



Pakistan-Israel Relations: A Chance of Normalization?

Ido Gadi Raz

Bar Ilan University

Pakistan has declared that it will not recognize Israel as long as the Palestinian issue is not resolved, but the normalization agreements between Israel and the Muslim countries that began in September 2020 with the Abraham Accords revived the question of relations between the countries. The connection between Pakistan's struggle with India over Jammu and Kashmir and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Pakistan's relations with Iran, and the Sunni radicals in Pakistan are central barriers to the establishment of diplomatic relations. On the other hand, private initiatives for advancing relations between Israel and Pakistan that developed after the Abraham Accords renewed the Pakistani discourse on the issue, and could serve as a lever for diplomatic relations in the long term. Pakistan's proximity and dependence on the Sunni Gulf countries, which have warmed their relations with Israel since the Abraham Accords, create an opening for indirect partnerships between Israel and Pakistan. The US-Pakistani connection, which has grown closer in recent years, could also serve as a foundation for future diplomatic ties.

Keywords: Pakistan, Abraham Accords, India, Afghanistan, Iran

Introduction

As of early 2023, Israel and Pakistan do not have diplomatic relations. While it appears that Israel is willing to establish diplomatic relations, Pakistan, alongside other Muslim countries such as Kuwait, Tunisia, and Yemen, insists on not recognizing the Jewish state as long as there is no resolution to the Palestinian issue. Nor ostensibly has the signing of the normalization agreements between Israel and Muslim countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in 2020 (the Abraham Accords) influenced Pakistani policy, which remains as it was regarding Israel. Then-Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan left no room for doubt

when he responded to a controversial report on a visit by a Pakistani citizen to Tel Aviv in November 2020: "Why would someone from Pakistan go [to Israel], when our policy is not to recognize Israel?"

Behind Khan's sharp statement are several core issues in Pakistani foreign and domestic policy that have prevented it from normalizing relations with Israel so far. What are the chances that Pakistan and Israel will establish official diplomatic relations? This article addresses the question by analyzing the primary elements influencing the two countries, as well as the salient geopolitical events since the signing of the Abraham Accords.

Despite the belligerent Pakistani policy toward Israel, Jerusalem did not wage a direct diplomatic campaign against Pakistan, and in the 1990s there were signs suggesting a rapprochement.

Historical Overview¹

Between Kashmir and Palestine

Pakistan's position on the issue of the Jewish state was expressed as early as 1947, in the struggle by Pakistan's representative to the UN against the plan to partition Palestine. According to American reports, during Israel's War of Independence, Pakistan attempted to provide the Arabs fighting against Israel with military support that included 250,000 rifles that it bought from Czechoslovakia and three aircraft that it bought from Italy. Pakistan's policy toward Israel stemmed not only from its support for the Arab and Muslim population living in the Land of Israel but also from its perception of the Arab-Jewish territorial struggle as equivalent to its struggle with India over the state of Jammu and Kashmir in the Himalayas. The historic [conflict](#) over Jammu and Kashmir broke out following the British plan to partition India in 1947, which led to war between the countries until July 1949. In Pakistan's view, both events represented Islam's struggles for sovereignty.

Nevertheless, in 1949, after the end of the War of Independence, Israel believed it would be possible to open a diplomatic mission in Pakistan and trade openly with it. A year later, representatives of Jewish organizations met with Pakistan's ambassador in London in order to [issue](#) transit permits through Pakistan to Jews who sought to leave Afghanistan. These attempts, alongside additional [Israeli diplomatic efforts](#) to develop relations with Pakistan in the first decade of their respective establishments, did not bear fruit. Pakistan repeatedly declared that it did not recognize Israel and will assist its Arab brethren in defending the holy places of Islam (i.e., al-Aqsa Mosque). And indeed,

in the Six Day War, the Yom Kippur War, and the first intifada, Pakistan supported Israel's enemies in a variety of ways—from providing humanitarian aid to flying fighter jets against the Israeli Air Force.

