

Should Pakistan recognise Israel?

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Summary

Suddenly, the suggestions that Pakistan should recognise Israel have begun to capture the headlines in Pakistan and the Middle East. Israel's diplomatic ingress in the Arab world and the change of administration in Washington may have spurred this debate which has largely been based on faulty premises. The paper seeks to correct these assumptions and argues against recognition.

The question of Pakistan's recognition of Israel has to be looked at from many angles – moral, legal, political and realpolitik. Given Israel's history of oppression of Palestinians, illegal settlements, denial of the right of refugees and abuse of the status of Jerusalem, recognition would be an affront to the moral sensibilities of many in Pakistan.

Recognition would also not sell well politically. Since it is not a foremost foreign policy issue, the government, particularly a politically weak one already under pressure from the opposition, cannot take the risk. As for the realpolitik, it would cut both ways. Recognition will diminish Pakistan's arguments about Kashmir and undermine its case. And it might also complicate Islamabad's already tense relations with Iran. Ironically, while Iran might interpret the move as Pakistan having joined anti-Iran forces in the Middle East, Pakistan's Gulf partners, ever distrustful of Pakistan's ties with Tehran and unhappy about some confusing new trends in its foreign policy, may only be half impressed.

On the issue of benefits, Pakistan has to ask itself whom it is trying to please and for what purpose. Is it the Saudis or the Americans? Prince Turki al-Faisal, speaking in Bahrain recently, called Israel as a "Western colonizing power", giving one to believe Riyadh has not made up its mind on its own recognition of Israel yet. Surely, the final Saudi decision will have less to do with what Islamabad does than what happens in Washington and within the region.

If Pakistan is trying to please the Americans, especially the incoming Democratic administration of Joe Biden, it needs to discard some old assumptions. Firstly, the issues that used to put Pakistan on the wrong side of Israel in the United States (US), thus affecting its relations with Washington, have lost their salience. Nor does the conventional wisdom that the Republicans are friendly and the Democrats are unfriendly hold true any longer, if ever it did.

Pakistan is no longer seen by Israel as a threat of any sort. Pakistan's support for the Palestinians does not matter anymore. The only lever that could move the needle for the Palestinians used to be Washington and it has long abandoned them.

The Palestinian cause was also grievously harmed by Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) with his incendiary rhetoric against Israel which, along with Iran's

nuclear programme, turned the Israeli-Palestinian question on its head. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu skilfully turned Iran into the burning issue in the Middle East, totally eclipsing the Palestine question. Israel has never been in a more comfortable position after having made diplomatic inroads into the Arab world. It has no anxiety about Pakistan.

Furthermore, the issues relating to Pakistan have changed so much in Washington putting the Republicans and Democrats on the same side. Both hold a critical view of Pakistan now formed cumulatively over the decades beginning with the walking away of America from Afghanistan in 1989, the invocation of the [Pressler Amendment in 1990](#), "which authorised banning most military and economic assistance to Pakistan if an annual presidential determination that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear device was not given", and the start of the radiance of the *jihadist* threat in the region and beyond.

Pakistan's image was particularly dented in the past one decade by the failed Afghanistan war and the suspected harbouring of Osama Bin Laden. The US-India and China-Pakistan relations also started looming large on the American perceptions of Pakistan further hurting its standing in Washington. Israel cannot make it any worse or better. Pakistan's recognition of Israel will thus neither impress the administration nor obligate the Israeli lobby.

Yes, Israeli and Indian lobbies often act in concert against Pakistan in Washington but Israel now does it less out of any enmity for Pakistan but to help out India. If it stops teaming up with India because of the recognition, will Pakistan's life become any easier? No! The fact is India, by its own steam, can inflict harm on Pakistan's interests in Washington now. It is India that Pakistan has to worry about both because of the extraordinary relations between the US and India and the rising influence of Indian Americans in the government and political circles.

If recognition would be largely inconsequential in Washington, how will it play in the India-Pakistan relations? Will Israel become more even handed? No! It reminds us of the historically solid ties between Moscow and India. Pakistan always thought that if it could somehow befriend Moscow, it would help Islamabad in the India-Pakistan relations. The Russians did become friendly with the Pakistanis in the end but not at the expense of their ties with India. Israel will do the same. Relations with India are far too important to Israel, touching its core relations with the US on the one hand and its new-found friendship with the Arabs on the other.

If Pakistan improves its ties with the Gulf countries, it will arguably check any Israeli designs against Pakistan in view of its emerging relations with the Arab countries. That would be the next best thing to recognition. In the realpolitik balance sheet, benefits for Pakistan, if any, mainly bilaterally, would be marginal, failing to override strong moral, political and Kashmir-related reservations. There is, therefore, no real value in Pakistan recognising Israel.

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