

# PAKISTAN-ISRAEL RELATIONS AFTER THE ARAB WORLD'S GEOPOLITICAL GRAVITATION TOWARDS ISRAEL

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## ABSTRACT

Security and financial diversification are the major, but not the only, reasons behind the recent Arab world's geopolitical gravitation towards Israel. It was vehemently believed that a formal move of the Arab world towards normalizations of relations with Israel will compel Pakistan to revisit her Israel policy and will eventually lead to normalization of relations with Israel. But the recent wave of normalizing of relations between Arab states and Israel proved this theory flawed. Now, the decades-old overt and covert contacts and visits between the Arabs and Israelis resulted in the formal announcements of normalization of relations between four major Arab countries and Israel. However, Pakistan has denied any change in her long-standing Israel policy even after the extreme pressure from some Arab countries and the Trump Administration. This article will analyze Pakistan's stance after the Arab world's geopolitical gravitation towards Israel and the believed pressure from some Arab countries and the Trump Administration on Pakistan with regards to the normalization of relations with Israel. This article will also discuss the historical background of Pakistan-Israel relations, contacts between the two ideological states, various tensions between the two, and believed constraints, such as the Iranian factor, the Kashmir Issue, the fear of the Islamist revolt, and so on.

**Keywords:** *Israel, Pakistan, Relations, Recognition, Diplomatic Relations, Arabs Geopolitical Gravitation.*

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## **ARAP DÜNYASININ İSRAİL'E YÖNELİK JEOPOLİTİK ÇEKİMİNDEN SONRA PAKİSTAN-İSRAİL İLİŞKİLERİ**

### **ÖZ**

Güvenlik ve finansal çeşitlendirme, son Arap dünyasının İsrail'e yönelik jeopolitik çekiminin arkasındaki başlıca nedenler, ancak sadece değil. Arap dünyasının İsrail ile ilişkilerini normalleştirmeye yönelik resmi bir hareketinin Pakistan'ı İsrail politikasını yeniden gözden geçirmeye zorlayacağına ve sonunda İsrail ile ilişkilerin normalleşmesine yol açacağına şiddetle inanılıyordu. Ancak Arap devletleri ile İsrail arasındaki ilişkilerin son zamanlardaki normalleşme dalgası bu teorinin hatalı olduğunu kanıtladı. Şimdi, Araplar ve İsraililer arasında onlarca yıllık açık ve gizli temas ve ziyaretler, dört büyük Arap ülkesi ile İsrail arasındaki ilişkilerin normalleştiğinin resmi olarak duyurulmasıyla sonuçlandı. Ancak Pakistan, uzun süredir devam eden İsrail politikasında herhangi bir değişikliği reddetti. Bu makale, Arap dünyasının İsrail'e yönelik jeopolitik çekiminden sonra Pakistan'ın duruşunu ve bazı Arap ülkeleri ile Trump yönetiminin Pakistan üzerinde İsrail ile ilişkilerin normalleşmesine ilişkin inanılan baskısını analiz edecek. Bu makale ayrıca İran faktörü, Keşmir Sorunu, İslamcı isyan korkusu gibi tarihsel arka planı, temasları, çeşitli gerilimleri ve inanılan kısıtlamaları tartışacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *İsrail, Pakistan, İlişkiler, Tanıma, Diplomatik İlişkiler, Araplar Jeopolitik Çekim.*

