

Pakistan's Foreign Policy towards Israel: A Critical Appraisal

Author:

Hassan F. Virk

Lecturer of Policy, Political Science, and Development Studies at the School of Integrated Social Sciences and
Research Associate at CSSPR, University of Lahore.

ABSTRACT

The foreign policy of Pakistan has been incoherent and shifty since its inception. The reason behind this volatility is that the policy-makers, rather than focusing on the policy process and the outcomes, have always succumbed to socio-religious pressures. Resultantly the major powers of the world have manipulated Pakistan into doing their bids. The negative aspects of Pakistan's foreign policy are not hard to discern: the gap between policy and strategy, xenophobic tendencies, domestic politics negatively affecting the foreign policy process and vice versa – including the civil-military discord and influence of religious pressure groups. This disorderly nature of foreign policy can be traced back to the decolonization and Partition of India in 1947.

To appraise Pakistan's Israel policy, this paper has been divided into two parts: the first indulges in a critical historical method of interpretation while the second attempts to formulate a new perspective on Pakistan's foreign policy towards Israel while offering clarification to some contemporary problems in the framing and implementation of Pakistan's future foreign policy towards Israel.

Keywords: Pakistan, foreign policy, Arab-Israel, rapprochement, new perspective.

Introduction

In between episodes of violence recurring in Gaza and throughout the steady expansion of urban settlements in the West Bank and Zionist occupation of Palestinian lands¹ (Salamanca et al., 2012), Pakistan's behavior (both as a country and a Muslim entity) towards Israel (as a country and Jewish entity) has been estranged. This estrangement didn't always mean a non-negotiable boycott of each other; there have been quite a few attempts at rapprochement and normalization (Malhotra, 2019).

Nonetheless, quite a few policy critics have taken for granted Pakistan's stance on Israel as hyphenated with Palestine. This surface-level and supposedly forever boycott of relations with Israel cannot be understood without taking the historical and geopolitical aspects into account. To navigate the contours of Pakistan's Israel policy, we will have to move back and forth through the decades, to rule out any chance of anachronism.

Pakistan's creation in the post-WWII bipolar world tainted the country's foreign policy. Back when the two superpowers extended their invitations to Pakistan and India, the former leaped towards the U.S. giving USSR a cold shoulder (Hyder, 1966); while the latter, despite its socialist inclinations, refused to join either of the blocs in favor of non-alignment.

Some fundamental questions make this paper a critical appraisal; such as:

1. What are the economic benefits of the Israel-Pakistan rapprochement?
2. Whether economic need supersedes the other foreign policy determinants or not?

¹ "The settler-colonial structure undergirding Israeli practices takes on a painful array of manifestations: aerial and maritime bombardment, massacre and invasion, home demolitions, land theft, identity card confiscation, racist laws and loyalty tests, the wall, the siege on Gaza, cultural appropriation, dependence on willing (or unwilling) native collaboration regarding security arrangements, all with the continued support and backing of imperial powers" (See: Salamanca et al., 2012).

3. How has the conflict within Pakistan's foreign policy towards Israel diverged from the original conflict of Palestine?
4. Has the Indian approach towards Israel been a dominant factor in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy?
5. With quite a few Muslim countries leaning towards normalization, what does the future shape of Pakistan's Israel policy look like?

To answer the aforementioned questions and to further account history, a comprehensive amalgamation of different aspects has been laid out in the succeeding section on foreign policy perspectives.

Key Perspectives on Pakistan's Israel Policy

Four perspectives surround the debate on Pakistan's foreign policy towards Israel: historical-colonial perspective, Islamic-Arab coalition perspective, clandestine diplomacy, and sociopolitical or domestic perspectives.

Historical-Colonial Perspective. History has its own pace and forward momentum: it flows river-like, making way through all terrains. Regardless of Pakistan's rejection of Israel as a state, the two countries have a history together.

Looking into the annals of history one finds shocking similarities between the creation of Pakistan and Israel: a national home for Jews and another one for Muslims (Devji, 2013). Besides being ideological twins, the roles played by the British colonials in their formation overlap (Kumaraswamy, 1997; Strawson, 2019).

