

# **Pakistan-Israel Relations: Decoding The Strategic Silence**



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Centre for Land Warfare Studies  
New Delhi



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KW Publishers Pvt Ltd  
New Delhi

**Editorial Team**

**Editor-in-Chief** : Lt Gen (Dr.) V K Ahluwalia

ISSN 23939729



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www.kwpub.com

Published in India by

Kalpana Shukla

KW Publishers Pvt Ltd

4676/21, First Floor, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110002

Phone: +91 11 23263498 / 43528107 email: kw@kwpub.com • www.kwpub.com

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# Pakistan-Israel Relations: Decoding The Strategic Silence

## Background

The end of the first half of the twentieth century witnessed the addition of two new nation-states to the Asian subcontinent. Muslims in British India and Jewish people around the world had envisioned a separate homeland; a dream which came true with the formation of Pakistan in 1947 and Israel in 1948. Born out of similar dreams and similar struggle for a separate nation, religio-ideological nationalism runs common in DNA of both states. In the words of Pakistan's former President and military ruler Zia-ul-Haq (1981), "*Pakistan is like Israel, an ideological state. Take out the Judaism from Israel and it will fall like a house of cards. Take Islam out of Pakistan and make it a secular state; it would collapse.*" Another commonality was centrality of military, evident in successive military coups in Pakistan and Israel's idea of having a people's army via conscription norm. The experiences and histories intertwine. Despite the analogy in genesis and nature of the states, the two nations have been diplomatically detached since 1948.

Even though Israel has offered to talk to Islamabad on certain occasions, the latter's reluctance has continued. Pakistan's aversion towards Israel is largely explained by strong Arab affinity, pro-Arab foreign policy and support for a Palestinian state. So strong is the opposition that Pakistan's passport clearly states, "for all countries except Israel." In public view, the two nations have remained aloof, indifferent and totally cut off. However their silence cannot essentially be equated with diplomatic hostility and antagonism.

(Late) Bahukutumbi Raman, former Additional Secretary at Cabinet Secretariat and head of R&AW's counterterrorism division, traced the existence of covert ties to the "days of Gen. Zia-ul-Haq in the 1970s," further highlighting the role played by Israeli security experts in safeguarding General Musharraf from "Jihadi networks" (Raman, 2005). However, Kumaraswamy (2000) claims that the two countries were quietly pursuing each other since the late 1940s. In his extensive primary research based on official archival documents available in Israel, Kumaraswamy brings out their rich history of secret diplomacy which remained wrapped in confidentiality for years. As per his study, the officials from both the sides have "*met, discussed and at times dined*" in locations across the globe, including Washington, London, Ankara,

Tehran, Kathmandu and Tokyo. His contention is supported by Yoger's claims of "initial contact between the Ambassador (High Commissioner) of Pakistan in London and representatives of Israel and Jewish organisations" dating back to early 1950s. In 1953, Pakistan's then foreign minister Zafrullah Khan met Abba Eban, then Israel's Ambassador to the United States in New York whereby he clearly stated that chances of normalisation of (Pakistan-Israel) ties were bleak, "*despite the fact that the Pakistani government does not bear any hatred toward Israel and understands that it is a factor in the Middle East that must be taken into consideration*" (Yoger, 2007). The statement rings true even after six decades. The two states have never been in a direct confrontation or conflict. But their silence has been intriguing many scholars and experts. The paper will probe into the diplomatic silence by tracing the trajectory of relations and bringing out the underlying factors influencing their behaviour.

### Tracing the Trajectory

The sporadic and undisclosed rendezvous never translated into open and formal relations until the year 2005, which came to be seen as a watershed moment in the dull history of Pakistan-Israel relations. Thus it won't be wrong to categorise and study the bilateral developments under pre-Musharraf era and post-Musharraf period.<sup>1</sup> Before Musharraf came to power, the communication between Pakistan and Israel was minimal, limited to closed-door talks (as discussed above). However few interesting aberrations and episodes of unintended cooperation in their silent relationship deserve to be mentioned: first, the intelligence-level cooperation in 1980s and second, the indirect sports diplomacy in the 1990s. In the 1980s, under Zia-ul-Haq Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) is believed to have worked together with Israel's Mossad in Operation cyclone; a CIA-led program to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan (Dahri 2016; Khan 2019). Although no political links or diplomatic ties were established, the cold war politics brought the two US-allies together.

In the 1990s, the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) appointed Dan Kiesel – an Israel-born sports physiotherapist as a trainer. His presence in Pakistan as a "doctor with a German passport" made his tenure easy, but his identity as an "Israel-born Jewish person" eventually became a controversial subject in the senate. Nevertheless Kiesel described his stay in Pakistan as a comfortable one and labelled Lahore as a "beautiful city" where he and his wife stayed for four years of his Pakistani tenure (1995 -1999) (Lewis 2001).

Besides these two instances, another interesting revelation was made by (then) Major RAK Manek, a serving Indian army officer who was sent to

Tel Aviv to attend a month-long commercial counter-hijack course in late 1979-early 1980s. During a personal conversation with Bidanda Chengappa in 1982, the officer revealed that “one of his course-mates was a Pakistani Army Major” (Chengappa 2019). The episode is intriguing on two grounds. First, even though the course was run on commercial lines, a counter-hijack course designed for military officers and by military officers doesn’t qualify to be fully private and commercial. Secondly, a Pakistani military officer’s presence in Tel Aviv could not have been possible without the approval of both the governments, thereby strongly signalling back-door communication and cooperation.