## INTRODUCTION

History witnessed that Pakistan and Israel are never been at war or in any other kind of conflict with each other. However, to articulate support with Arab Muslim states with regards to the Palestinian cause and her fears that India-Israel both are working against her security, eventually disturbing the sub-continent balance of power, Pakistan rebuffed to accord recognition to Israel as a state since its creation (Sajjad, 2015). It is not just these disquiets that halted Pakistan from according recognition to the state of Israel but it has a lot to do with her history, geopolitics and internal & external believed constraints. Even before the creation of Pakistan, not merely the then All India Muslim League (AIML) throws its weight in support of Palestinian Muslims but even the Indian National Congress (INC) supported the Palestinian cause as well. It was all because of their own independence struggle against the British that enabled them to identify themselves with Palestinians. Patently, the two political parties had different points of view but they were both against the inception of the Israeli State. Therefore, their pre-independence struggle approaches, pertaining to the Palestinian issue, are reflected in their foreign policies after their independence as well. Muslims of the subcontinent were well aware of British deception and their divide & role policy, so they were among the first ones who extended their support to Palestinians. All India Muslim League (AIML) expressed their disquiets over the “safety & sanctity of the Holy Places” shortly Mr. Balfour officially admitted the British aid in constituting a homeland for the Jews in Palestine. Thus, owing to the historical background Pakistan extended support to Palestinians (Pirzada, 1969 and 1970).

Pertaining to their similarities, Israel and Pakistan came into being in the name of religious minorities’ rights protection. Both ideological states have many more things in common than normally believed. Both states had to foist languages, orchestrate identities, and deal with peculiar borders, and both successfully averted theocracies. Moreover, though both countries came into being to erect a harbor for all the Jews in the world and all the Muslims of India, both encountered the reality that more Jews and Indian Muslims are living outside the new anticipated Elysium’s (Kumaraswami, 2006).

Though, Pakistan never softened her stance on the Palestinian issue. However, still, the first foreign minister of Pakistan Zafarullah Khan had held several meetings with the Israelis in the 1950s. Pakistan’s former FM Khurshid Kasuri met his Israeli counterpart in 2005 (URL-8). Therefore, the decades of hostile rhetoric towards Israel have not halted Pakistan from establishing, if not full, some contacts with the Jewish state (Kumaraswami, 2006).

During the Cold War, Pakistan allowed the state of Israel to aid the Afghan Mujahidin, fighting against the then Soviet invasion, during the war in

Afghanistan. President Musharraf was very open towards normalization and started an open intellectual and academic debate on recognizing the State of Israel (Crile, 2015). Thus, this led to a foreign minister's landmark meeting of both countries in Istanbul in 2005. As it was deemed a taboo before, the Israel issue has now been openly debated in Pakistan (Javaid & Khan, 2014). In 2018, a debate was sparked by a prominent Pakistani journalist on social media by tweeting that "High time Pakistan counter nefarious Indian designs with bold foreign policy moves. Our deepest friends making fresh alignments [signaling towards the recent Arab world's geopolitical gravitation towards Israel]. No permanent friends no enemies. Why can't we openly debate the pros [&] cons of opening direct and overt channels of communication with the State of Israel?" (URL-9). After the recent normalization wave of Arab States with Israel, news of Pakistan's possible normalization of relation were widely circulated. However, despite the extreme pressure on Pakistan to normalize relations with Israel, the incumbent prime minister of Pakistan Imran Khan and the government of Pakistan explicitly denied any move or intentions towards normalization of relations with Israel without the resolution of the Palestinian issue.

With regards to the recent development in the Arab-Israel relations, major Arab States are all cozying up with Israel and turning their wrath towards Iran - their common arch-enemy. Before the formal announcement of normalization, the Foreign Minister of Bahrain Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa has backed Israeli airstrikes on Iranian interests in Syria. The United Arab Emirate had hosted visits of officials from Israel and Israel's Prime Minister was on his official visit to Oman in 2018 (URL-8). Now finally the UAE and Bahrain announced the normalization of relations with Israel on 15 September 2020, followed by Sudan and Morocco on October 23, and December 10, 2020, respectively.

This article will address the main question, whether it is the right time for Pakistan to recognize Israel, especially after the Arab world's geopolitical gravitation towards Israel. Also, the article articulates the history, believed constraints, various tensions, and the recent Arab world's geopolitical gravitation towards Israel.

## **HISTORY AND CONTACTS**

Pakistan and Israel came into being in 1947 and 1948 respectively. Both were created on religious ideological bases. In the case of Pakistan, it was the eminent "Two nation Theory", and Israel was founded on the very old ideology of Homeland for Jews (URL-17). During the independence struggle from the British, not only the All India Muslim League (AIML) but even the Indian National Congress (INC) had supported the Palestinian cause and opposed the

inception of the state of Israel (Pirzada, 1969 and 1970). To establish diplomatic ties with Pakistan, the maiden PM of Israel Mr. David Ben-Gurion reached out to Mr. Muhammad Ali Jinnah through a telegram but Jinnah never responded to him (Kumaraswamy, 1997).