For two decades after the Balfour Declaration, a steady flow of Jewish immigrants to British-mandated Palestine, and violence against the Arabs by Zionist militias had been overseen by the empire itself. But this tide of cooperative colonialism turned in 1939 when the British Empire restricted immigration to Palestine in the aftermath of the Arab Revolt which left thousands of Arabs dead or wounded. Nonetheless, throughout WW II the passage of Jews fleeing Nazi persecution to the Promised Land continued covertly. It was only after the war when Jewish insurgency against the British administration kicked off in Palestine over the issue of restriction. Once again when the empire tried to mediate a division of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states with Jerusalem under trusteeship, both parties to the conflict were very loath of this idea and violence recurred. Soon, after referring the matter to the UN, the British chickened out of Palestine –declaring an end to the mandate² (Cavanagh& Veracini, 2016).

Simultaneously in British India, Punjab was partitioned arbitrarily by Sir Cyril Radcliffe in 1947 which resulted in communal riots and retributive genocide, killing millions. In both Palestine and Punjab, the British Empire could've stopped the massacres but it had chosen to procrastinate. This gross mishandling of the affairs of decolonization culminated in two wars in 1948: the First Kashmir War and the Arab-Israel War.

This chain of events laid fertile ground where resentments and rivalry would grow between India-Pakistan and Pakistan-Israel.

²On a side note, it has also been misconstrued that Israel went on to become a settler-colonial entity because the land where it is located was repeatedly subjected to settler-colonialism over time (Fox, 2019): land has geographical and social traits but not hereditary.

Islamic-Arab Coalition Perspective. One of the main reasons that Pakistan maintained for its Israel policy has been religious solidarity with the Arab-Muslim countries. As Yagar (2007) links it to a trend or inclination in Asian Muslim countries,

“Hatred of Israel, and the refusal to recognize or establish diplomatic relations with it, is evident to some extent in all Muslim countries in Asia. This phenomenon is based on feelings of Islamic solidarity with Arab countries and a sense of religious belonging to the global Islamic community, the *umma(h)*.”

In its nascent years, Pakistan adopted a mixed foreign policy by inclining towards the West but not recognizing Israel, the project state of the West, in solidarity with Palestinian Muslims.

India’s recognition of the State of Israel in 1950 was followed by Nehru’s statement, "We would have [recognized Israel] long ago because Israel is a fact. We refrained because of our desire not to offend the sentiments of our friends in the Arab countries" (Kumaraswamy, 1995). This recognition accorded India long-term benefits; for example, Israel helped India militarily in the war of 1971 (Raghavan, 2013).

In the 60s, Pakistan initiated a domestic funding drive and also sent fighter jets to help the Arabs in the Second Arab-Israel War.

This strife resulted in the defeat and humiliation of Arab countries and Palestine was almost surrendered to Israel. But it can be seen as the pilot of an Islamic collective security alliance; and, in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s vision, it was just the beginning. In the 70s, after the Fall of Dhaka, Bhutto tried to unite Arab leaders –mostly despotic monarchs who used the Palestinian card to cover oppression in their own regimes- into an Islamic Third World which went as far as

slapping an oil embargo on the West in retaliation to America's decision of re-supplying the Israeli forces in the Yom Kippur war. In retrospect, the focus seems less on Palestine and more on creating an alternate world order.

Sociopolitical Perspective.

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.

(Zia-ul-Haq, December 1981)³

Domestic and International: A Hybrid Determinant to Foreign Policy. The year 1979 saw Bhutto's hanging and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Then in the 80s, Pakistan made a swift transition to Islamization under General Zia who would hit two targets with one arrow: using the religious card to gain legitimacy for his military regime and to incite Mujahidin against the Soviet Union; hence, positioning himself as the 'last man standing between the free world and the Red Army. Another major factor was the rising apprehension about the possibility of becoming the next target of Communist expansion and Indo-Soviet relations only added to this fear. So, it colluded with the American and British intelligence agencies to run a decade-long anti-Soviet covert operation: *Operation Cyclone*. Interestingly, Soviet weapons captured by Israel were funneled to Mujahideen with prior consent from Pakistan. This manipulation of the then geopolitical milieu reduced Palestine to 'one of the problems faced by the Muslim world' – meanwhile, Israel speeded up its economic and diplomatic growth.