The only Pakistani leader who made audible noises about Israel during his political career and post-retirement was General Pervez Musharraf. In the year 2005, after Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza Strip, the attempts of a Pakistan-Israel rapprochement began in Turkey. Pakistan under President Musharraf—a military dictator—and Israel under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon finally decided to take their relationship to the next level and the first bilateral meeting between Israel’s foreign minister Silvan Shalom and his Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri was held at a hotel in Istanbul on September 1 (MFA, 2005a). In the words of Silvan Shalom, the goal of the meeting was normalisation of relations between the two states (UPI, 2005). “That is their goal and ours,” he said. The watershed moment was reported by reputed newspapers such as *New York Times* (Erlanger and Masood, 2005), *Washington Post* (Khan, 2005) and *Al Jazeera* (2005), and the meeting was labelled as an ice-breaker. In the aftermath of the meeting, Israel’s industry even temporarily waived the requirement for import licence for importing goods from Pakistan to encourage trade (MFA, 2005b). However nothing concrete materialised.

A fortnight later on September 15, Musharraf and Sharon came face-to-face at the reception of United Nations World Summit in New York and shook hands (PNS, 2005). While there were no “important diplomatic talks” between the two leaders, the handshake did raise a few eyebrows.<sup>2</sup> On September 19, upon invitation of Jack Rosen, the President of American Jewish Congress, Musharraf addressed the Jewish community in New York. In his historic speech, he underscored that both the nations do not pose any national security threat to each other. But Pakistan’s “legitimate support” for a Palestinian homeland has kept the two nation states diplomatically aloof (Somfalvi, 2005). Musharraf, in his book, *In the line of Fire*, labels the event as “a very big first: a Pakistani leader mixing with and then addressing the American Jewish community” (Pipes, 2005). Musharraf’s moves did not go unnoticed within and outside the diplomatic corridors in Pakistan. This step did not go

down well with the Islamic parties in Pakistan too. President of Muttahida Majlis Amal (MMA) Qazi Hussain Ahmad's statement that, "those recognising Israel are not well-wishers of Muslims and Pakistan" testifies to the same (PNS, 2005).

Soon after, on October 8, 2005, as a major 7.6 earthquake hit Pakistan, Israel offered a helping hand (Jacoby, 2005). Islamabad did accept the hand, but with a strict precondition that the aid be channelled through a third party. Finally Israeli aid reached the Pakistani soil through a number of different channels (Jacoby, 2005; Shamir, 2005). However as per Israel's official sources, Israel-based NGO Israeli Flying Aid (IFA) was instrumental in this humanitarian engagement MFA (2013). Eagerness of Israeli officials for cooperation with Islamabad was evident on many occasions, an enthusiasm that Pakistani counterparts never exhibited. On the surface, the year 2005 may have signalled some progress in the Israel-Pakistan equation. However all the promises and pleasantries were limited to paper. The euphoria died a premature death and the historic moment failed to make history. Close to the next general elections in 2008, Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto is believed to have expressed interest in establishing "official relations with the Jewish state if elected" and was also seeking "Mossad protection" (*Israel Today*, 2007). In the aftermath of Bhutto's assassination in December 2007 and the 2008 general elections, Musharraf left the country and shifted to London. Two years later, in 2010, reports of Israel trying to sell radar components and electronic warfare systems to Pakistan surfaced in the media though there is no official confirmation of the transaction (Nayar, 2013). The same year, Israel's leading humanitarian NGO IsraAID (Israel Forum for International Humanitarian Aid) is believed to have reconstructed a school in Pakistan in the aftermath of deadly floods (IsraAID, 2013). Thus in the year 2010, Israel tried to forge alliance based on both hard power and soft power, but no substantial progress could be made.

In 2012, in his first interview to the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, Musharraf emphatically highlighted the need for Pakistan to reassess its foreign policy based on changing ground realities. However his views as a deposed leader living in London in exile were not taken seriously by Islamabad and the question of Israel-Pakistan ties got buried until the recent rumours of an Israeli private jet landing in Islamabad on October 24, 2018 surfaced in the media. An exclusive report by London-based *Middle East Eye* claimed that an Israeli plane stopped at Pakistan's Noor Khan Airbase in Rawalpindi (Chaudry, 2018). The Pakistan government denies it and so does the state of Israel. Another important and notable recent development was Pakistan's foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi's statement reflecting Islamabad's

interest in “advancing its relations with Israel,” made on the sidelines of Munich Security Conference in February 2019 (Ahmad, 2019). A week later, Qureshi addressed the National Assembly and clarified that “Pakistan’s policy on Israel was consistent as always and no change had been made in it.” (APP 2019)

Thus the trajectory of Pakistan’s engagement with Israel has been very rickety, largely limited to closed-door conversations and rumours. This compels one to question Pakistan’s rigid and reluctant outlook towards Israel. This paper assesses the strategic silence between the two nations, by attempting to answer the following questions:

- Is Pakistan’s Israel policy a result of its support for a Palestinian homeland?
- How do geographical factors and internal socio-political considerations figure in Islamabad’s Israel policy?

### **Israel-Palestine Conflict and Arab World’s Changing Equation with Israel**

The Israel-Palestine conflict—often labelled as world’s most intractable, enduring and tragic conflict—is rooted in a dispute over land claimed by the Jewish people as their biblical birthright and by the Arabs who were inhabitants of the territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan river known as Palestine. However a letter written by a British statesman, popularly known as Balfour declaration, sealed the future of Palestine in a perennial conflict. Written by Arthur James Balfour, Foreign Secretary to United Kingdom’s Prime Minister David Lloyd George, dated November 2, 1917 the document stated that, “*His Majesty’s Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object...*” (Janin, 2002: 188). Since then the Ummah—the global Muslim community—and the Jewish state have been at loggerheads.