In the 1950s, Pakistan's Ambassador to the UK and Israel's officials did make some contacts with regards to establishing an embassy in Karachi, or at minimum to start trade with each other [but the efforts failed because of the Palestinian issue]. Furthermore, the then foreign minister of Pakistan Zafarullah Khan met his counterpart, Abba Eban, in New York, in January 1953. The agenda of that meeting was to discuss the relations between the two countries. Pertaining to relations between both the countries, Mr. Khan told the Israeli FM that there is no chance of normalization of relations between the two countries in the foreseeable future (Yegar, 2007) and because of the Palestinian cause, Zafarullah Khan opposed the idea of a Jewish state in the United Nations General Assembly session in Oct 1947 (URL-18).

George Crile had claimed in his book "Charlie Wilson's War" that during the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, The Spy agency of the United States, Pakistan, Israel, and Britain had conducted a secret operation by the name "Operation Cyclone". [To fight the USSR which was knocking on Pakistan's doors. Any pragmatic state would do the same and patently state does collaborate against their common enemies. Besides, the Saudi intelligence agency also played a role in the said war]. Furthermore, It is said that the then PM Benazir Bhutto had held a covert meeting with the Israeli delegate, who specially went to the US during Benazir's visit to Washington DC, in 1995 (Crile, 2015).

Moreover, the Pakistani incumbents to the United Nations were frequently approached by the Israeli ambassador to the UN, Gad Yaacobi, in the 1990's era. The representatives of the American Jewish Committee and Anti-Defamation League, held a meeting with the Pakistani ambassador to the U.S and the UN, in hopes to bring the two countries closer towards normalization. Soon, Isi Leibler, vice president of the World Jewish Congress, flew to the Pakistani capital Islamabad and met with the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's brother Shahbaz Sharif. Sharif told him about the Israeli plot to bomb the Pakistani nuclear sites, giving training to the Indian commandos, and he told Isi Leibler that Pakistan's stance regarding Israel will alter after a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian issue (Yegar, 2007).

During the reign of General Pervez Musharraf, he started the debate of Islamabad's diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv (URL-3). It was this push that led both the countries into a landmark formal foreign ministers meeting (URL-

4). Nevertheless, Musharraf did say that Pakistan will not accord recognition to the state of Israel until the establishment of a Palestinian independent state (URL-21). Furthermore, according to Britain's department of business report, Pakistan along with few other Arab countries was accused of purchasing defense equipment from Israel, however, the public relations wing of Pakistan's armed forces, ISPR (Inter-service public relations), and the state of Israel, both refuted the news (URL-6). Upon the circulation of a report in the Pakistani media of an Israeli jet landing in Pakistan, in 2018, a debate sparked in Pakistan on the issue of Pakistan's foreign policy shift pertaining to the recognition of Israel. However, Later, during his visit to the United States to attend the General Assembly, the incumbent Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, denied the speculations of any change in policy regarding Israel (URL-1).

### **VICARIOUS TENSIONS**

Israel plotted to bomb and destroys the Pakistani Kahuta nuclear reactor to scuttle the so-called dubbed as the "Islamic bomb". But India rebuffed to bestow permission of landing and refueling to the Israeli jets. (Levy & Scott-Clark, 2008; Schneider, 1995). Moreover, the Israeli Prime Minister refused to dine in the Serafina restaurant in New York after knowing that the Pakistani Prime Minister Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif will also be dining in the same restaurant – 2 Oct 2015 (URL-13). When it comes to the Pakistani side, it is believed that during Israel's war of independence, Pakistan purchased 250,000 guns that were transported to the Arabs (Yegar, 2007). During the Arab-Israel war, the Pakistani Air force (PAF) aided the Arabs and a PAF pilot by the name Saif-ul-Azm shot down 4 Israeli jets (URL-10). Last but not the least, Pakistani Passport holders cannot visit the state of Israel. The following quote is mentioned on the Pakistani Passport, "This passport is valid for all countries of the world except Israel"

