

ISRAEL, PAKISTAN TIES A BRIDGE TOO FAR?

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Recently, Israeli and Pakistani scholars and opinion-makers appear to have speculated about the possibility of the two states establishing diplomatic ties. This has cast fresh light on the changing dynamics in the region and Israel's growing diplomatic reach and success.

Ever since Israel's founding in 1948, it has been the endeavour of the Jewish state to overcome its regional isolation and enhance diplomatic relations with as many countries as possible. Apart from Turkey (1949), Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), none of the states in the region have recognised Israel. In fact, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) routinely pillories Israel for its "occupation" of Palestinian lands. The latest in this long acrimonious saga is the OIC's call to convene an emergency session to discuss Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's remarks that, if re-elected, he would definitely annex the Jordan Valley in the West Bank and the northern Dead Sea.

The regular and scathing indictment by the Islamic world notwithstanding, Israel has been successful in gradually expanding its diplomatic profile beyond its immediate neighbourhood. Israel has established diplomatic relations with a large majority of the 193 UN member states.

India established full diplomatic ties with Israel in January 1992. While many factors brought these two democracies together, it is a fact that both have successfully tackled state-centric threats throughout their history. Israel has successfully dealt with the gauntlet thrown down by the combined Arab opposition in 1948, 1967 and in 1973. India has prevailed over an acutely hostile and implacable Pakistan in every conflict since Partition. Both Israel and India have been victims of asymmetric warfare such as terrorism, which they continue to tackle with resolve.

Thanks to the dynamism infused in India's foreign policy by the Indian Prime Minister, India's interactions with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have witnessed an impressive upward trajectory in recent times, encompassing economic and security ties. High-level political engagement with the West Asian region has been another hallmark of the Narendra Modi government.

No doubt, mutual apprehensions about Iran have nudged Israel and the Gulf states closer. Israel continues to look beyond the confines of its immediate region for greater economic and diplomatic Lebensraum. The Indo-Pacific region too is fast emerging as a prime focus of its endeavours.

While Israel established diplomatic ties with China at the same time as with India (January 1992), their relations have been primarily limited to the economic realm due to the American embargo on selling sophisticated weapons systems to Beijing. Israel, however, is expanding its arms sales to India and to countries in Southeast Asia.

Under a changing rubric, Israel is also looking at increasing its diplomatic footprint in South Asia and beyond. Forging closer ties with populous Asian Muslim countries such as Bangladesh and Indonesia would help it to gain greater legitimacy in the Islamic world.

Pakistan, however, is a different kettle of fish. The president of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, Prof. Efraim Inbar, recently published an opinion piece in the Israeli

newspaper, *Haaretz*, titled 'Israel would welcome ties with Pakistan – Should India Worry?' (<https://bit.ly/2lWr8EE>). He argues that Pakistan's national interests would better be served by having ties with Israel, particularly since Israel carries weight in Washington and could perhaps mediate on recurring U.S.-Pakistan tensions. Concerns regarding Iran were also cited as a point of convergence.

A rapprochement between Israel and Pakistan appears to be far-fetched. The fly in the ointment is that Pakistan is considered the "sword-arm" of the Sunni world. Islamabad has invested considerably in the security of the Arab monarchies, including in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Pakistani military units have been stationed in these countries to promote internal stability. Pakistani leaders such as Nawaz Sharif have sought and received refuge in the Arabian Peninsula.

Pakistan has used the platform provided by the OIC to drum up support for its stand on Kashmir, just as the OIC has done for the Palestinian issue. If Pakistan were to establish diplomatic ties with Israel, it would dilute its Islamic credentials and lead to a weakened support base within the OIC on Kashmir, a point acknowledged by Pakistani commentator Ayesha Siddiqa in an opinion article in the same newspaper following Prof. Inbar's piece. The regime in Pakistan would also face the heat from its many domestic conservative Islamist groups. More importantly, in a recent interaction with the media, military spokesperson Maj. Gen. Asif Ghafoor refuted the possibility in response to a query about Pakistan's recognition of Israel, stating that such stories were part of a propaganda war aimed at turning the general public against the country's military.

Iran is recognised as a potent threat by Israel and the Shia-Sunni divide in Pakistan is frequently a point of friction between Iran and Pakistan. However, as Ms. Siddiqa notes, Israel cannot expect Pakistan to be used against neighbouring Iran and risk the dangers of escalation in sectarian conflict, given that more than 20% of its population is Shia. Pakistan is unlikely to take any steps that could rock its relations with Iran. In April 2015, Pakistan's Parliament had turned down Riyadh's request to join a Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen to fight the Houthi rebels supported by Iran.

India has successfully walked a tightrope between Israel and Palestine, and Israel may well hope to do so between Pakistan and India. However, it is not in Israel's interest to seek diplomatic ties with a state that sponsors terrorism.

While it is the sovereign right of nation states to decide such matters, it appears that the idea of diplomatic ties between Israel and Pakistan remains, for now, a pie in the sky.

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