Pakistan’s support towards a separate sovereign Palestinian state and Palestinian right to return has been staunch and persistent, evident in its sustained votes in favour of Palestine at the UN General Assembly (Yegar, 2007). Moreover Pakistan has maintained close ties with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, which was recognised as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians at an Islamic summit in Lahore in February 1974 (UN, 1974). According to claims by a Pakistani researcher, Pakistani pilots flying Jordanian and Syrian planes downed some Israeli planes in 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars (Hussain, 1988). Islamabad’s military support and training to the PLO is also an important indicator of its support to the Palestinian cause and the Arab states.

Dr. Moshe Yegar (2007) in his analysis of Pakistan-Israel relations argues that “significant progress” in Israel’s ties with the Arab world could change Pakistan’s position. The current geopolitical order suggests that the Arab world seems to have found reasons to get intimate with Israel. But Pakistan’s position remains unaltered.<sup>3</sup> If Islamabad’s Israel policy is largely guided by its support for the Palestinian cause, then it is pertinent to analyse how certain Arab states and Muslim nations maintain discreet ties with Israel while sustaining their support for the Palestinian cause. Kaura (2018) rightly points out that the most powerful players on Middle East’s geopolitical chessboard, including Turkey (since 1949), Egypt (since the 1979 peace treaty) and Jordan (since 1994), have diplomatic relations with Israel. However Pakistan’s policy “remains frozen in time”.

A study of relations between Israel and Pakistan’s closest allies becomes relevant here. Islamabad’s closest allies, namely, Saudi Arabia (a Sunni Arab nation), Turkey (a Sunni Muslim country) and China—all maintain covert or overt ties with Israel. Turkey was the first Muslim nation to recognise Israel way back in 1949. Until the 1990s, the two states maintained low-profile contacts behind closed doors. However relations blossomed in the 1990s as the alliance became more open and deep, mainly defined by military cooperation (*Defence Turkey*, 2010; Uzer, 2013). With rise of Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (JDP) in 2002, the Turkey-Israel dynamics changed and there has been a gradual decline in the relations. The bilateral relations touched their all-time low in May 2010 when the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) commandos raided Mavi Marmara, the largest ship taking part in a Humanitarian flotilla intended to break the Israeli-Egyptian blockade of the Gaza Strip, leading to the death of ten Turkish activists (Efron, 2018). But strong economic interests and common perceived threat from Bashar al-Assad have been compelling Erdogan and Netanyahu to find a common ground.

Since establishment of diplomatic ties in 1992 (MFA, 2018), China and Israel have been in a steady and pragmatic relationship, with military cooperation, infrastructural projects, economic trade, technological expertise and tourism providing solid bedrock to the alliance. Most interesting of all the alliances is the unofficial and clandestine coordination between Riyadh and Tel Aviv. As per the reports, for the last five years the two US allies have been meeting informally and their awkward cosiness has raised many eyebrows in the region (Salama, 2017). Saudi Arabia and Israel loath Iran alike and their mutual animosity with Tehran could have led to a marriage of convenience between the two states.

In July 2016, an informal delegation led by retired Saudi general Dr. Anwar Eshki visited Israel and held meetings with Israel Foreign Ministry

Director-General Dore Gold and several Knesset members (TOI, 2016). The unusual encounter was not an official government-level interaction. But the delegation could not have visited without the knowledge and consent of the Saudi government. A year later in November 2017, Gadi Eisenkot, the chief of general staff of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) gave an exclusive interview to a Saudi newspaper *Elaph* hinting at an anti-Iran alliance with “moderate Arab nations” such as Saudi Arabia (Beaumont, 2017). Israel’s energy minister, Yuval Steinitz, in an interview to IDF’s Army Radio in November 2017, also confirmed Israel covert ties with Saudi Arabia (Haaretz, 2017). During a regional meeting held in Cairo in November 2018, Saudi Arabia and Egypt openly urged the Arab nations to establish trade and commercial ties with Israel (Okbi, 2018), highlighting the need to distinguish political issues from economic relations.

Saudi Arabia, despite being a Sunni Islamic nation having strong linkages with Wahhabism, has been able to nurture strategic ties with the Jewish state. The Saudi-Israeli case exemplifies that strategic calculations, rather than religious identities and affinities, are a decisive factor in geopolitics. A Wikileaks cable describes “*Israel’s relations with the Gulf as a function of the Gulf Arabs’ fear of Iran*” combined with “*Arabs’ belief in Israeli influence in Washington*” (Wikileaks, 2009). Besides old alliances with Arab states such as Jordan and Egypt, new associations with GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) members indicate that the status quo is changing in favour of Israel.

