Israel - Palestine Conflict and India’s Role

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1. Introduction

- Few international disputes have generated as much emotion, passion, anguish, and diplomatic gridlock as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- Rooted in decades of clashes over religion, borders, and territory, the dispute between Israelis and Palestinians has engulfed scores of politicians, diplomats, and others in a peace process in which the ultimate goal has been tantalizingly close on numerous occasions only to be dismantled at the 11th hour. While the tortured history of the conflict dates back more than a century.

2. Historical Background

- In the aftermath of WWI, the Holocaust in which six million Jewish people were killed, more Jewish people wanted their own country.
- The European powers awarded Britain the right to determine Palestine's fate. In 1937, desperate to separate the feuding Jewish and Arab communities, Britain recommended partition of Palestine into two sovereign states, Arab and Jewish.
- The Arabs rejected this proposal, unwilling to cede what they felt was Arab land to yet another colonial power.
- The ensuing War of Independence saw more than 700,000 Arabs fleeing the territory, becoming refugees under Israeli, Egyptian, or Jordanian rule. In 1948, the two sides went to war.
- When it ended, Gaza was controlled by Egypt and another area, the West Bank, by Jordan. They contained thousands of Palestinians who fled what was now the new Jewish home, Israel.
- Jews, by now almost a third of its population, were prepared to defend their embryonic state. The War of Independence saw more than 700,000 Arabs fleeing the territory, becoming refugees under Israeli, Egyptian, or Jordanian rule. In 1948, the two sides went to war.
- While the traditional Zionist narrative asserted that Arab leaders encouraged their constituents to flee (with the promise of eventual victory and return), recent scholarship has shown that Jewish fighters did, at times, forcefully evict Arabs.
- Eventually, the area designated for Palestinian sovereignty was conquered by Jordan’s Arabian monarchy. Jerusalem was left a war zone, and an independent Palestinian state never emerged.
- More than 4.6 million Palestinians are refugees and their descendants, many living in camps in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. They get help from the United Nations.
- Though the Palestinians don’t have an army, rockets are regularly fired from Gaza into Israel. Israelis living in border towns are used to having to take shelter and adapting their lives to deal with the rockets.

3. UN Partition Plan

- Finally, in 1947 the United Nations decided to intervene. However, rather than adhering to the principle of “self-determination of peoples,” in which the people themselves create their own state and system of government, the UN chose to revert to the medieval strategy whereby an outside power divides up other people’s land.
- Under considerable Zionist pressure, the UN recommended giving away 55% of Palestine to a Jewish state—despite the fact that this group represented only about 30% of the total population, and owned fewer than 7% of the land.
4. 1947-1949 War

- While it is widely reported that the resulting war eventually included five Arab armies, less well known is the fact that throughout this war Zionist forces outnumbered all Arab and Palestinian combatants combined – often by a factor of two to three. Moreover, Arab armies did not invade Israel – virtually all battles were fought on land that was to have been the Palestinian state.

- Finally, it is significant to note that Arab armies entered the conflict only after Zionist forces had committed 16 massacres, including the grisly massacre of over 100 men, women, and children at Deir Yassin. Future Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, head of one of the Jewish terrorist groups, described this as “splendid,” and stated: “As in Deir Yassin, so everywhere, we will attack and smite the enemy. God, God, Thou has chosen us for conquest.” Zionist forces committed 33 massacres altogether.

- By the end of the war, Israel had conquered 78 percent of Palestine; three-quarters of a million Palestinians had been made refugees; over 500 towns and villages had been obliterated; and a new map was drawn up, in which every city, river and hillock received a new, Hebrew name, as all vestiges of the Palestinian culture were to be erased. For decades Israel denied the existence of this population, former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir once saying: “There was no such thing as Palestinians.

5. 1967 War & USS Liberty

- In 1967, Israel conquered still more land. Following the “Six Day War,” in which Israeli forces launched a highly successful surprise attack on Egypt, Israel occupied the final 22% of Palestine that had eluded it in 1948 – the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Since, according to international law it is inadmissible to acquire territory by war, these are occupied territories and do not belong to Israel. It also occupied parts of Egypt (since returned) and Syria (which remain under occupation).

- Also during the Six Day War, Israel attacked a US Navy ship, the USS Liberty, killing and injuring over 200 American servicemen. President Lyndon Johnson recalled rescue flights, saying that he did not want to “embarrass an ally.” (In 2004 a high-level commission chaired by Admiral Thomas Moorer, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, found this attack to be “an act of war against the United States,” a fact few news.
6. UN Security Council

- The UN Security Council passed Resolution 242, which called for peace between Israel and its neighbors in exchange for Israel giving back the land it had acquired during the Six Day War. Negotiations about how to implement it went nowhere. The Sinai was returned to Egypt under a separate peace deal in 1979, but the Golan Heights and the Palestinian territories remain under occupation.