### **INTERNAL & EXTERNAL BELIEVED CONSTRAINTS**

Several other believed constraints impede Pakistan from formally recognizing the state of Israel. For instance, [it is believed that] the fear of Islamist and inner instability is one of the main reasons that halts Pakistani leadership from establishing diplomatic relations with Israel (Yegar, 2007). Furthermore, Divya Malhotra argued that ratification from Mecca will ease the fury of the ultra-Islamists and may help quash the fears of Pakistan of an internal revolt (Malhotra, 2019). However, this is proven wrong by the recent developments in the Arab world with regards to Israel. The Pakistani state has the power to control these ultra-Islamist factions as she successfully did during the Faizabad sit-in crisis in 2017, created by the ultra-Sunni Islamist party, Tehrik-e-labbaik Pakistan (TLP). Secondly, despite the believed pressure from the incumbent Saudi government,

which is more inclined towards Israel than all previous Saudi governments, Pakistan refused normalization of relations with Israel.

Along with fears of believed inner instability and revolt from the ultra-Islamist factions, there are other some believed external impediments as well. For instance, according to Dr. Moshe Yegar, the biggest constraint of Pakistan is to show solidarity with fellow Muslim Arab countries (Yegar, 2007). Secondly, it is believed that Pakistan does not want to be alienated in the Arab Muslim world. If Pakistan establishes ties with Israel without the consent of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan might face an economic boycott from her Middle Eastern friends. However, the recent Arab gravitation and pressure on Pakistan to recognize Israel prove all these theories wrong. As stated earlier, despite the believed pressure from some Arab countries and the Trump Administration, Pakistan refused normalization of relations with Israel and linked the issue with the resolution of the Palestinian issue. Therefore, the Pakistani stance over the recognition issue is more historical and ideological than the said believed constraints except the Iranian factor and the issue of Kashmir.

Iran is a huge factor in Pakistan-Israel relations. It is argued that Iran, as an immediate neighbor of Pakistan, compels Pakistan to think before according any formal recognition to the state of Israel. After the inception of Pakistan, Iran was the very first nation that accorded recognition to Pakistan and the then Shah of Iran, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, was the first foreign leader that visited the nascent nation, Pakistan (URL-12). During the pro-U.S Iranian regime of Reza Shah, Pakistan had enjoyed fairly intimate relations with her immediate neighbor – Iran. However, after the fall of the shah, a Shia-Islamist regime had been established by Ayatollah Khomeini, and Pak-Iran relations become soured. This was all happening during the reign of General Zia-ul-Haq – a Sunni Islamist Pakistani head of state. Thus, quite naturally, Pakistan started looking towards the Sunni Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia. However, it is hard to ignore Iran completely because Iran is an immediate neighbor of Pakistan and has the world's fourth natural Gas and oil reserves which is the cheapest option for Pakistan to fulfill its energy needs (Malhotra, 2019). Secondly, Pakistan has the second biggest Shia Muslim population in the world – after Iran. [Throughout the Middle East, Iran is using Shia Muslims as her proxies in the region to serve her interests]. Pakistan cannot sustain instability and a Sunni-Shia conflict within her borders (URL-23), especially after coming out of a brutal war on terror that devastated the country. Thirdly, having a hostile relation with India in the east and tense relations with Afghanistan in the west, Pakistan cannot afford to let turn another neighbor hostile towards her. Thus, Pakistan is playing a balancing role between the Saudis and Iranians – Shia & Sunnis – but this is a difficult path to



walk on. Any over gravitation of Pakistan towards the Sunni Arab states can turn Iran hostile towards Pakistan and Iran has the full capacity to fuel the Balochi separatists in Pakistani Baluchistan province against the establishment. Adding up Israel into the equation may further disrupt this balance (Malhotra, 2019).