Israel’s breakthrough with Oman is also an important development. The two states had been secretly in communication since the 1970s and discreet ties continued through the 1990s. The clandestine affair was exposed when, in December 1994, then-prime minister Yitzhak Rabin met Oman’s ruler Sultan Qaboos (UPI 1996). After Rabin’s assassination in November 1995, Oman’s foreign minister Yusuf Alawi visited Jerusalem and held a meeting with Shimon Peres, then Prime minister to discuss prospects for cooperation in health, agriculture, tourism and technology. The meeting culminated in opening of respective trade offices in both the nations in 1996. However the escalation of Israel-Palestine tensions in September 2000, known as second intifada, resulted in closing of the trade office and both states resorted to closed-door talks (Ahren 2013). After two decades of stalemate, Prime Minister Netanyahu’s visit to Muscat on 26 October 2018 at the invitation of Oman’s Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said signals a significant shift in the geopolitical theatre. Next month, on 6 November, Israeli transport minister Yisrael Katz landed in Muscat for the International Transport Conference, where he floated the proposal to build a railway network connecting Haifa to Dubai, bypassing Iran (TNA 2018). The proposed railway diplomacy to

link Jordan, Israel, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain was labelled as an act of betrayal by the Palestinian officials, signalling their discomfort with Arab states' changing rapport with Israel. Two questions beg attention; why is Oman important for Israel? And why did Israel choose to publicise a covert meeting? Bordering the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman, and the Persian Gulf, Oman's geographical location has strong strategic implications. By developing ties with Oman, Israel might get a chance to reach out to Pakistan and Iran. Oman's independent foreign policy and positive equation with Iran (Lons, 2018; Fattahi, 2018) is likely to give Israel a chance to broaden its diplomatic outreach. If a positive outcome is to be expected, Oman might act as an interlocutor between Tel Aviv and Tehran and offer them space to hold closed door talks. However that would jeopardise Israel's ties with its other anti-Iran Gulf allies. On the other hand, Israel (in conjunction with Washington and other Gulf allies) might be eyeing intelligence sharing or defence cooperation with Oman to further aid and strengthen its anti-Iran posture. The aforementioned scenarios are merely speculative possibilities, but Israel's Tehran-centric policies compel one to think in this direction.

Oman's strong connection with Pakistan also offers Israel a chance to utilise this alternate channel for reaching out to Islamabad. Incidentally Netanyahu's Oman visit in October 2018 was preceded by a rumoured stop at Rawalpindi. Some scholars view Muscat's bonhomie with Tel Aviv as an attempt to "divide the Muslims" and hamper the Muslim unity (Ahmad Dar, 2018). Secondly, Israel's decision to openly acknowledge its talks with Oman can be seen as a deliberate act to announce to Iran that Israel's sphere of influence is not limited to the anti-Iran Arab states and that Israel is also capable of reaching out to Iran's allies in the region. Either way, this new partnership marks an end to the long spell of diplomatic lull.

Equally interesting is Israel's engagement with the United Arab Emirates. The two states are believed to have maintained concealed ties since the Oslo Accords in 1990s (Ahren, 2018; MEMO, 2018a). As per an expose by the *New Yorker* magazine, "a sense of trust" was built between UAE and Israel in the mid-1990s, mainly converging over "emerging Iranian threat," leading to intelligence and military cooperation under wraps (Entous, 2018). However the murder of Al-Mabhouh—one of the founders of the military wing of Hamas—in an alleged Mossad-led operation in Dubai in January 2010, derailed the relations (Neubauer, 2017; Ahren, 2018). Eventually the two states overcame the major setback and the strategic synergy continued.

The year 2018 saw the two states taking big steps to bridge the gap. In February 2018, the Emirates hosted a large delegation of American Jewish leaders led by Stephen M. Greenberg, the chairman of the *Conference of*

*Presidents of Major American Jewish Organisations*, discussing regional security landscape, mainly focusing on Iran, Yemen and Qatar (Ahren, 2018). Even though there was no direct reference to Israel, open interaction with Jewish leaders hinted at UAE's interest in normalising ties with the Jewish state. In August 2018, a senior official from UAE visited Israel to discuss prospects of enhancing bilateral trade, indicative of economic diplomacy (TOI, 2018). A few months later, in mid-September 2018, UAE hosted Israeli and Turkish envoys for backchannel talks to discuss diplomatic issues (MEMO, 2018b). On October 25, 2018, coinciding with Netanyahu's undisclosed visit to Oman, Israel's Culture and Sports Minister Miri Regev landed in the Emirates, marking the first open state visit to UAE, in order to attend the Judo Grand Competition in Abu Dhabi (MEMO, 2018c). Her trip was more than a mere international sports event with Israeli participants and officials. During the trip, Regev was taken to the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, making her the first Israeli (minister) to visit the third largest mosque in the world (Osman, 2018). These multi-faceted developments revolving around trade, culture and sports diplomacy, blended with backchannel talks are indicative of enhanced levels of trust and warmth in the UAE-Israel equation.

Qatar, the first GCC state to grant de facto recognition to Israel, also deserves to be discussed. The opening of Israeli trade office in Doha in 1996, the first in GCC, marked the beginning of Israel-Qatar entente. Next year, in 1997, the Israeli trade minister was invited to Doha for the fourth annual Middle East and North Africa Economic Summit further (Fanack, 2018), much to the discomfort of Arab states. Doha's cosiness with the enemy state attracted immense criticism and censure from the Arab world and larger Muslim community. However Qatar's pro-Israel policy was not without a reason. These developments were preceded by a failed attempt to oust Qatar's ruler, Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, also known as Operation Abu Ali. During the month of Ramadan on February 14, 1996, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and UAE orchestrated a coup d'état against the Qatari ruler but did not succeed in their mission (*Al Jazeera*, 2018). Thus, in the process of reevaluating its relationship with the Arab states, Qatar moved closer to Israel. Shaking hands with Israel was a strong short-term response and also a well-calculated long-term strategy to deal with a hostile neighbourhood. However the relation wasn't an easy one.

Succumbing to Arab pressure, Doha closed the Israeli trade office in November 2000 (BBC, 2000). Nevertheless, the two states continued to talk in privacy and the trade office was reopened in 2005 (Neubauer, 2018). With the Israeli attack on Gaza strip in 2008, the relations soured once again and touched a nadir as all political and economic ties were cut off. As Israel-

Palestine tensions eased, Qatar restarted its engagement with Israel while continuing its support for the Palestinian cause. Despite the hiccups, Doha has managed to balance its ties with the Jewish state.