The Radical Barrier

Despite the belligerent Pakistani policy toward Israel, Jerusalem did not wage a direct diplomatic campaign against Pakistan, and in the 1990s there were signs suggesting a rapprochement. In March 1993, then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin met with Pakistan's ambassador to the UN, Jamsheed Marker, and discussed possible bilateral relations. In addition, many other meetings were held during this period between diplomats from the two countries and non-governmental organizations on behalf of the State of Israel in third countries, but these did not develop into an overt normalization agreement. The main reason, [according to statements](#) by Pakistani diplomat Akram Zaki, was fear of opposition from extremist groups and clerics in his country. [In the late 1970s](#), Sunni Islamization processes began [under the rule of military dictator](#) General Zia-ul-Haq, and were influenced by the Cold War and events in neighboring countries—the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Zia both [Islamized](#) the laws in Pakistan and approved and funded the establishment of madrasas (Islamic schools), which later became the main source of jihadists. [Of the](#) 3,906 madrasas that were registered in Pakistan in 1995, 2,010 were established after 1979, and as of 2005, the estimated number of students in the madrasas was 1.7 million. One of the terrorist organizations that grew out of those madrasas is the Taliban, whose name means “the students” (at a madrasa). After the end of the Soviet-Afghan War in 1989, the radicalism that emerged in Pakistan was [directed mainly toward the struggle with India](#) over Kashmir, as part of Islam's territorial struggle. [Studies](#) show that religious Sunni radicalism continues [to influence](#) policy in Pakistan to this day.

The Musharraf Era

In September 2005 a military coup in Pakistan brought President Pervez Musharraf to power and augured a [positive new era](#) in Pakistan-Israel relations. Musharraf seriously considered relations with Israel, especially in light of strategic considerations that related to Israel's involvement in the Pakistani-Indian conflict. Musharraf met with American Jewish leaders in the United States and [noted](#) that he is convinced that peace in Palestine would enable the restoration of good relations between Islam and Judaism. A few months earlier, a public meeting even [took place in Turkey](#) between the Israeli and Pakistani foreign ministers. However, in August 2008 Musharraf resigned and [was exiled from the country for five years](#), and the leaders who subsequently rose to power in Pakistan did not embrace his line of thinking regarding Israel.

Since the Abraham Accords: Public Debate and Political Status Quo

It is possible that public opinion leaders, journalists, and others in Pakistan believed that the Abraham Accords, signed in 2020 between Israel and countries from the pragmatic Sunni camp, gave new impetus to the [drive](#) to establish relations between Pakistan and Israel. “We today have the first, robust and rich nationwide debate in Pakistan on establishing diplomatic ties with Israel. This is huge,” said Pakistani journalist [Ahmed Quraishi](#) regarding a private delegation of Pakistani-Americans to Israel in May 2022, in which he participated. Although the delegation was not connected to the Pakistani government, it succeeded in making headlines in Israel and Pakistan, and even drew criticism from officials in Islamabad.

In tandem, the possibility of establishing relations with Israel arose again in Pakistan, especially in light of Israeli President Isaac Herzog's [welcome](#) of the delegation. Most of [the responses](#) to the delegation were critical, out of solidarity with the Palestinians, while [others](#) saw relations with Israel as an important

strategic move, arguing that rapprochement with Israel would help Pakistan economically. The prevailing [anti-Israel claim](#) focused on the “suppression of the Palestinians,” “the construction of illegal settlements,” and Israel's abuse of control over Jerusalem, and in particular what was seen as violating the status quo regarding al-Aqsa, the third-holiest site in Islam. The political and economic profit that could result from recognition of Israel was eclipsed by the moral damage of betraying the Palestinians and violating Islam and the political damage of further distancing Pakistan from Tehran and creating an opening for compromise on the issue of Jammu and Kashmir.

Nonetheless, most of those supporting consideration of relations with Israel did so in indirect ways, by emphasizing the Jewish state's socio-economic strength as a successful hi-tech nation—apparently in order to avoid criticism of support for Israel and to plant the seeds of a positive perspective toward Israel. For example, in July 2022 the publicist Javed Chaudhry [devoted an entire column](#) on his website to the need to survey developing Israeli technology. At the start he wrote: “Israeli scientists surprised the world this week when they brought to market an air conditioner that operates without electricity,” and ended by comparing the two countries: “You look at this country with 9.2 million people, and then you look at Pakistan, whose population in only one city—Lahore—is more than all of Israel, but we're not even able to produce the food that we consume.” That same month, a Pakistani citizen published an [op-ed](#) on the *Friday Times* news site, which often criticizes Israel, in which he praised Israeli education and its focus on science and technology. While the writer emphasized that Israel is a country that was established on the occupied land of Palestine, he affirmed that today Israel is a fact that cannot be denied.