The Kashmir conflict is another impediment in the way of Pakistan to normalize relations with Israel. Without a resolution of the Palestinian issue, recognizing Israel will be disastrous for Pakistan's Kashmir policy. Therefore, recognition of Israel without a resolution of the Palestinian issue will automatically mean Pakistan is losing its claim of Kashmir (URL-25). According to the Aljazeera report, during the foreign minister of Pakistan's visit to the UAE in December 2020, he made it clear to the UAE that Pakistan cannot recognize Israel without the resolution of the Palestinian Issue. "I categorically presented Pakistan's stance on Israel to the UAE's foreign minister that we will not and cannot establish a relationship with Israel until a concrete and permanent solution to the Palestine issue is found," Shah Mahmood Qureshi told reporters. He also explained to the UAE the "depth of emotions and feelings Pakistanis have about Palestine and Kashmir" (URL-24).

## **ARAB WORLD'S RECENT GEOPOLITICAL GRAVITATION TOWARDS ISRAEL**

Without going into the history, it is more appropriate to throw some light on the very recent developments and contacts between the Arab states and Israel. An unprecedented shift has been seen in the Gulf States relations towards Israel as they are all teaming up for a common enemy – Iran ( URL-17). After Egypt and Jordan signing peace treaties with Israel, now other Arab countries are also taking steps towards normalization and diplomatic relations with Israel. UAE and Bahrain announced the normalization of relations with Israel on 15 September 2020, and following the footsteps of these two, Sudan and Morocco also announced the normalization of relations with Israel on October 23, and December 10, 2020, respectively. Furthermore, the visit of Iraqi officials to Tel Aviv, security coordination by the Egyptians with Israel in the Sinai region, and visits of Arab states by Israeli officials including the visit of Israeli PM Bibi Netanyahu to Oman in Oct 2018 are all connected with the recent Arab world's geopolitical gravitation towards Israel. In a TV interview Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, President of Egypt, said: "Our air forces must sometimes enter Israeli airspace, so there is good coordination ... and there is cooperation" (URL-2).

According to the then ex-communication minister of Israel, Ayoob Kara, that Saudi Arabia is keen to purchase natural gas from the State of Israel. This will directly



link the kingdom to the Israeli city Eilat ( URL-17). In Oct 2018, the Israeli Prime Minister visit to Oman left everyone stunned. He was accompanied by his wife, [the head of the Israeli spy agency Mossad, the national security advisor, and the director-general of the foreign ministry] and other government officials (URL-16). PM Netanyahu said: “This visit comes against the background of diplomatic efforts that I have been promoting in recent years vis-à-vis the Arab countries. There will be more” (Krasna, 2018a). Here it is to be noted that the Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas also visited Oman 3 days ahead of Netanyahu’s visit. Furthermore, Bahrain’s FM said: “We have never ever questioned the wisdom and farsightedness of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos in trying to help and do their part in trying to reach a solution for this [Palestinian-Israeli] issue... We look forward to Sultan Qaboos succeeding in his effort” (URL-16). [Before the official announcement of normalization of relations with Israel on 15 September 2020], an Israeli minister flew to the UAE for a judo tournament in Oct 2018. Israel’s team won gold and its national anthem was played for the first time in the history of UAE (URL-14). The minister also visited the beautiful Sheikh Zayed mosque accompanying by UAE officials (URL-7). Ayoob Kara, the then Israeli minister of communications visited the UAE to attain the International Telecommunication Union Plenipotentiary Conference (URL-11). In May 2019, a new rabbi has been appointed in a synagogue in Dubai which was empty since its erection a couple of years ago (URL-19). In November 2018, Eli Cohen, the economy minister of Israel, received an invitation to participate in a conference in Bahrain in April 2019 (URL-20). However, due to security concerns and a public outcry, the visit was canceled. Eli Cohen said that his planned visit to Bahrain to attain the conference has been “delayed due to political Issues” (URL-15). In Feb 2019, under the leadership of Mike Pence, vice president of the United States during the President Trump administration, a meeting was held in Warsaw where the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu met with Saudi, UAE, and two other Arab countries foreign ministers. The agenda of the meeting was the containment of Iran. More significantly, this meeting was not kept covert ( URL-17). In November 2017, the Israel Defense Forces chief of general staff, Lieutenant General Gadi Eizenkot, gave an exclusive interview to Saudi media – which was unthinkable a decade ago (URL-22). Therefore, it is impossible to believe that the Gulf States are acting on their own without the consent of Saudi Arabia. The Gulf States might be encouraged by Saudi Arabia – with the backing of the Trump administration – to warm-up their relations with Israel [and this has now been proven when Saudi Arabia did not censure UAE, Sudan, Morocco and Bahrain for officially recognizing Israel]. The Saudi regime might be testing the reaction of the Arab masses and trying to curtail the cost for Saudi normalization with Israel in the future (URL-5).

