

DEBATING THE INHERENT RISKS OF PAKISTAN'S POTENTIAL RECOGNITION OF ISRAEL



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Will Pakistan recognize Israel? The question has been recurrently discussed on Pakistan's mainstream news channels and social media platforms since the signing of the Abraham Accords between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel in 2020.¹ Since then, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan have also recognized Israel. As a result of their recognition, diplomatic pressure has been mounting on Islamabad from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the United States (US) to normalize ties with Israel.²

Pakistan has thus far defied this pressure. At the same time, Pakistan has tested the response of public opinion towards the potential Pakistani overtures toward Israel. At this juncture, Pakistani public opinion is staunchly pro-Palestine and anti-Israel, making it difficult for any elected government to overtly engage with Israel, let alone recognize it. At any rate, amid rapid transformations in the Middle East, Pakistan should articulate its diplomatic stance more voicefully on this issue, keeping in view its own interests and ground realities rather than bowing to external pressures.

A few years ago, it was unthinkable to have an open discussion on Pakistan-Israel engagement.³ However, the powerful Pakistani military establishment's willingness to allow an open media debate on the issue has removed the taboos attached to it in the past. In May, the debate was rekindled when Israel's President Isaac Herzog disclosed that he had met with a group of Pakistani-Americans while addressing the annual gathering of the World Economic Forum in Geneva, Switzerland.⁴ The visiting delegation included Pakistani journalist Ahmed Qureshi who worked for the state broadcaster, Pakistan Television. The revelations created a political uproar in Pakistan, and Qureshi was fired from his job.⁵ Subsequently, the Pakistani Senate passed a resolution condemning the Israeli atrocities against the Palestinians and urged the Pakistani government to highlight the Palestinian issue globally.⁶

Against this backdrop, this policy brief examines the positions of various Pakistani stakeholders vis-à-vis the question of normalizing relations with Israel. In doing so, the brief highlights how the debate on this issue is being steered in Pakistan. The second part of this brief discusses the potential pitfalls of Pakistan's recognition of Israel.

Context and Background

US President Joe Biden's July 13-16 Middle East visit had a three-point agenda: Israel, Iran and oil.⁷ In his visit, Biden made a new push for other Middle Eastern states to recognize Israel.⁸ Ahead of Biden's arrival in Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom opened its airspace for all international flights, thereby paving the way for flights to and from Israel.⁹ Some experts view this development as a sign of a Riyadh-Tel Aviv thaw, further bridging the diplomatic distance

***THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT
HAS HISTORICALLY BEEN SEEN IN
PAKISTAN AS A MUSLIM-JEWISH ISSUE
RATHER THAN AN ARAB-ISRAEL ISSUE***

between the two sides.¹⁰ Going forward, it will also bring into sharp focus the question of Pakistan's potential recognition of Israel, if at all, once again. For some observers, Saudi Arabia, Islamabad's principal economic patron which provides billions of dollars in loans and deferred payment oil facilities, cannot wait too long for the Pakistani civil-military leaders to sort out their inhibitions.¹¹

The Israel-Palestine conflict has historically been seen in Pakistan as a Muslim-Jewish issue rather than an Arab-Israel issue. This ideological framing of the Palestine-Israel dispute leaves very little space for the Pakistani leadership to accommodate the Saudi demand. Hence, unlike the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan, any purported Pakistani attempt to engage with Israel will be much slower, complicated and even conflict-prone. Pakistan's longstanding official position has been to not recognize Israel in the absence of a two-state resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict within the pre-1967 borders and East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state.

Positions of Pakistani Stakeholders on Israel's Recognition

Military Establishment

The Pakistani military establishment is the most influential stakeholder, which has been shaping Pakistan's foreign policy since its inception, directly and indirectly. The military establishment's input on rapprochement with Israel will be the most decisive factor. Unsurprisingly, its approach toward Israel is grounded in a realist approach. It views this discussion from a strategic perspective given the longstanding enmity with India. For the establishment, if recognizing Israel advances Pakistan's national and regional interests, Pakistan should take gradual steps in this direction, which is why the establishment has allowed for trial experiments through open media debate.

The establishment believes rapprochement with Israel can help Pakistan reduce the former's hostility to its geostrategic interests. As nuclear weapon states, Pakistan and Israel have identical stances on various issues concerning nuclear proliferation. Both have engaged in cooperative diplomacy with each other in the United Nations (UN) on nuclear nonproliferation debates. The establishment thinks diplomatic relations will create new opportunities for both countries to further enhance their cooperation and learn from each other.

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Furthermore, the establishment believes that by engaging with Israel, Pakistan can also diversify its options of countries from which it can buy cutting-edge military hardware. Pakistan's addition to Israel's list of weapon importers will also create an incentive for Tel Aviv to balance its dealing with Islamabad and Delhi. However, this argument is a bit far-fetched given the fact that India is a far bigger defense market than Pakistan. Besides, Tel Aviv will not compromise on its longstanding ties and overlapping interests with Delhi for Islamabad.