Moreover, there were also a few calls from local leaders, and even a cleric, who called for examining relations with Israel after the

Abraham Accords. The prime minister of the autonomous Pakistani region Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Sardar Tanveer Ilyas Khan, [said during a memorial](#) for the region's previous prime minister, Imran Khan, that an open discussion should begin on the topic of relations with Israel (Sardar is identified with Khan's party). At the same time, the cleric and leader of the JUI-F movement, Maulana Muhammad Khan, [stated](#) in an interview with a local television station in December 2020 that he supports normalization with Israel, reasoning that "educated Muslims need to understand that the Quran and history prove to us that the Land of Israel belongs only to the Jews."

Journalist Arif Bahar analyzed this public debate in Pakistan following the Abraham Accords, and on June 4, 2022, wrote a [column for the Pakistani news site Jasarat](#) called "Echoes of Recognition of Israel." Arif noted that the issue of "the (Pakistani) state's recognition of Israel is again echoing with full force," and that "the purpose of the discussion that started after a year or two is desensitization of the issue of recognizing Israel, more than the recognition of Israel itself. [That is,] to make it [Israel] easier to swallow and more acceptable to the public."

In September 2022, another Pakistani delegation came to Israel, this time a smaller one. The delegation, led by a former Pakistani government minister, [met](#) with President Isaac Herzog and Foreign Ministry officials. Apparently the relative ambiguity surrounding the visit indicated concrete measures taking place under the surface. The organization [Sharaka](#), which was established following the Abraham Accords in order to leverage them and encourage people-to-people peace, was behind the two delegations. Alongside the organization's activity are private initiatives of Pakistanis, mainly ex-patriates, to bring about peace between the two countries. An example is the work of Noor Dahri, a Pakistani living in London who [visited Israel](#) in August 2022 and caused quite a stir on social media and in the Israeli, Palestinian, and Pakistani media. The

[activists who came to Israel](#) emphasized, both in their visits and on social media, that they are Pakistanis who support normalization with Israel, and this advanced the internal Pakistani discourse on the topic.

In addition, over the past decade, the academic discourse on Pakistan-Israel relations has also increased. As early as 2014, an [article](#) by Umbreen Javaid, Malik Tauqir, and Ahmad Khan published in *South Asian Studies* stated that many Pakistanis now believe in the idea of recognizing Israel. In 2021, Zahid Ahmed and Khurram Abbas argued in an [article](#) in *Middle East Policy* that Pakistan (under the Khan regime) is under the pressure of the GCC countries to recognize Israel on the one hand, and to support the struggle of the Palestinians on the other hand. In contrast, an article published that year in a Turkish journal [stated](#) that Pakistan would not be able to recognize Israel in the current circumstances, due to relations with Iran and the Palestinian issue, which corresponds with the issue of Jammu and Kashmir. Online articles written by Pakistanis have raised similar arguments for and against normalization with Israel, whereas those who support normalization highlight the [economic and military benefits](#) that collaboration with Israel could provide.

On the state level, it seems that Pakistan's leaders are still maintaining the status quo of supporting the Palestinians and not recognizing Israel. During Operation Breaking Dawn (August 2022), Pakistan was among the first to [criticize](#) the IDF's actions in Gaza. Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif also resorted to his Twitter account: "Martyrdom of ten Palestinians, including a five-year-old girl, from Israel's latest terrorist act." During Operation Guardian of the Walls in 2021, before succeeding Imran Khan as prime minister, Sharif [called](#) Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "the new Adolf Hitler." Khan was [ousted](#) in a vote of no confidence after failing economically and diplomatically, and in November 2022 Khan was [shot](#) while leading a protest convoy towards Islamabad.

