e.g. Indonesia, Malaysia and Bangladesh moving the same way. (Hirschberg, *Asia Time*, 2003).

Needless to say, the end of Cold War has weakened the standing and position of the Palestinians because of the US who is sole superpower showing complete association with the Israelis. The realities of new world order, for example culmination of Cold War, America’s open inclination and commitment to Israel, war on terrorism and broader weakness of the Arab world played crucial role which resulted into an alternative choice of compromise and arriving at an understanding for peaceful co-existence with Jewish state (Zaidi, *Pakistan Horizon*, April 2005). In the world of Diplomacy the consideration of appropriate timings is very much important. China had developed her relations with Pakistan after a bickering with India. Now both are closest allies. Pakistan’s supporter USA has now improved its relations with Pakistan’s once arch enemy India. Pakistan may obtain the same benefits from Israel if any ripe movement comes in future. In this scenario having relationship with Israel can be productive for Pakistan. Just seeing India and Israel developing a strategic cooperation, it is not fruitful for Islamabad just watching from the distance and not nurturing good relations with Israel so that Pakistan may be able to maximize its own strategic benefit.

Though Professor Kumaraswamy, in a study under *Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies*, has made too much about contacts between Pakistan and Israel which were basically insignificant and too much was drawn from available material yet one cannot deny the contacts between these two countries. He upholds that the “absence of formal diplomatic relations has not inhibited Israel and Pakistan from maintaining regular contacts, dialogues and meetings”. On several junctures, Pakistan and Israel were on same page on important issues in the Middle East. He also maintained that they have chalked out limited understandings on important security matters, which also includes the nuclear issue (Kumaraswamy, *Beyond the Veil*, March 2000, 81p). From time to time there have been contacts usually at UN Headquarters and Geneva. There were also contacts in some other capitals during 1990s. In the early years the contacts were made because Israel was desperate for recognition from Arab Islamic world. During Afghan *jihad* Pakistan and Israel being on same side, the later helped Pakistan in the UN to get some votes for Afghan resolution and on couple of occasions Israel provided arms to the *mujahidin*... mainly through third party. (The News, September 27, 2005, The News, December 10, 1995). Ex Foreign minister Khurshid Mahmood Kasuri pointed out that “Pakistan and Israel’s clandestine contacts are decades old and not one decade alone. The successive governments did consider the option for having diplomatic ties with Israel but somehow it could not materialize. Both the governments did have understanding on various counts and it was never made public.” (The News, September, 2005). Previously, Israeli attention or fright has mostly focused on the reality that Pakistan is the single Muslim nation having nuclear power. Due to this potential, Israel’s leadership were worried that sophisticated armory may be shifted to Arab states. But it was after the 1998 nuclear tests that Israel felt for Pakistan,

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and started using all available options for manufacturing good ties with the only Islamic nuclear power. By that time the Israelis had learnt that their friendship with Pakistan would not only help them dilute Islam-based opposition towards them but they could use Pakistan as a conduit to reach countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia. (The News, September 20, 2005). Secrecy in relations, however, enabled Pakistani leaders to continue routine back channel contacts with Israel and Israeli authorities also exhibited positive stance towards Pakistan (Kumaraswamy, March 2000, p 43). Government officials announced many times to discuss the issue of recognizing Israel. On June 23, 2003 in Washington Mr. Riaz Khokhar, Pakistan's foreign secretary, said that "sooner or later Pakistan will have to recognize Israel." He told a press conference that "although that possibility is far off," eventually "we will have to deal with it." But he highlighted that Pakistan's relations with the Palestinian people "would always be at the top of agenda for us. Our Commitment to the Palestinian issue is second to none" (Dawn , June 24, 2003).