Mainstream Political Parties

Of the three mainstream political parties, namely the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI), the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the last two have pragmatic views of reproachment with Israel. Despite public denial, like the military establishment, they view it through a realist approach instead of an ideological lens. As political parties, the PPP and PMLN are equally cognizant of Pakistan's strategic interests and ground realities vis-à-vis the Middle East's shifting geopolitical landscape as well as the Saudi and Emirati demands. However, they realize that recognition of Israel is equivalent to political suicide. Pakistan's longstanding position on Kashmir also impedes their purported overtures towards Israel. Pakistan's Kashmir policy is based on supporting the Kashmiris' inalienable right-to-self-determination under the UN resolution. If Pakistan recognizes Israel without a two-state solution, it will undermine Pakistan's stance on Kashmir.¹² Before normalizing ties with Israel, Pakistan will have to pursue active diplomacy with India to settle the Kashmir question. Hence, these two parties, can only sensitize the public opinion towards the evolving Middle Eastern situation, but they cannot recognize Israel.

On the other hand, PTI of former Prime Minister Imran Khan, is more opportunistic and less pragmatic on this issue. In line with its populist agenda, it exploits the question of recognizing Israel for domestic politics to enhance its mass appeal. Khan has consistently claimed that his removal in a parliamentary vote of no-confidence in April was due to a US-sponsored plot in conjunction with India and Israel.¹³ Soon after the pictures of Qureshi's Israel visit were leaked on social media, PTI leader and former Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari termed it the new government's plan to recognize Israel.¹⁴

IN THE EVENT OF PAKISTAN'S RECOGNITION OF ISRAEL, MILITANT GROUPS LIKE TEHREEK-E-TALIBAN PAKISTAN (TTP), THE ISLAMIC STATE OF KHORASAN (IS-K) AND AL-QAEDA COULD ALSO EXPLOIT IT TO CARRY OUT ATTACKS AND ATTRACT FRESH RECRUITS

The Far-right and Religious Political Parties

Pakistan's diverse religio-political landscape is fragmented in its responses to the question of Israel's recognition. The Sunni and pro-Saudi Pakistan Ulema Council has more moderate views compared to Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazal (JUIF) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) which opposed the idea. Both JUIF and JI consider recognition of Israel without a two-state solution as a great betrayal to the Palestinians as well as a violation of Pakistani founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah's principle of supporting a two-state solution.¹⁵

On the other hand, the pro-Iran Shia political parties, such as Majlis Wahdat Al-Muslimeen (MWM), and other organizations view this issue from the lens of Sunni Gulf States and Israel's growing closeness in the region to isolate Iran.¹⁶ To them, any Pakistani move to normalize ties with Israel will be an outcome of Saudi and Emirati dictation. It is important to mention that Pakistan is home to a sizable Shia population which has great reverence for Iran as the heart of Shia Muslim world. On the eve of the Yemen War in 2015, the pro-Iranian lobby vehemently protested in major Pakistani cities and threatened to spark unrest if Pakistan joined the Saudi coalition to invade Yemen.¹⁷ These Shia political parties have threatened similar reactions should Pakistan recognize Israel.

In the event of Pakistan's recognition of Israel, militant groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) and Al-Qaeda could also exploit it to carry out attacks and attract fresh recruits. Lately, it has been observed that both al-Qaeda and IS-K have been latching onto issues which are emotionally appealing to Muslims. Hence, a Pakistani decision to recognize Israel could also result in a new wave of terrorist attacks in the country.

Public Opinion

Despite the evolving Middle Eastern geopolitical realities and the Arab-Israel normalization, the recognition of Israel is still a hard sell in Pakistan. Public opinion in Pakistan is staunchly opposed to the idea of recognizing Israel because the issue has been framed as a Jewish-Muslim problem instead of an Arab-Israel dispute. The common Pakistani has a strong emotional attachment with the Palestine issue. Indeed, every time there are Israeli atrocities against Palestine there are popular demonstrations in Pakistan. Every

year, Al-Quds day is zealously observed in Pakistan in solidarity with Palestine. In the public imagination, Israel is viewed as a national security threat.

Therefore, any decision to recognize Israel will be met with strong public disapproval in the absence of a two-state solution to the Palestine conflict. It would be seen as selling-out in return for material benefits and as a disservice to Islam. Due to the Kashmir and Palestine conflicts being identically framed as based on the principle of self-determination, any Pakistani normalization with Israel would be conflated with a likely Pakistani compromise with India on Kashmir as well. Pakistan witnessed widespread protest demonstrations after the signing of the Abraham Accord between Israel and the UAE.

Why Pakistan Should not Recognize Israel?