One of the speculations on the motive for the shooting was that Khan was [pro-Israel](#) and sought to normalize Pakistan's relations with Israel during his term. Even though there is no concrete evidence for this claim, it demonstrates the complexity and even the expected consequences for a Pakistani leader who would make such a decision. Likewise after the Abraham Accords were signed, the Pakistani military, which plays an important role in the country's politics, [declared](#) that it does not recognize Israel and that it only supports the establishment of a Palestinian state. The vast majority of the public discourse on news sites and social media about relations with Israel, which increased after the Abraham Accords, is still negative, but nonetheless there are some in Pakistan [who claim that](#) normalization with Israel could actually bring about a resolution of the Palestinian issue. It would grant Pakistan an important status as a mediator in the conflict and also help it cope with its economic crisis.

Pakistan's Strategic Importance

Pakistan first [tested a nuclear weapon](#) in 1998, and to this day it is the only Muslim country with nuclear capability. Pakistan's ongoing hostility toward Israel constitutes a military threat due to its ability to transfer nuclear technologies and capabilities to countries that are enemies of Israel, or alternatively, to provide such capabilities to countries like Saudi Arabia, which would in turn lead to a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

Pakistan's geographic location in the southern part of central Asia—between Iran to the west, Afghanistan to the north, India to the east, and the Arabian Sea to the south—makes it a territory with strategic importance for Israel and for its most important ally, the United States, and all the more so for Israel's enemies. First, the shared border with Iran, which has warm relations with Islamabad, makes Pakistan a convenient sphere of activity for Tehran, which poses a real threat to the State of Israel as it [progresses](#) toward nuclear military capability.

Second, the withdrawal of the United States and NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2021 left Pakistan alone on the front lines against the Taliban government, the rising [Islamic State](#), and other terrorist groups. Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban [can serve as fertile ground](#) for Hamas, Iran, and others that threaten Israel, which makes Pakistan an important strategic and intelligence sphere for Israel. In this context, Pakistan has also become more valuable for the United States, which declared that it will continue to wage the global war on terror [from afar](#). An example of this strategy was the [assassination](#) of former al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri on July 31, 2022, in which the United States reportedly used Pakistani intelligence. Third, China [is investing billions of dollars](#) in Pakistan as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. The plan includes the CPEC corridor, which creates an economic corridor to the Arabian Sea for China and reduces its dependence on Middle East countries.

Pakistan's ongoing hostility toward Israel constitutes a military threat due to its ability to transfer nuclear technologies and capabilities to countries that are enemies of Israel, or alternatively, to provide such capabilities to countries like Saudi Arabia, which would in turn lead to a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

The India-Israel Connection

Alongside Pakistan's strategic importance to Israel is Israel's [close economic and military relations](#) with Pakistan's historic enemy, India. Similar to Pakistan, India's policy on the Middle East in general and on Israel and the Palestinian conflict in particular has been greatly [influenced](#) by its struggle over Jammu and Kashmir. India tried to receive Arab-Muslim support in its struggle with Pakistan, and therefore for years demonstrated a critical stance toward Israel. Only on January 29, 1992, after the end of the Cold War, India announced its normalization with Israel. Despite India's concern that

establishing diplomatic relations with Israel would incur negative effects, after over 25 years of relations between the countries, the positive outcomes are clear.

In 2017 Israel signed a cyber [partnership agreement](#) with India. Israel, subject to recurring cyberattacks by Iran, forged a strong military partnership with India, which is targeted by cyberattacks by China and Pakistan, and this partnership troubles Islamabad, among others. Pakistan claims that thanks to the Israeli Pegasus technology, India succeeded in listening to private conversations of former Prime Minister Imran Khan, and carried out other acts of espionage and surveillance under the country's auspices. [In addition to being](#) the biggest buyer of Israeli military equipment, India is engaged in the development of military technologies in cooperation with Israel and closes major deals with many Israeli companies such as Rafael and Elbit. Between 2015 and 2019, Israel's weapons exports to India grew by 175 percent.

