

Why Pakistan Won't be Next to Normalize with Israel

Domestic constraints, support for Palestine and growing ties with Iran will likely continue to keep Pakistan and Israel apart

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The Abraham Accords have brought about peace between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain, with Sudan and Morocco also set to develop full diplomatic relations with Israel.

The guessing game is on as to which Arab or Muslim country might be next to recognize Israel. Pakistan is often mentioned in this regard and the Pakistani media have speculated about this too.

But near-term Pakistani-Israeli peace is unlikely because of Pakistani domestic constraints and Islamabad's foreign policy orientation.

Public debate in Pakistan regarding an approach to Israel is not a new phenomenon, and it is no longer taboo to advocate for normalization of relations. The leader of Pakistan in 2003, **General Pervez Musharraf**, advocated publicly for warming relations with Israel.

In September 2005, Pakistani **Foreign Minister Kurshid Kasiri** met his Israeli counterpart **Silvan Shalom** in Istanbul – a rare public meeting – but it failed to thaw relations between the two countries.

There have been other secret meetings between leaders of the two countries. There are journalists and even religious leaders that have spoken publicly about the need for Pakistan to open up to Israel.

What is equally clear is the great opposition to rapprochement with Israel, particularly among various Islamist circles that carry considerable political weight.

Moreover, anti-Semitic convictions are widespread in Pakistan. According to a 2019 Pew poll, 74% of Pakistanis held unfavorable views of Jews.

The official government position requires “a just settlement” to the Palestinian issue before a change in policy towards the Jewish state can be considered.

Recently, **Prime Minister Imran Khan** even admitted to resisting pressures from the US (and another unidentified country believed to be Saudi Arabia) to establish diplomatic ties to Israel.

It remains unclear, however, whether the Pakistani political elite can emulate Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states in decoupling the Palestinian issue from the potential benefits of building ties to Israel. A corollary unknown is the ability of more pragmatic elements of the Pakistani political elite to act against popular sentiments.

Pakistan's enmity towards Israel is of no real advantage to Pakistan. Arab states have not really supported Pakistan on the Kashmir issue. By boycotting Israel, Pakistan forfeits much needed Israeli expertise in agriculture, telecommunications, water management, medical services and high tech.

A relationship with Israel also could open doors in Washington, where Pakistan is increasingly under suspicion for cooperation with China and Islamist terrorists.

Pakistan should be under no illusion that Israel will give up what Narendra Modi has called "a strategic partnership" between India and Israel. The India-Israel tie involves strategic coordination, cooperation against terror, transfer of military technology, co-production of weapons, and arms sales.

Moreover, India is a huge and lucrative market for a variety of Israeli products and services. India is also a rising global power that in realpolitik terms is much more important than its western neighbor.

Finally, for Israel the alternative to India's economic and strategic weight is China. China's interactions with Israel are strictly limited to the economic realm due to American concerns about transfer of military or dual-use technology to its global rival.

The repeated discussions in Pakistan about ties with Israel are followed with interest only by the narrow Israeli foreign policy community. Most Israelis do not know much about Pakistan. Generally, its image is associated with Islamist terrorists that attacked, inter alia, Jewish targets in India in 2008.

The fact that **Osama bin Laden** found refuge in Pakistan reinforced this image. A growing number of Israelis, partly former backpacker hikers (over 20,000 per year), feel sympathy towards India, which is seen as the largest democracy displaying tolerance for Jews.

Nevertheless, Israel would welcome in principle any approach by an important Muslim state such as Pakistan. Israel always seeks to expand its international recognition and legitimacy.

Israel also has an interest in diluting the religious dimension of conflict in the ethno-religious Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In contrast to the more secular West, Israelis understand the importance of religious matters in politics.

In fact, the Abraham Accords were received in Israel enthusiastically, partly because the mere name of Abraham – a common ancestral father – lent religious legitimacy to Israel.

Israel also values its good relations with Muslim states in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Israelis expect Muslim states not to link disagreements regarding progress on the Palestinian question to decisions about establishing bilateral relations with Israel.

Unfortunately, international politics do not augur well for a near-term improvement in Israel-

Pakistan ties. Pakistan is getting closer to Iran, a country whose leadership seeks the destruction of Israel.

Islamabad's relations with Ankara, which is ruled by a Turkish version of the Muslim Brotherhood, have been traditionally close. Turkey's aggressive policies including sending mercenaries to fight in Kashmir are viewed in Jerusalem as an increasing security challenge.

Pakistan has also challenged Saudi leadership in the Muslim world, while Riyadh is moving closer to Israel and has played an important supporting role in American diplomatic efforts to expand the Abraham Accords.

Furthermore, Pakistan's links to China, its role in nuclear proliferation and its ambiguous posture towards Islamist extremists do not endear Pakistan in Washington, which is of course Israel's most important ally.

To Washington's displeasure, Pakistan also has failed to comply with guidelines of the Financial Action Task Force, an international anti-money laundering and anti-terrorism financial institution. In short, Pakistan's current foreign policy makes it an unattractive partner for Israel.

Considering domestic realities in Pakistan and Pakistan's foreign policy orientation, the occasional rumors of a breakthrough in ties between Jerusalem and Islamabad are likely to remain just that – unsubstantiated rumors.

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