- The Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza were not given citizenship in Israel or equal protection or benefits under the law. The Israeli government also violated the Geneva Conventions by confiscating Palestinian land and water resources and building settlements on the West Bank and Gaza. For twenty years, the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza were a traumatized, defeated, docile population, routinely humiliated by soldiers and used as cheap labor in the Israeli economy.

7. First Intifada

- Then in 1987, the Palestinian population collectively rose up against Israel's repressive policies. The uprising, which became known as the first Intifada, was characterized by mass civil disobedience, general strikes, boycotts, refusals to pay taxes, and Palestinian youths throwing stones at Israeli tanks and soldiers. The word intifada means 'shaking off,' and this was the Palestinians' first attempt to assert their own national identity rather than waiting for Arab armies or the UN to do it for them. More than 1,100 Palestinians and 150 Israelis were killed in the ensuing five years, and tens of thousands more Palestinians were injured or arrested.

- The conflict was a public relations disaster for Israel. Videos were shown around the world of Palestinians armed only with flags and slingshots facing down tanks, and of Israeli soldiers beating terrified Palestinian children. Israel began to lose its cherished image as the David against the Arab Goliath. Instead it began to be seen as the Goliath against the Palestinian David. Israelis also began to realize that the occupation could not be maintained indefinitely without cost. Many on the Israeli left began to oppose the occupation.

- The Intifada also worried Yasser Arafat, the head of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), a coalition of Palestinian nationalist resistance groups with Fatah at its center. Founded in 1964, it was admitted to the UN with observer status in 1974 and was regarded as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. It initially operated out of Jordan and Lebanon, engaging in guerrilla tactics in an attempt to regain Palestine by force of arms. It was expelled from Jordan in 1971 by King Hussein, then expelled from Lebanon in 1982 by Israel, at which point it fled to Tunisia. By the time the Intifada broke out, the PLO was largely out of touch with life in the Palestinian territories. It had played no part in leading or organizing the Intifada.

- In 1988, in order to gain recognition for the PLO and save himself from irrelevance, Arafat agreed to recognize Israel and renounce terrorism. It was a historic compromise. He unilaterally surrendered Palestinian claims to 78% of historic Palestine and agreed to focus aspirations for Palestinian statehood solely on the remaining 22% -- the West Bank and Gaza.

- Five years later, in 1993, Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin signed the Oslo Accords, hailed as a blueprint for peace between the two peoples. It was the first time Israelis and Palestinians publicly recognized each other as partners for negotiations toward peace rather than enemies who might be defeated by force of arms. (In October 1994, Israel signed a peace treaty with Jordan, leaving Syria and Lebanon the only countries bordering Israel still in a state of conflict with it.) After that, the 'two-state solution' became the mantra of the mainstream.

- The Accords created the Palestinian Authority (PA), headed by Arafat and his associates and based in Ramallah. It had limited administrative and security duties in the West Bank and Gaza while Israel retained control of water, airspace, borders, imports, exports, residency, travel, taxation, currency, etc. This arrangement was supposed to last for a five-year period during which Israel and the PA would engage in trust-building measures and negotiate final-status issues such as East Jerusalem, refugees, borders, and settlements. It was hoped that an independent Palestinian state-and peace-would follow.
8. Second Intifada

- The explosive atmosphere reached a flashpoint in September of 2000, when the second Intifada erupted. Soon afterwards, Israelis voted in a new Prime Minister -- Ariel Sharon of the right-wing Likud party.
- The unrest spiraled from Palestinian protests and deadly Israeli repression into riots, assassinations, suicide bombings, and massive Israeli military incursions. The conflict became known as the second Intifada.