Meanwhile, [in October 2021](#), Israel and India decided, with the United Arab Emirates and the United States, to establish the I2U2 partnership, for the purpose of geo-economic cooperation in the Middle East and Asia. The partnership was established against the backdrop of China's growing strength in the Middle East and Asia, evident in the Belt and Road Initiative in Pakistan, and it aims to strengthen the diplomatic, economic, and military relations among the I2U2 countries. The growing ties between Israel and India are of major [concern](#) to Pakistan, as noted by former President Musharraf. The closer the cooperation between the countries becomes, especially in the military sphere, the more pressure there will be on Pakistan to try to reduce it.

Pakistan's Relations with the Arab Gulf States and the United States *The Arab Gulf States*

As a Sunni country, one of Pakistan's closest allies is Saudi Arabia, which sees itself as the

leader of the Sunni world and the guardian of Islam's holy sites. Saudi Arabia leads the "pragmatic" Sunni camp, which includes first and foremost the Gulf countries of Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman, along with Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco. Over the years, Saudi Arabia has provided Pakistan with [economic support](#)—whether through monetary aid, energy sources, or [aid in attaining nuclear weapons](#), or through providing employment for Pakistani laborers. In October 2021 [Saudi Arabia promised](#) \$4.2 billion to assist Pakistan in its economic crisis, and in August 2022 added another \$3 billion. Together with the ongoing support, Saudi features have penetrated into Pakistani society, for example Islamization with Wahhabi characteristics in the 1980s, and stemming from this, the rise of local jihadist movements. Saudi Arabia sees Pakistan as a strategic partner that will help it via its nuclear capability in time of need, in particular, in the scenario of a [nuclear Iran](#). On January 5, 2023, only six weeks after he was appointed Chief of Staff of the Pakistani Army (among the strongest figures in the country), Asim Munir flew to Riyadh [to discuss the security and military cooperation](#) between the countries. Asim's round of meetings, which included Saudi Crown Prince and de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman, indicates the reciprocity that exists between the countries, alongside the strategic importance that they see in one another. Pakistan seeks Saudi Arabia's economic support, and in return it can offer it assistance in the security-military sphere, as well as the transfer of technology for the enrichment of uranium, the production of Chinese missiles, or the deployment of forces in Saudi Arabia.

Despite the close relations between the two countries, in 2015 [friction arose](#) after Pakistan refrained from joining the Arab coalition fighting against the Houthis in Yemen. In 2019 [the friction escalated](#) when Saudi Arabia decided to allow India to join the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) summit as a guest of honor. The summit was held in the United Arab Emirates

and included 57 countries. That same year India changed its constitution [and made the regions in dispute](#)—Jammu and Kashmir—an integral part of the country. This act, without any of the Gulf countries standing at Pakistan's side, led to Pakistani anger and a sense of betrayal. In response, Pakistan decided to convene a diplomatic summit in Malaysia on the issue of Kashmir's status. Only Turkey, Malaysia, and Iran supported the effort, but after heavy Saudi pressure Pakistan reversed course. The main reason, beyond Saudi Arabia's religious influence, [is Pakistan's economic dependence on Saudi Arabia](#), which makes it difficult for Pakistan to take unprecedented steps without Riyadh's approval.

The signing of the Abraham Accords between Israel and Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (with the [“external support”](#) of Saudi Arabia) [increased](#) the pressure on Pakistan by the pragmatic Sunni camp to act in a similar manner. In addition, the leader of the camp, Saudi Arabia, is slowly showing signs of warming its relations with Jerusalem, which it deems of strategic importance. [In an interview](#) in March 2022, bin Salman noted that he sees Israel as an optional ally and not an enemy, although he emphasized his hope that Israel's conflict with the Palestinians will be resolved. Over the years, the [Iranian threat](#) has been the basis for the quiet rapprochement between Riyadh and Jerusalem, since Saudi Arabia sees Tehran as the most serious threat to it at the present time. Moreover, as part of Riyadh's aspirations to diversify its oil-based economy, it [sees the hi-tech nation](#) as an important partner, similar to [the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain](#). Already today there is business between Israel and Saudi Arabia, albeit through third country mediation. In addition, the fact that the United Arab Emirates, one of Pakistan's most important allies, has joined the I2U2 along with India and Israel demonstrates how the Gulf countries from the pragmatic Sunni camp see Israel as an important economic and military partner.