Scholars such as Uzi Rabi (2009) describe Doha's Israel policy as a product of its economic and strategic motivations. Rabi contends that the natural gas-rich state saw a potential buyer in Israel, inciting it to foster commercial ties. On the other hand, Tel Aviv offered an easier alternate route to reach out to Washington. While both the factors might have shaped Doha's policy, Qatar's leadership during the late 1990s faced a greater threat within the Arab world than from Israel. Thus Qatar-Israel entente was possible mainly due to the former's threat perception. Consequently, by using Israel as a trump card and positing itself as an interlocutor on both sides of a major geopolitical faultline, Qatar has secured its position in the region.

Walking in the footsteps of its Arab allies, Bahrain has found a common ground with Israel based on their mutual animosity towards Iran. The links between the two states date back to October 1994 when Israel's then Environment Minister (late) Yossi Sarid visited Bahrain as the first Israeli minister to officially visit a Gulf state (Goren, 2015). His meeting with Bahrain's Foreign Minister Mohamed Ben Al-Mubarak and Health Minister Jawad Al-Arid was a major breakthrough, setting the template for Israel's engagements with the Arab world. Gadi Baltiansky, the then assistant to the deputy foreign minister and part of the visiting delegation iterated Bahrain's "desire for future cooperation" (Goren, 2015; MEMO, 2017). Ever since then, the two states have been cooperating in privacy. A Wikileaks cable based on developments in 2005 exposed Manama's "secret contacts" with Mossad—Israel's external intelligence agency and King's interest in further expanding the strategic partnership (Birnbbaum, 2011; Melman, 2011). Recent developments are indicative of Bahrain's intent to develop deeper ties with the Jewish state. As per a media report, Bahrain had expressed interest in normalising ties with Israel during a closed meeting held on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference in 2017 (TOI, 2019). Manama reiterated its position on the subject during the Middle East Peace and Security summit held in Warsaw on February 14, 2019 when Foreign Minister Al Khalifa labelled Iran as a "bigger and more toxic challenge" vis-à-vis Israel-Palestine issue and hinted at Manama's intention to develop diplomatic ties with the Jewish state (Ahren, 2019a; Ahren, 2019b).

Unlike all the other GCC member nations which have been gravitating towards Israel, Kuwait remains the only exceptional state which has not budged from its position. The gulf country has maintained a clear pro-Palestine position and never demonstrated any signs of warming up with Israel. Post-

Warsaw summit, the National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanim reaffirmed Kuwait's "principled and firm position" against normalisation of ties with Israel (MEMO, 2019; Cafiero, 2019). Nevertheless, it is evident that many Arab states are getting comfortable with the idea of coming out of the closet and announcing their ties with Israel to the world.

Over the years, the Palestinian issue has fallen low on the list of Arab priorities, even though it enjoys a special status in the Arab world and is a testimony to Arab unity. Alliance with Israel continues to have a satanic connotation in the imagination of Arabs and remains unpopular on the streets of the Arab world. Although the Iranian peril has been a strategic priority for most Arab states, the Palestinian oppression remains a major heartache. Thus sincere and serious efforts by Israel to resolve (if not completely end) the Palestinian conflict remain indispensable for having an open embrace with Israel.

All these nations, while maintaining their discreet ties with Israel, have not compromised on their emotive support for the Palestinian cause. The Gulf nations are, however, rethinking and revising their Palestine policy and expanding their strategic bandwidth to include Israel. At best, it reflects strategic wisdom. But, certainly, there is no proof to suggest that any of these countries are abandoning the Palestinian cause. A 2017 report by United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA, 2017a) labelled the US as the largest donor contributing six times more than Saudi Arabia. Posited as the sixth largest global benefactor to the UNRWA, Saudi Arabia was the largest Arab donor, contributing generously towards developmental projects in healthcare and education sectors. The only other Arab states to fall in the top-twenty global UNRWA donors list were the UAE occupying the 15th spot, followed by Kuwait on the 19th rank. Pakistan stood 87th on the donor list of 95 nations and institutions, suggesting that the cash-strapped country's support for the Palestinian cause has been heavily skewed towards rhetoric rather than action and actual aid (UNRWA, 2017b). Certainly Pakistan's financial contribution of US\$ 20,000 (62 times lower than India's contribution of US\$ 1,250,000) amounts to peanuts from a pauper. A government-agency report of a meeting between Peter Mulrean, Director UNRWA and Pakistan's permanent UN representative Maleeha Lodhi held in New York in November 2018, while highlighting a rise in Islamabad's contribution to the UNRWA, does not offer any statistics. Most of the Pakistani media reports on the subject exhibit the same trend. Pakistan's "unflinching support" for the Palestinian cause in the UN cannot be discounted and undermined (Ali, 2013). Without fail, Pakistan has voted in favour of a Palestinian state and has received the recognition

and acknowledgement it deserves. Pakistan's general propaganda in favour of Palestine and its open censure for Israel has been morally uplifting for the Palestinians. Leaving aside the cashless and non-material support, both the parties have not made any notable gains in this transaction of consolations, sympathies and promises.

Moreover, maintaining strategic relations with Israel while extending firm support for Palestinian demands is no more an aberration evident from the cases discussed above. Thus the hypothesis that Islamabad's unconditional support for a Palestinian homeland impedes the normalisation of ties seems to be more of an excuse rather than a calculated policy decision.