9. India’s balanced attitude since past

- India’s balancing act between its Israeli and Palestinian friends is a relatively recent phenomenon. For most of its pre and post-independence history, New Delhi viewed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through an ideological lens and in zero-sum terms, pursuing a foreign policy antagonistic towards the Jewish state.
- India was one of the first nations to recognise Palestine’s cause and it was the first non-Arab state to recognise the Palestinian Liberation Organisation as the sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in 1974.
- In fact, India refused to grant Israel full diplomatic recognition until 1992, the last major non-Muslim country to do so.
- Such hostility towards Israel is surprising given the similarities the two countries share. Both nations are former members of the British colonial system, are surrounded by traditionally hostile states, are islands of democracy in the middle of generally undemocratic regions, and are constant victims of Islamic extremism. Despite these similarities, New Delhi maintained an unsympathetic posture towards Israel from its earliest days.
- Several factors, including a fear of alienating its large Muslim population, Cold War politics, a desire to counter Pakistan’s influence in the Muslim world, and a need to garner Arab support for its position over the Kashmir issue compelled New Delhi to pursue an exclusively pro-Arab and thus pro-Palestinian foreign policy for more than forty years.
- Such a policy translated into India reflexively condemning Jewish aspirations in Palestine and later the Jewish state itself while instinctively supporting the Palestinian position.
- After more than four decades of such policy imbalance, however, a host of developments, notably the end of Cold War, exposed the discredited and anachronistic assumptions underlying India’s Middle East policy, and forced New Delhi to recalibrate its approach towards the region to reflect new international realities.
- India’s cherished Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) lost its validity following the end of the Cold War and with it, New Delhi’s ideological justification for its staunchly pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli position.
- Additionally, the 1991 Madrid Peace Process prompted India to conclude that if the Arab world and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) were now willing to negotiate with Israel, New Delhi had no reason to maintain the status quo.
- India also realized by this time that its longstanding and unqualified support for the Palestinians had reaped few, if any, dividends for New Delhi over the Kashmir issue or any other dispute involving Pakistan for that matter.
- New Delhi has continued to deepen its relations with Israel while simultaneously showcasing its ties to the Palestinians, deftly pursuing both bilateral relationships in tandem. That neither side sees any inconsistency in India doing so is a testament to New Delhi’s newfound diplomatic dexterity.
- India’s skillful balancing act between its Israeli and Palestinian counterparts is an enlightening illustration of the transformation Indian foreign policy has experienced since the end of the Cold War. Although India has not entirely jettisoned some of its outdated instincts that previously shaped its approach to the region, it is no longer guided by zero-sum calculations or held hostage by outdated ideologies.
10. Present India-Israel relations

- Abandoning ideology for pragmatism and zero-sum calculations for a more fair balanced approach, India finally extended full diplomatic recognition to Israel in 1992.
- Ties between the two countries have flourished since then with India and Israel sharing a congruence of interests in several areas and embarking on a multidimensional “strategic partnership” as a result.
- The two natural allies have made counterterrorism and military cooperation the center piece of their bilateral relations, which is unsurprising considering both countries share similar strategic outlooks and face constant assault from Islamic terrorism.
- New Delhi has benefited from Israel’s expertise in counterterrorism training and border security, while Israel has emerged as one of India’s most important sources of sophisticated military equipment and weapons systems.
- Economic cooperation as well as collaboration in space research, trade, science and technology, and education is also thriving between India and Israel.
- Although India’s dynamic relationship with Israel advances a series of critically important Indian interests, New Delhi has not allowed its robust ties with the Jewish state to dilute its historic bonds with the Palestinian people.

Whether India can sustain the success it has achieved is yet to be seen, but so far, India’s new foreign policy calculus towards the Middle East is a welcome departure from decades past.

11. India-Palestine relations

- India’s solidarity with the Palestinian people and its attitude to the Palestinian question was given voice through our freedom struggle by Mahatma Gandhi.
- India’s empathy with the Palestinian cause and its friendship with the people of Palestine have become an integral part of its time-tested foreign policy.
- In 1947, India voted against the partition of Palestine at the United Nations General Assembly. India was the first Non-Arab State to recognize PLO as sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in 1974.
- India was one of the first countries to recognize the State of Palestine in 1988. In 1996, India opened its Representative Office to the Palestine Authority in Gaza, which later was shifted to Ramallah in 2003.
- Apart from the strong political support to the Palestinian cause at international and bilateral levels, India has been contributing, since long time, material and technical assistance to the Palestinian people.
- With the Government of India’s aid, two projects were completed in the field of higher education i.e. Jawaharlal Nehru Library at the Al Azhar University in Gaza city and the Mahatma Gandhi Library-cum-Student Activity Centre at the Palestine Technical College at Deir Al Balah in the Gaza Strip.
- Under India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) Forum’s assistance, an Indoor Multi-purpose Sports Complex has been constructed in Ramallah.
- Al Quds hospital in Gaza is in the process of reconstruction and the process of building a rehabilitation centre in Nablus has started.
- Trade between India and Palestine has shown steady improvement. Products imported from India include fabrics, yarns, readymade garments, household appliances, stationery products, leather products, industrial tools and accessories, basmati rice, spices, vaccines and pharmaceutical products, sanitary wares, marble and granites.
12. India’s recent steps towards Israel and Palestine

Belief that is growing as India’s tilt towards the Israel is shown by following incidence:

- Increase in burgeoning military relationship of India with Israel.
- India refused to vote against Israel in a resolution related to strikes in Gaza over a period of two months in 2014 that left more than 2,200 dead, including 1,462 Palestinian civilians. The vote was on a report, submitted during the UNHRC’s summer session in Geneva a year later that blamed Israel for what it called “extensive use of weapons with a wide kill and injury radius.
- India’s abstention from voting can be termed as a departure from India’s traditional position on Palestine that has remained unwavering since the last seven decades.
- India’s engagement with Israel has grown substantially in the last two decades on military, scientific, commercial and agricultural matters. The affinity has been less ideological than pragmatic, each side understanding the other’s needs.
- Israel remains uncomfortable about India’s close ties with Iran, just as India looks warily at Israel’s relationship with China.