³*The Economist*, Dec. 12, 1981, p. 48. Quoted in Kumaraswamy (1997).

While Pakistan ventured into the marshlands of global Jihad and brought radicalization homewards, India had set the ground for diplomatic ties with Israel which commenced briefly after the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Migrant Labor. Pakistan, like other South Asian countries, encouraged its unemployed citizens to seek contract employment in the labor-scarce developing Arab countries. A major wave of mass migration of Pakistani labor had begun in the late 1960s before the oil boom kicked in (Khan, 1991).

Religion. Religious sentiments are a sensitive phenomenon in South Asia. Manipulation and silence amidst communal riots (in Palestine and Punjab in the 1940s) on behalf of the British Empire sowed seeds of hatred between different religious-based communities which would be born into enemy states –which later on forcefully demanded and were bestowed with sovereign statehood based on religion (Birnbaum, 2020).

Pakistan's political and military elite has always tried to coax the radical clergy toward political ends. According to Yagar (2007), Pakistan has avoided establishing diplomatic relations with Israel may cause instability within Pakistan. Kaura(2020)also attributes the dim prospects of an Israel-Pakistan rapprochement at present due to the ideological nature of the state of Pakistan and the Islamist orientation of its people.

Secret Diplomacy Perspective. Recognition of Israel, or a mere suggestion of it, has been one of the forbidden topics at the street level. An Op-Ed published in Haaretz by two Pakistani authors in August 2020 was severely and widely criticized (Roy & Virk, 2020).⁴ In

⁴ The surname in this publication is not co-incidental. In fact, I was the co-author. This opinion piece brought me under severe criticism and threats. A journalist went on to call me a 'foreign agent'. Fellow Muslims from different areas were calling me out as an apologist for Israeli genocide and suppression. Such unwarranted allegations lead

contrast, Israel was never actually a forbidden fruit in the policy and diplomatic circles of Pakistan: due to a manufactured public opinion, the conversations incendiary to public sentiment are tea-time conversations for the elite in Pakistan.

Israeli and Pakistani officials have indulged in back-channel diplomacy over the years (Kumaraswamy, 2006; Yagar, 2007). Reasons behind this secrecy are (a) fear of arousing adversity against Pakistan among radical Islamist groups in the Muslim world; and (b) maintaining the global image of Pakistan as a leading force in the Muslim world while exploring options for rapprochement with Israel (Kumaraswamy, 2006).

In the context of Israel's clandestine diplomacy, Kumaraswamy has worked towards creating a good deal of literature (Kumaraswamy, 2006;)

The country's dependency on the U.S., a strong bond with Saudi Arabia, and Indo-Israel defense collaboration have been the driving factors of secret Pakistan and Israel's secret diplomacy.

Towards the Fifth Perspective

Against this chronological backdrop, this paper is a pilot attempt at creating a new perspective on Pakistan's Israel policy. It is neither purely a foreign policy debate nor a study in international politics; but a multidisciplinary critical discourse. The basic premise is: that the equation of the Pak-Israel conflict vis-à-vis Arab-Israel conflict has grown into an inverse proportion.

This new discourse features, and lays down a basis for future research on, the following long-listed points of investigation:

to dangerous outcomes. I've been against the Palestinian and Kashmiri occupations but it doesn't mean that we can't open ourselves to discuss the way out of this mess. With the piece in question, I had intended to open a window to discussions on this forbidden topic.

Inverse Proportion. The more the original subsidiaries of the Israel-Palestine conflict (e.g. Egypt and Jordan) distanced themselves from the Palestinian crisis, the deeper went Pakistan's involvement.