### Geographical Compulsions

With Iran on its western frontier and India on its eastern border, Islamabad has a staunch enemy and a close ally of Israel respectively as its immediate neighbours. It therefore becomes important to understand how Iran and India figure in Pakistan's Israel policy.

**Iran factor:** Pakistan's reluctance to nurture closer ties with Israel may be influenced by its geography. Islamabad cannot afford to ignore that Iran in its immediate neighbourhood is an arch rival of Israel and it will be in Islamabad's interest not to mess up with Tehran. While Saudi Arabia and Israel warmed up to counter Iran—a common enemy—Pakistan does not have any strong strategic reason to shake hands with Israel.

Iran was the first state to recognise the modern nation state of Pakistan in 1947 and in 1950 Iran's Mohammad Reza Pahlavi became the first head of state to visit Pakistan (Notezai, 2017). Both the states enjoyed a healthy equation until 1979. After the 1979 Iranian revolution, the bilateral equation soured. Ayatollah Khomeini took over the reins of Iran at the time when Pakistan was under a staunch Sunni preacher, Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq. Islamabad started skewing more towards the Sunni Islamic countries including Saudi Arabia. The relations thus remained rocky. Iran, as the world's fourth largest and second largest reserve holder of oil and natural gas respectively, offers the most feasible and cost-effective answer to Pakistan's energy deficiency (EIA, 2019). Iran is also important for Pakistan's internal equilibrium since the country has a notable Shia population, second largest in the world after Iran. Therefore the fear of being pulled into power struggles along sectarian lines adds to Islamabad's tensions (Yusuf, 2017).

Pakistan's relations with Iran are not independent, but are a function of Washington and Riyadh's stance towards Tehran. The July 2015 nuclear deal between P5+1 and Iran, termed as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was a positive development for Pakistan-Iran bilateral relations.

However the US decision to pull out of JCPAO was a major blow to the bilateral equation, rendering all prospective projects relating to economic, military and energy cooperation, null and void (Khan, 2018; Pant and Rej, 2018). On the other hand, Riyadh's anti-Tehran approach has been a major obstruction in Pakistan-Iran ties. If Pakistan drifts too close to Riyadh, Tehran is capable of feeding the Baloch separatists against the establishment. Thus any tensions with Iran will also upset the socio-political status quo. A Sunni Pakistan has managed to maintain its ties with Shia Iran despite being very intimate with Saudi Arabia. But Pakistan's balancing act with two rival states is riddled with complexities. Shamil Shams (2016) rightly explains that Islamabad "...is trying to balance things out by claiming it wants to bring the Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia and the Shiite Iran closer, but experts say it is a tightrope walk, which could also prove to be dangerous." Adding Israel to its foreign policy mix might shake this delicate balance further. Thus a possible explanation, and a more logical one, could be the Iran factor.

**Paranoia of India-Israel-US nexus:** In his recent book, Happymon Jacob (2018: 23) makes an interesting analogy between behaviour of nations and individuals. Like young children being advised to stay on guard against strangers, some nations also grow up with similar paranoia against strangers. Eventually they become distrustful and develop an attitude problem. Such characteristics define Pakistan and perhaps Israel too.

Yet another possible explanation for Pakistan's attitude towards Israel could be Islamabad's paranoia of US-Israel-India nexus and "*their unholy alliance against the Muslim world*" (Kumaraswamy, 2000: 89). Islamabad believes that India-Israel connections are a potential threat to its security (Javaid and Khan, 2014) and the bonhomie between these two nations over the last two decades has never gone unnoticed by Pakistan. Islamabad closely watches India's foreign policy moves, and their worries have been further escalated by the warmth between the two right-wing leaders—Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—evident in their respective visits to Israel (in July 2017) and India (in January 2018). On the one hand, India and Israel reached a new level of comfort and intimacy under the Modi regime as he became the first ever Indian Prime Minister to visit the Jewish state. On the other hand, Pakistan's deteriorating relations with Washington under the Trump administration have further isolated the Islamic republic (Calamur, 2017; Kaura, 2017). Trump's refusal to acknowledge Islamabad's role in fighting terrorism at the Arab-Islamic-US summit held in Riyadh in May 2017 made USA's disdain for Pakistan evident. In addition, Trump avoided a bilateral meeting with former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif leaving Islamabad embarrassed and humiliated and the

relations continue to be sour under Imran Khan. (Kaura, 2017) The Trump administration has been repeatedly criticising Pakistan's support to the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network, labelled by President Trump as "agents of chaos" and in 2018, the US military aid to Pakistan was cut down by US\$ 300 million due to Islamabad's failure to deal with militant groups on its soil (NYT, 2017; Barker, 2018). Additionally, the US has welcomed India's involvement in Afghanistan, a perennial irritant in Islamabad-New Delhi relations. Evidently the current mood in Washington is unfavourable for Islamabad. Thus Tel Aviv and Washington's intimacy with New Delhi compels Islamabad to take measured steps.