In Pakistan, the overwhelming public and institutional opinion is against the notion of recognizing Israel, notwithstanding the pressure of some friendly countries. It collides with Pakistan's longstanding positions on key foreign policy issues and realities on the ground. The potential benefits, whether in the security sector or the technological realm, that Pakistan can profit from by recognizing Israel can be availed from alternative sources as well. At this juncture, the disadvantages of recognizing Israel outweigh the few and far between advantages.

For the following four reasons, Pakistan should not recognize Israel.

First, recognizing Israel will compromise Pakistan's stance on Kashmir. Pakistan's support for the Kashmiris' right to self-determination in line with UN resolutions is identical to its position of a two-state resolution for Palestine. More importantly, India will perceive Pakistan's recognition of Israel as an indirect endorsement of its unilateral steps in August 2019 to revoke Kashmir's semi-autonomous status. It bears mention that in August 2019, India's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) repealed Article 370 and 35A which guaranteed Kashmir's semi-autonomous status.¹⁸ Subsequently, India bifurcated Kashmir into the two federal union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. Pakistan's recognition of Israel will amount to an indirect endorsement of Kashmir's current status quo as a fait accompli.

***RECOGNIZING ISRAEL WILL
COMPROMISE PAKISTAN'S
STANCE ON KASHMIR***

Second, Iran will view Pakistan's recognition of Israel as part of the broader Middle Eastern geopolitical trend of allying with Tel Aviv to isolate Tehran. Hence, Islamabad should carefully weigh the notion of recognizing Israel. Pakistan has a long border with Iran and deep-seated cultural, civilizational and religious linkages. After Iran, Pakistan is home to the second largest number of Shias in the world. Pakistan's Shia community looks to Iran for spiritual and religious guidance and select Shia groups like MWM voiceferously defend and forward Iran's interests in Pakistan through protest rallies and Shia politics. Since 2015, Iran has recruited, trained and funded a large number of Shia militants from Pakistan and organized them under the proxy group Liwa Al-Zainebiyoun (the Zainebiyoun Division) to fight in its proxy war in Syria.¹⁹ Following Daesh's defeat and the revival of the al-Assad regime in Syria, most of these battle-hardened pro-Iran Shia militants have returned to Pakistan. Iran can undermine Pakistan's internal security by using its proxy assets should the latter recognize Israel.²⁰ Similarly, Iran shelters Baloch separatists groups, like the Baloch Liberation Front and Baloch Liberation Army, which have been waging a long-running ethno-separatist insurgency in Pakistan's Balochistan province. Iran can finance and arm these groups to intensify their attacks in Balochistan. After the US withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, most of the Baloch separatists have moved from sothern Afghanistan to Iran's Seistan-Balochistan province.²¹ Furthermore, keeping in consideration its growing energy requirements, Islamabad cannot afford to alienate Tehran, which could be a steady source of cost-effective energy supplies to Pakistan.

Third, as outlined above, public opinion in Pakistan is overwhelmingly pro-Palestine and anti-Israel. On each page of the Pakistani passport, it is printed, "valid for the all countries of the world except Israel." In the public imagination, recognizing Israel will be considered a great betrayal both to the cause of Palestine and Islam. The Pakistani populace views Israel as an enemy state which assisted India in its unrealized plan to destroy Pakistan's nascent nuclear program in the 1980s.²² The Indian plan to destroy Pakistan's Kahutta Nuclear Plant was envisioned after the June 1981 Israeli attack on an Iraqi nuclear reactor under construction at Osirak.²³ Reportedly, eight Israeli F-16s flew more 600 miles over the airspace of three hostile countries to destroy the target and return back.

Finally, by recognizing Israel, Pakistan will neither please the US, nor Saudi Arabia. Irrespective of who is in power in the US, Democrats or Republicans, Islamabad's salience in Washington has declined following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Therefore, whether Pakistan recognizes Israel or not, it will not have any impact on its ties with the US. Likewise, the Middle East's current developments and Saudi Arabia's regional objectives both influence its cautious but steadfast engagement with Israel. Riyadh's pressure on Islamabad to recognise Israel may therefore be a ruse to support its case for establishing consistent links with Tel Aviv.

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Conclusion

Pakistan's decision to recognize Israel or not should be based on assessing its strategic, diplomatic and economic priorities, notwithstanding the external pressures. The incumbent embattled Pakistani government, which is facing a volatile political and economic situation, is unlikely to decide on this sensitive issue. However, one thing is clear: the rapid geopolitical developments in the Middle East will persistently expose Pakistan to this question.

It is evident that the disadvantages far outweigh the few and far between benefits that Pakistan will avail by recognizing Israel. Not only would such a decision compromise Pakistan's Kashmir policy, but it would alienate neighbouring Iran and outrage the pro-Palestine public opinion as well. Pakistan can navigate the external pressures by taking the question to the parliament and portray the lack of political consensus as its reason for not recognizing Israel.

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