Migrant Labor. Economic interests and foreign policy have been aligned in the context of Pakistan's migrant labor in Arab countries: in this case, Pakistan has a partial economic dependency on its friendly Arab states/kingdoms and that is one of the lesser-known reasons for Pakistan's Israel policy.

Secret Diplomacy with Israel. At some points, as in the 2000s during Palestinian intifadas and surge of terrorism domestically, Pakistan put on halt its concern with Palestine and indulged in secret diplomacy with Israel.

The Indo-Arab-Israel-US Quadruple Determinant. India established diplomatic ties on January 29, 1992, termed 'normalization'. The trouble with the South Asian region is that normalcy has never been a fixed measure: one country's normal is abnormal for another country (Ahmed *et al*, 2015). By that logic, the very essence of 'normal' can be brought into question. While Pakistan was pleasing the Arab world by boycotting Israel, India became a formidable IT entity and trade partner which the Arab countries needed badly to modernize their economies. So, the question is whether economic need supersedes the other foreign policy determinants or not.

Drawing a comparison between India and Israel, Khan (2011) links the parallel emergence of India and Israel in the post-9/11 period as industrialized and technologically-advanced states...pursuing their common hegemonic agendas of 'Greater Israel' and 'Akhand Bharat', since their inception. Both countries have an oppressive attitude and hostility towards their

neighbors and, both have forcibly occupied areas beyond their geographical borders.⁵Due to these and some other common factors, for example, rivalry with Pakistan, a friendly relationship emanates between the two countries.

Today when India and Israel are about to complete three decades of bilateral relations, J&K has been annexed by India, and Israel is on the verge of annexing the West Bank, the question to be asked is: What has Pakistan hitherto gained, and what plans to achieve in future, from a perpetual rejection of Israel?

Other than India, the U.S. alliance with Israel has also been one of the key factors to further boggle Pakistan's Israel policy (Niazi, 1998; Leng, 2000; Kaura, 2020). Between ideology, alliance, aid, and military assistance, the country could never decide on an all-weather scheme of foreign affairs. Israel has been the biggest U.S. civilian and military aid recipient for the past 60 years. Other than the American security and geopolitical interests, this relationship has been attributed to the powerful Jewish lobby within the U.S. as manifested in the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). This aid relation affects Pakistan directly (Ali et al., 2016).

Questioning the Muslim Question.

The Israel-Palestine conflict was originally an issue of settler-colonialism, forced displacement of natives, and occupation; but, soon it progressed into or was painted as a 'Muslim' problem. In this transformation of conflict, several internal and external forces kept putting pressure on all the parties involved.

Gandhi's 1938 remark substantiates the original secular nature of this conflict,

⁵ For a similar analogous study, see: Jangid (2021).

‘Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French!’⁶

When Jawaharlal Nehru recognized Israel saying that ‘Israel is a fact’ (Roy & Virk, 2020; Jangid, 2021), it was seemingly an act of departure from Gandhian values. But is there an alternate explanation for opting to recognize? There can be several ways India’s decision could be explained: as a competitive policy option against Pakistan’s rejection of Israel as a bastard child of Europe’; a long-term strategy to make non-alignment practical; Whatever intellectual sense it makes, India had reversed its four-decades-old policy of recognition-without-relations in January 1992 and normalized relations with Israel.

Gandhi’s remark can be found quoted often in prominent writings, on India’s policy towards Israel, both prior to and post normalization in January 1992. Kumaraswamy (2020) pertinently suggests that “despite the changed circumstances, the continued flagging of Gandhi to explain India’s policy towards Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict raises an important question: why cite Gandhi’s pro-Arab statement when Indo-Israeli relations have been blossoming remarkably?”

The Indian polity, while being a passive participant in the occupation of Kashmir whether by virtue of citizenship or national security vis-à-vis Pakistan, has been in confusion regarding the Palestinian question. India under PM Modi has become a regime governed by representative fascism. It has resulted in refreshing Indo-Israel relations (Kumaraswamy, 2017; Kaura, 2019; Kumar, 2019; Gupta et al., 2019; Puthan Purayil, 2020; Blarel, 2021). As the built order of South Asian national security and strategy goes, any upward progress in Indo-Israel bilateralism is

⁶ The Jews (1938), quoted in Kumaraswamy (2020).

bound to raise alarms in Pakistan. This has a direct bearing on Pakistan's Israel policy. Hence, it is more of a political than a religious issue today.