### **Religious Climate and Political Trade-off**

Pakistan's general intolerance towards its religious minorities is another internal factor which restrains the state from getting close to the Jewish nation. Pakistan's reputation for treatment of minorities is painted in black. Non-Muslims, commonly labelled as "Kafirs," are socially degraded, humiliated and treated as "second-class citizens." The fact that the minorities in Pakistan have come down from 23 per cent in 1947 to three per cent of the total population is also an indicator of religious suppression (Ispahani, 2013). Pakistan's disdain for minorities cannot be hidden under the garb of the oft-quoted secular promises and vision of founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

Shalva Veil, in her anthropological study of Pakistan's Jews, revealed that, "in the first half of the 20th century, there were nearly 1,000 Jewish residents in Pakistan" with maximum concentration in Karachi (Weil, 2011). Partition compelled the Jewish community to disperse to Afghanistan or India, and eventually to Israel, after May 1948. As of 2018, the only trace of the country's Jewish connection is Fishel Benkhald, Pakistan's (self proclaimed) last living Jew (Goldberg, 2014). Born to a Jewish mother and Muslim father in 1987, he grew up as "Faisal Khalid." Since the religious identity in Judaism comes from the mother, he was born a Jew, but concealed his Jewish identity for fear of social ostracism and religious persecution. Only in 2017 was he allowed to register himself as a "Jewish person" on the national records (TOI, 2017) and in 2019, he became the first Pakistani passport holder to be granted an Israeli visa (PT, 2019). Pakistan's media termed it as a "diplomatic thaw or a baby step towards it" (PT, 2019), hinting at the possibility of a positive change in Pakistan-Israel relations.

The discomfort with religious minorities in Pakistan is not just a debate on constitutional provisions and principles, but also a conversational taboo. Pakistanis refuse to indulge in open conversations on religious views beyond Islam and commenting on Pakistan-Israel relations could invite trouble.<sup>4</sup>

However, lately, there have been some positive noises in the media. In February 2018, editorials by Islamabad-based student Mohsin Saleem Ullah (2018) in Pakistan's prominent newspaper *Daily Times* and Israeli author Herb Keinon (2018) in the *Jerusalem Post* lauded India's diplomatic balancing act with Israel as well as Palestine, and suggested Islamabad to follow the same pragmatic approach while shaping its foreign policy. It would, however, not be easy to extrapolate how many Pakistanis subscribe to this view. Is there a section of Pakistani society which views this new strategic proposal with optimism but suppresses their opinions for fear of admonition? It's certainly not an easy guess. Pakistani diplomat Touqir Hussain believes that most Pakistanis tend to "*filter their worldview through the prism of religion and tensions between Islam and west,*" and are likely to view Pakistan-Israel relations as a "Muslim-Jewish alliance" rather than a pragmatic partnership between two nation states (MEI, 2009). Thus even as Pakistan and Israel spoke in secrecy for years, Islamabad maintained a strong and vocal public opposition to the Jewish state often viewed as a "demented nation with an unfortunate past and perhaps future too" (Khalil, 1992).

Equally important is the "Islam" factor. Islam is central to Pakistan's national security. Babar Ayaz (2013: 249-63) underlines that Pakistan is a "security state and not a welfare state" and the armed forces of Pakistan project themselves as the "defenders of Islamic ideology of Pakistan" and not just defenders of the borders. Thus the Pakistan military has assumed an essentially religious character. Mazhar Aziz (2008: 3), in his book *Military Control in Pakistan*, astutely observes that the (Pakistan) military identifies itself as the "state rather than being a part of it." By projecting India as an existential threat and designating themselves as the saviours of the Islamic republic, the military has assumed the supreme authority to run the country on their terms. This India-centric foreign policy blended with the "Islamic unity" card restrains the country's leadership from making any radical changes to the foreign policy, in congruence with the changing geopolitical landscape.

This leads us to the next question—what is the political trade-off of a Pakistan-Israel handshake? For any regime, the primary concern is regime survival and negative political repercussions hold back the state leaders from taking bold decisions. In Pakistan, Islam is a strong socio-political force which is often used to manipulate or influence public opinion. Religious indoctrination from childhood is used to paint Pakistan as a Sharia state based on Allama Iqbal's dream of an Islamic nation. Loathing of Israel and Jews is a hallmark of the radical Islamists, according to Dr. Tashbih Sayyed and any regime failing to treat the Jewish state with contempt would outrage Pakistani public opinion (Jacoby, 2005). Thus, proximity with Israel is not something which

can be brushed aside as a minor foreign policy shift and the political costs of this decision could be very high for any Pakistani leadership.

## Conclusion

Israel's growing informal diplomacy with Arab nations in general and Saudi-Israel thaw in particular are a strong stimulus for Pakistan to reassess its Israel policy. As former British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston reminds us, *"We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow."*

The question that needs to be probed is: what do Pakistan and Israel stand to gain by coming closer? After seventy years of statehood, the two states have little in common. Both the nations had a fragile start with an unstable economy and weak socio-political institutions. Pakistan, a nation carved out of India, had some institutions in place since the process of state building started at least a decade ago. The Muslims of undivided India became the founders of a new Pakistan, and in 1947, the new state started its journey on a geographical space not very alien to them. Israel, on the other hand, was an idea in the imagination of the Jewish people. A nation was built on a land which previously belonged to a totally different people. The Palestinian issue united the Arabs and Muslims of the world against one nation—Israel. Both the nations grew up under the paranoia of an existential threat. Pakistan was facing a constant threat from India, while Israel was encircled by Arab enemy states. Both have fought many wars and struggled to sustain themselves. However their trajectories have been totally different. Today Israel is known as a military power, start-up nation and a tech-titan. Israel can offer its expertise in the areas of information and technology, agriculture, water and medical technologies and environmental technologies. Pakistan, on the other hand, is a poor nation with a rich army (Siddiqui, 2019). The country is heavily relying on its aid-oriented myopic economic policies and unproductive developmental projects funded by third parties. It needs a new model of development which Israel is capable of offering. Pakistan's weak economy is likely to benefit immensely with the prospective exchange of information and technology, and there is strong economic logic backing this alliance. However economic rationale generally takes a back seat in foreign policy decisions and Pakistan-Israel equation is an apt testimony to this.

