

PALESTINE, NOW A FOOTNOTE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Tel Aviv City Hall is lit up with the flags of the United Arab Emirates and Israel as the countries announced they would be establishing full diplomatic ties, in Tel Aviv, Israel, on Aug. 13, 2020.

| Photo Credit: [AP](#)

In an agreement brokered by the U.S., Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have agreed to establish full diplomatic relations. This is a historic moment for Israel. For a long time, Israel was a state that no country in West Asia was to recognise, negotiate with or broker a peace with until statehood was granted to the Palestinians. However, Israel managed to achieve full diplomatic relations with Egypt in 1979 and then with Jordan in 1994. This is the third significant win for Israeli foreign policy where it has managed to keep the precondition of Palestinian statehood off the table and establish full diplomatic ties.

Soon after U.S. President Donald Trump announced the joint statement from Washington, the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, said it was a “historic day”. This sudden development has surprised the world of diplomacy. Mr. Netanyahu has been an unconventional politician. He has always been convinced that Israel can achieve peace with the Arab states on its own terms, without using the old-school formula of ‘land for peace’. His Gulf diplomacy began a few years ago. He sought the participation of Israeli sports teams in international tournaments held in the UAE. The Israeli Culture and Sports Minister, Miri Regev, visited Abu Dhabi on an official state visit in 2018. On an invitation from the U.S., Mr. Netanyahu met Arab leaders at a conference in Warsaw in 2019. A video of this meeting, leaked by the Prime Minister’s Office, showed Ministers of the Gulf countries defending Israel while speaking about the Iran issue.

Indeed, it is the Iran factor that has facilitated this friendship between Israel and the UAE. In fact, since the time Mr. Netanyahu announced that he would extend Israeli sovereignty over parts of the West Bank, there has been rhetoric against it. But because of Iran’s rising regional influence, the UAE considers full diplomatic ties with Israel acceptable. Iran has sustained its nuclear ambitions and has been politically resilient despite regional and international coercion. Also, led by Saudi Arabia, the Gulf monarchies have been making desperate attempts to have a strategy with the U.S. and Israel for maintaining the status quo.

This diplomatic win comes for Mr. Netanyahu in the middle of a legitimacy crisis. He has been facing protests from the public in Jerusalem for more than a month. In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of Israelis have been demanding his resignation. The Jewish diaspora in the U.S. has also protested against him in solidarity with the Jews at home. In addition, he stands on trial on charges of fraud, bribery and breach of trust. Just when everything appeared to be out of control, he has surprised his supporters with this major diplomatic breakthrough. What makes this victory sweeter for him is the vindication of his decade-long policy that Israel will achieve peace on its own terms instead of making compromises and painful concessions.

The substantive political issues of the Palestinian people have withered away. For a long time, the Palestinian issue has become a non-issue in the region. When she got the news of Israel-UAE deal, Hanan Ashrawi, member of the executive committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization, tweeted: “We are nobody’s fig leaf!” She also tweeted to the UAE leader, Mohamed Bin Zayed, “May you never experience the agony of having your country stolen... May you never be sold out by your ‘friends’.”

The question of Palestine was not a precondition or part of the deal that Egypt signed with Israel in 1979. Under Gamal Abdul Nasser's leadership, Egypt was the leader of the Arab world, but after Nasserism and the wars in 1967 and 1973, it realised that it did not have enough leverage to compel Israel to accept the two-state solution. This was the case with Jordan too, when it established full bilateral ties with Israel in 1994 leaving the Palestinian cause in the hands of Yasser Arafat.

The Palestinian issue is a non-issue for the Arab rulers because it is not an existential matter. There is solidarity among the Arab people with the Palestinians, but that's about it. The ruling class is not accountable to the public as most of the Arab rulers are not democratically elected and often make decisions depending on the situation in the region. That's how the Iranian factor has moved them closer to Israel. Yasser Arafat was right in believing that it is childish for the Palestinians to sit behind the autocratic Arab leaders. The agreement shows that the Palestinian national movement needs to be reawakened, but there is no Arafat to lead it.

Khinvraj Jangid is Associate Professor and Director, Centre for Israel Studies, OP Jindal Global University, Sonapat. Email: khinvraj@gmail.com

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