Roy & Virk (2020) wrote, "Pakistan's exclusionary foreign policy towards Israel has been due to its wrongdoings against Palestinian Muslims. But if that's the real reason then why hasn't Pakistan boycotted America for Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, and arming Israel against Hezbollah and PLO; China for Uyghur persecution; and India for Gujrat and Kashmir? If Egypt and Jordan, the directly affected countries of the Palestinian conflict, can make politico-economic deals with Israel for the good of their peoples, why can't Pakistan which is far removed from the conflict?"

Kaura(2020) argues why Pakistan might want to follow the other Muslim countries towards normalization, "...various Muslim states are establishing and/or seriously considering relations with Israel. In recent years, Israel's relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have marked an unprecedented improvement as the focus of many Arab countries has shifted from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to countering Iranian influence. India's ability to maintain close relations with Israel while maintaining good relations with many Middle Eastern countries and the Palestinians is seen by Pakistan's political elite as a strong reason for the need to have normal relations with the Jewish state"

There is a list of other Muslim countries which have recognized Israel and established diplomatic ties (Table 1) while still rejecting the violence perpetrated against the Palestinians (Rynhold & Yaari, 2020). Does it lead to the question of that is it practical for Pakistan to stand out?

Country	Year and Venue	Details
Turkey	1949	The first Muslim majority country to recognize the State of Israel
Egypt	1979, Washington, D.C.	Egypt–Israel peace treaty. ⁷
Jordan	1994, Arabah	Treaty of Peace Between the State of Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan: Wadi Araba Treaty ⁸
UAE	2020	UAE established diplomatic relations with Israel on August 13, 2020, and was mediated by the Trump administration. ⁹
Bahrain	2020	
Sudan	2020	
Morocco	2020	

Table 1. Recognition of Israel by Muslim Countries (1949-2021)

Contrary to what Yagar (2007) predicted that Pak-Israel tensions would thaw when the Arab countries normalize their relations with Israel, nothing of sort has happened as of yet.

⁷ Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Camp David Accords.
<https://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/camp%20david%20accords.aspx>

⁸Clyde Haberman (27 October 1994). "Israel and Jordan Sign a Peace Accord". *The New York Times*.

⁹Forde, K. (28 May 2021). "Profits or Palestine? UAE-Israel deals likely to continue quietly". *Alljazeera*.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/5/28/profits-or-palestine-uae-israel-deals-likely-to-continue-quietly>

Conclusions

Despite Indian domestic oppression of the Muslim minority and occupation leading to war crimes in Kashmir, there has been positive growth between India and the UAE. Along with the Emirates, some other Muslim countries are on the path of recognizing Israel –if not as a state, then as ‘fact’. The allegation of ‘profit over Palestinians’ on the Arab countries has been floated as well. In this context, commenting on the UAE-Israel agreement, SVP of the Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and Director, Middle East Program Jon B. Alterman suggests that, “these agreements are more significant for the Arab world than they are for Israel. Israelis may derive a certain amount of emotional security from feeling less isolated in the region, and they may get some marginal advantages that they could not have obtained otherwise in their struggle with Iran.”

If Pakistan positions itself as a leading force in the Muslim world, then which course it would follow as the trend to recognize has gained pace among the Muslim countries?

This paper has provided a critical history of Pakistan’s policy towards Israel and identified the complexities and multi-dimensional constraints, ranging from historical to sociopolitical and geopolitical of course, to the country’s foreign policy process. Based on its findings, the future shape of Pakistan’s foreign policy towards Israel can be discerned and further built upon. As a point of departure, it is safe to suggest that Pakistan can do much more for Palestinians if it can first do what needs to be done for Pakistanis.

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