Weighing the strategic gains, this alliance might give Pakistan the opportunity to serve as an interlocutor between Israel and Iran, in principle. Pakistan is perhaps the only close ally which has been allowed by the Saudi regime to maintain healthy and functional relationship with Iran, probably

due to its geographical compulsions. Yet it has not been able to successfully mediate between the two rivals. Islamabad has lacked the strategic will, wisdom and courage needed to take independent foreign policy decisions (Jamal, 2017; Arifeen, 2018). Thus the likelihood of Pakistan's serious mediation between Israel and Iran is low.

On the other hand, Israel stands to make some strategic gains by developing ties with Pakistan. Pakistan's geographical location would give Israel more confidence to counter the Iranian threat. It would bring Israel physically closer to its arch-rival. Israel is probably eyeing intelligence cooperation with Pakistan as the only serious gain it can get from an alliance with a state known for manufacturing and exporting terrorism. Thus clearly Israel stands to increase its strategic footprint by reaching out to Pakistan, while no economic gains can be expected from the association.

Islamabad's gains from the alliance are likely to be economic while Israel's gains will be strategic in nature, both befitting each other's priorities. But the perils of such an association are high for Pakistan. Any open flirting with Israel is highly likely to annoy general masses, infuriate the extremists and jeopardise the political equilibrium by putting the ruling government in a tight spot. Moreover, Pakistan-Israel intimacy will instantly tick off Tehran. Thus the costs of an open embrace and partnership seem to be exceeding the benefits.

**The way ahead:** The world might still have to wait for Pakistan-Israel open embrace but the changing ambience is certainly offering Islamabad more space to engage with Israel. The short-term and more conservative outcome of the Arab-Israel rapprochement would be more frequent closed-door talks between Pakistan and Israel, being initiated by the latter's new allies in the Middle East. Pakistan's foreign minister Mahmood Qureshi's statement expressing interest in advancing its relations with Israel underscores the changing mood in Islamabad (Rehan, 2019). The winds of change blowing in the Arab world seem to have reached the shores of Pakistan. The approval from Mecca will help to extinguish the anger of the masses, making it easier for Pakistan to reassess its Palestine policy. Eventually, if not immediately, Islamabad might consider establishing strategic ties with the Jewish state.

**Indian perspective:** From an Indian perspective it is imperative to analyse how New Delhi is likely to view such a scenario. An ally's intimacy with an enemy state is never a comfortable prospect. By the same logic, New Delhi might feel insecure and apprehensive about Tel Aviv's equation with Islamabad if the two decide to shake hands in the open. Nevertheless, the bond between India and Israel is strong, steady and mature. Israel has nurtured close ties with India, despite New Delhi's decision to maintain its relationship with Iran. Israel has given India the space to pursue its foreign

policy based on its own geographical and geopolitical compulsions. In pursuit of Tel Aviv, India has not abandoned Tehran. As Chaulia (2018) rightly articulates, “in foreign policy, only bosom friends agree to disagree.” It is time for India to exhibit the same trust and maturity if Israel tries to court Islamabad for its strategic gains. Perhaps Tel Aviv’s entry inside Islamabad’s diplomatic corridors might give India an alternate channel of communication and negotiation. Either way, it is highly unlikely that Tel Aviv will barter its alliance with India to win over Islamabad.

## Notes

1. Bidanda Chengappa (currently Associate professor at Department of International Relations and History, Christ University Bangalore) had interacted with Maj Manek of Establishment 22 in his personal capacity in Bangalore in 1982. The young officer, in his conversation, clarified that he did not fraternise with the Pakistani officer but was certain of his nationality. At that time, both India and Pakistan did not have any diplomatic ties with the state of Israel, even though India had recognised Israel in 1950 while Pakistan hasn’t done it so far.
2. The two leaders shook hands and introduced their spouses to each other. Very few words were exchanged.
3. During my interaction with an official at Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi in September 2017, I was told that Pakistan’s official position on Israel is non-negotiable for two main reasons: Pakistan’s support for Palestinian people is a matter of moral obligation and secondly, Israel’s intimacy with New Delhi is perceived as a major threat and irritant in Islamabad.
4. During my visit to Islamabad (for South Asian Youth Conference) in 2012, my Pakistani counterparts were too wary of discussing the “Yehudi” issue or comment on prospects of an alliance with Israel for fear of being heard and castigated. A few months back, as I tried to reach out to some Delhi-based Pakistani students, Pakistani friends and acquaintances based in the Middle East, no one was willing to engage in a discussion on the subject, more so over email.

My search for answers and opinions online led me to a few interesting narratives. First was a first-hand account by late Dr. Tashbih Sayyed—a Sunni Pakistani-American scholar and journalist—who meticulously articulated the vivid details of his visit to Israel in 2005 in his article “*A Muslim in a Jewish Land*” (Sayyed, 2005). His American passport gave him a chance to experience Israel—a journey Pakistani passport holders are not allowed to undertake. In his opinion, the Jewish state—with its state-of-the-art technology, brilliant infrastructure and inclusive model—has some valuable lessons for the world and the Muslim community. Second was Muhammad Aamir Khokhar, an MBA student based in Rawalpindi and an active history-geopolitics discussant on Quora—a US-based online discussion forum. In a brief interaction over email, Aamir opined that Pakistan-Israel rapprochement is a harmless proposal. “Many Islamic nations in the Middle East have relations with Israel, while maintaining their stand on Palestine issue,” he added.

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