To understand the background and the reason behind the official recognition of Israel by four Arab states and the frequent unprecedented contacts of the Arab world with Israel, we have to throw some light on the Iranian factor. Since the famously known P-5+1 Iranian nuclear deal, signed by France, Russia, the USA (Obama's administration), China, United Kingdom and Iran, the relations between the Arab States and Israel have been enormously improved as they collectively condemned the deal. However, the Trump administration pulled out the United States from this deal, and under the Trump administration, the urge in the Sunni Arab Muslim countries to strengthening ties with Israel further intensified. Their common foe, Iran, brought both the Arabs and the Israelis together (Krasna, 2018b). Furthermore, the Arab Spring weakened the Arab countries and they are now more concerned about their internal security and stability. Thus, the Palestinian issue took a backseat. They are now more interested in intelligence sharing and security-related cooperation, including with Israel – especially after the ISIS and Iranian proxy threats (Krasna, 2018a). Secondly, the Arab states are now more interested in diversifying their economies to cut dependence on oil to prepare for the post-oil era.

With regards to Pakistan's Israel policy, It was believed that a change in atmosphere in the Arab world regarding Israel may also pave the way for Pakistan to take steps towards normalization of relations with Israel, but this theory was erroneous. Despite the change in the Arab world regarding Israel, Pakistan is steadfast in her traditional stance regarding the former. Therefore, the Arab gravitation is not going to impact Pakistan's policy until the Palestinian gives her a green signal. This might strain relations with her traditional allies but the cost of recognition for Pakistan is much higher than a strain in relations with allies.

## **CONCLUSION**

The economic and security interests of Arab the world superseded their Palestinian policy. They are now more interested in the containment of Iran, intelligence sharing, security and economic ties with Israel than the resolution of the Palestinian issue. Iran has now their major concern especially after the famous nuclear deal between Iran and five major countries. Thus, this brought the Arab world closer to Israel. With regards to Pakistan, despite the recent Arab world's geopolitical gravitation towards Israel and some believed pressure from some Arab countries and the Trump Administration, Pakistan refused and cannot normalize relations with Israel because of her ethical stance on the Palestinian and Kashmir issue, the historical background, geopolitics and the Iranian factor. Pakistan cannot afford to turn Iran hostile because of the huge Shia population, economic ties, and geopolitical concerns. A peaceful resolution of the Palestinian problem will definitely open doors for Pakistan towards normalization. For

Pakistan, normalization of relations with Israel may not be very helpful at this stage because of two major reasons. (1) Pakistan will lose its moral and ethical standing on both issues, Kashmir and Palestine. (2) Fear of hostility in Pak-Iran relations and fear of Iranian proxies using the 20% Shia pollutions of Pakistan. Therefore, Pakistan's Israel policy and constraints are very different from the major Arab States. Secondly, being a nuclear power, Pakistan cannot follow other and change her policy for someone else interests. So, the Arab world's gravitation and pressure are not going to change Pakistan's policy towards Israel until the Palestinian gives her a green signal. This might strain Pakistan's relations with her traditional allies (the Arab World, especially with the Saudis and Emiratis) but the cost of recognition for Pakistan is much higher than a strain in relations with her allies. Therefore, the possibility of Pakistan changing her Israel policy or recognizing the latter is next to zero, at least for the time being.

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