Hope for Change during Musharraf Era

The most recent debate on recognition issue started with the statement of ex ruler of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf who urged the countrymen to consider recognizing Israel. He once told, "This is the responsibility of the nation to decide. This should be seriously thought over. The media should have an open debate on this," "The debate should be serious. There should be no emotionalism of the extremists," He questioned, "What is our dispute (with Israel)? We should think,". Musharraf explained that if countries that have disputes with Israel are moving toward peace with it, Pakistan should also rethink its policy (*Daily Times*, June 30 , 2003). According to an Israeli daily Musharraf offered identical remarks before going to his tour of Europe and USA, but interpretation of Israel went on to say that as whole it was a purposeless gesture meant to upgrade his own stature in the USA. His statements on a Pakistani TV were both very strong as compared to his earlier remarks and were announced when President Bush had openly assured him a three million dollar assistance. Resultantly, an Israeli source pointed, "His intention truly appears to be serious, not aimed merely at conciliating U.S. public opinion." The newspaper further pointed out that "Musharraf's remarks ... were preceded by the visit to Israel last week of a Pakistani businessman who is considered one of the president's close associates. The businessman was apparently sent to "test the waters" as to whether Israel, which has close ties with Pakistan's traditional foe, India, would be interested in relations with Pakistan as well. (*Haaretz*, June 30, 2003). The enthusiastic and public remarks of General Musharraf in above mentioned TV interview were considered as sign of change in Pakistan's policy vis-à-vis Israel. After this interview prominent Indian daily *The Hindu* commented that despite repeated assertions in Islamabad that political links with Tel Aviv are not imminent, the question now is "when" and not "if" Pakistan should begin an engagement with Israel (*The Hindu*, September 6, 2003). The message of interview was obvious that Pakistan can talk with Israel when Palestinians are also doing the same. Iran Press Service quoting *The Jerusalem Post* reported that Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom greeted the initiative of Israel and Pakistan coming nearer to establish diplomatic relations, responding to the

Pervez Musharraf's earlier interview suggesting the question should be seriously thought over. He also considered Pakistan as a "very important" Muslim and Asian country. (Iranian Press Service, 2003). A senior official of the Israeli Foreign Ministry said, "We have no diplomatic or border problems with Pakistan... we have no reason for any hostility. We would be happy to have relations with Pakistan." (Mohan, *The Hindu*, September 6, 2003). Our establishment at that point in time seem to encourage mutual relations between Israel and Pakistan. Gen. Pervez Musharraf and former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres went through a "chance encounter" outside a VIP lounge at the annual World Economic Forum held in Davos on January 21, 2004. The Pakistan foreign office spokesman, however, dispelled the notion that the meeting signaled a change in Pakistan's policy towards Israel and stated that "This is not an indication of a review of our policy towards Israel." (*Dawn*, January 24, 2004). The response of foreign office was akin to its policy that how to react on this sensitive issue in public. Again a bold statement came from Pakistan when General Musharraf recognized "reality of Israel being there". He said "Pakistan stands for the acceptance of the reality of Israel within its pre-1967 boundaries, as also (for) the creation of a sovereign state of Palestine, living side by side, in peace." (*Dawn*, July 10, 2004).-As anticipated, these comments sparked off a heated debate, in which opinions from both sides of the split were expressed. As expected, religious parties were the fore runners in opposing Israel. They believed that "Gen Musharraf has no right to recognise Israel and if any action is taken at any level, the MMA[an alliance of religious parties during Musharraf regime] would launch a mass agitation to overthrow him." Religious parties always think that Israel is unlawful entity and usurper of the Arab land, whose is responsible for atrocities against Palestinians (The Telegraph, July 1, 2003).

Things changed considerably when at last there was a public and path-breaking, 'historic' meeting between Mr. Silvan Shalom(foreign minister of Israel) and Mr. Khursheed Kasuri(foreign minister of Pakistan) took place in Turkish capital Istanbul on September 1, 2005(*Dawn* , September 2, 2005).Shalom said that meeting was ' source of great encouragement and hope for the Israeli people...' (Yegar, October 25, 2007) to counter, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas was assured by General Musharraf that Pakistan would not establish diplomatic relations with the Jewish state "until Israel withdraws completely and the Palestinian state is established."(*The News*, September 5, 2005).Deputy Prime Minister of Palestine, Mr. Nabil Shaath, in a statement affirmed that Palestinian Authority was "worried" over the meeting "because it's not a good time to start relations with Israel... It is not good to give Israel gifts before it really implements the peace process, not only in Gaza but in the West Bank and Jerusalem(Mazari, *The News*, September 7, 2005). Right wing Hamas felt uncomfortable on Pakistan Israel engagements and reported nod of Palestinian president.(*Dawn*, September 10, 2005). It was clarified by the Pakistani Foreign minister that softening of Israel Pakistan relations will not have any bad impact on its principal stand on Palestinian issue as Pakistan still believes in establishment of Palestinian state with Jerusalem its capital. (Daily *Haaretz*, September 4, 2005) Kasuri told a briefing in New York that contacts with Israel would create "diplomatic space" for Pakistan. "But the contacts do not amount to the recognition of the Jewish state. There can be no recognition before a viable solution to the Palestinian issue is found," He

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held that indications were given to Israel that if she was ready to decide and consider Palestinian issue “there’s no reason why the Muslim world would not respond positively to it.” He assumed that “while Pakistan understood that this dispute could only be resolved by Palestinians and Israelis, we feel that we can play a role through our contacts with Israel.”(*Dawn*, September 13, 2005). Pakistan’s Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz called the move not more than “a step to engage with the Jewish state in the interest of Middle East peace” and rejected charges of U-turn making it clear that “Pakistan would not recognize Israel before an independent Palestinian state was established”(*Dawn*, September 3, 2005). Interestingly while parliamentarians from the MMA called the action a disloyalty to the Palestinian issue, members from the Pakistan People’s Party and the Pakistan Muslim League (N) primarily opposed because the decision was taken solely by General Musharraf without consulting parliament in a long-standing national policy.“ (*Dawn*, September 3, 2005). There was no official response from the Arab world to the event, but the meeting got a large coverage in the Arab media. It has been observed that the Kasuri-Shalom meeting made the Arabs think their own weak points and they sensed that Pakistan would converse to Jewish state from a point of strength which these states do not enjoy (Mazari, *The News*, September 7, 2005). The famous American Jewish Congress-Council for World Jewry commended the historic meeting between the Israeli and Pakistani Foreign Ministers, which according to it was an attempt to “seeking engagement with Israel and with Jews.” **Another landmark came when General Musharraf addressed influential American Jewish Congress(AJC). In his significant speech to AJC, General Pervez Musharraf made it clear that “By respecting Palestinian aspirations, Israel will attain its legitimate desire for assured security.”** Regarding the prospects of Pakistan’s relations with Israel, he concluded, “Pakistan has no direct conflict or dispute with Israel. We pose no threat to Israel’s security. We trust that Israel poses no threat to Pakistan’s national security. But, our people have a deep sense of sympathy for the Palestinian people and their legitimate aspirations for statehood. In response to the bold step taken by Prime Minister Sharon to withdraw from the Gaza, Pakistan decided to initiate an official contact with Israel. Our Foreign Ministers met in Istanbul through the good offices of our Turkish friends. As the peace process progresses toward the establishment of an independent Palestinian State, we will take further steps toward normalization and cooperation, looking to full diplomatic relations.” Musharraf, [September 17 2005; http://www.ajcongress.org/musharraf_address.htm](http://www.ajcongress.org/musharraf_address.htm)

Hence, despite the fact that Musharraf rule had shown some strong imperatives but still Pakistan has adopted traditional stand due to constraints involved in the decision. As declared by Musharraf at an early stage of floating the idea of recognising Israel, policy shift vis-à-vis Israel can be possible only after a national agreement on the issue is achieved. "we would review ground realities and then decide to take any further action". The General held that the US-backed plan was to be carried out, "We are monitoring all developments, taking place in that region. (*The News*, July 3, 2003).

Conclusion

Regarding discussion about recognition of Israel, however, one should keep in mind that, unlike past, when a slight hint would create uproar, the opposing voices are not so strong

now a days and a large number of people has supported the idea of recognizing Israel. Credit of most recent debate goes to General Musharraf who mooted a matter which no previous government could ever dare to initiate. Further, Pakistan has officially denied any move to accord immediate recognition, the official statements did not rule out recognition in the future. So a review of Pakistan's position on recognition shows that from Musharraf era, there is a change, if not a shift, in its attitude towards Israel. In official comments during first decades of 20th century, the non-existence of any clash of interests was frequently stressed. This sharply contrasts with the policy of yesteryears, when rapprochement with Israel was considered unthinkable (Khan, *The Nation*, July 5, 2003). Efforts may continue to be made to establish good relation with Israel to normalize historic bitter ties. It is believed that a spirit of friendly relationship still prevails on both the sides. We see that back channel diplomacy keeps on working to achieve the desired results. Establishment should also consider that one school of thought is bitterly against its recognition the other is in favour of recognition of Israel without any further delay. But the pragmatic approach would be to treat the matter strategically by gradual decrease in the motions through public media and open discussions or holding seminars etc. Musharraf Regime also remained divided yet fruitless in the ultimate solution of this long outstanding issue. Pakistan is still waiting for such a clue that may be acceptable to all the Muslim Community, enjoying better ties with Israel too.

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