Pakistan is beset by a [deep financial crisis](#) that includes a [debt](#) of over \$7 billion to the International Monetary Fund, soaring inflation, and more than \$10 billion of damage [from the flooding](#) that struck the country in August 2022, and thus it cannot afford to lose the economic-political support that it receives from the Sunni Gulf countries. Despite its [disappointment](#) sometimes at their policy, it must be flexible in its positions, including toward Israel. Evidence of this could already be seen on the coasts of the Black Sea between June and July 2021. The international [Sea Breeze exercise](#) led by the Sixth Fleet of the US Navy [brought together](#) a large number of armies from the Middle East and beyond, including the IDF, the Pakistani army, and the Saudi army. As part of the exercise, it was reported that a Pakistani ship anchored close to Israel's territorial waters. Israel's participation in the military exercise alongside Pakistan is no small matter, especially in light of the military partnership between Israel and India. The exercise apparently does not hint at upcoming normalization between Pakistan and Israel, but it demonstrates how Pakistan adapts itself to the Saudi interest, including when it comes to Israel.

The United States

Pakistan and the United States have strengthened their relations in recent years, in light of several developments that have increased Islamabad's dependence on Washington, and in parallel have increased Washington's interests in Islamabad. Following [its withdrawal](#) from Afghanistan in August 2021, the United States lost its strategic foothold in the region, which opened the door for the rise of several terrorist organizations in Afghanistan that also operate in Pakistan [and threaten to harm](#) the West and the United States. Aside from ISIS, which made headlines with its showcase [suicide attack](#) at the Kabul Airport in August 2021, the [Pakistani Taliban](#) movement (TTP), the sister movement of the Afghan Taliban, is increasing its activity and harming state interests in Pakistan. Beyond the

one-time cooperation between the countries on the assassination of al-Zawahiri, it appears that the United States and Pakistan seek to expand the [military](#) cooperation between them, and in September 2022, Washington gave the green light to the [sale](#) of F-16 aircraft to Pakistan, in a deal valued at \$450 million.

Despite the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020 between Israel and various Muslim countries, there are several main barriers that prevent Israel and Pakistan from normalizing their relations.

Beyond its military interest, the United States sees Pakistan as a [strategic element](#) in the war against China over regional influence, and therefore is prepared to support Pakistan in both economic and humanitarian spheres. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Washington [donated](#) almost \$80 million and about 80 million vaccinations to Pakistan. After the heavy floods that struck Pakistan last year, the United States [sent](#) a humanitarian airlift to Pakistan. Moreover, the [economic cooperation](#) is reflected in bilateral trade, which reached \$8.89 billion in 2021, with exports from the US to Pakistan increasing by 24 percent and exports from Pakistan to the US increasing by 35 percent over 2020. To date there is no clear indication of a direct Israeli connection to Pakistan-United States relations, although the rapprochement between Islamabad and Jerusalem's strongest ally creates a foundation for future economic and military cooperation between Israel and Pakistan, even if it only indirectly or confidentially.

The Iranian-Shiite issue

Notwithstanding the Saudi and US influence in Pakistan, Islamabad also maintains close relations with Tehran. Iran provides Pakistan with uncompromising support [in its struggle with India](#) over Jammu and Kashmir, which is based on a shared pan-Islamic conception. Furthermore, since the Islamic Revolution of

1979, Iran has seen it a mission to spread the Islamic revolution and defend all Shiites in the world, including the [Shiites in Pakistan](#), who comprise 10-15 percent of Pakistan's population. This is a central barrier to normalization with Israel, as Iran could [use the Shiites in Pakistan](#) to oppose such a decision with violence and even undermine public order in Pakistan.

The Iran-Pakistan connection is marked by considerable pragmatism, which creates economic opportunities for both countries. According to figures from the official website of the Pakistani government, the volume of annual [trade](#) between the countries in 2021 was \$392 million and comprises primarily rice, meat, paper and cardboard, chemicals, textiles, fruits, and vegetables. However, an additional \$7.5 billion [project](#) to construct an oil pipeline between Iran and Pakistan was stopped in 2019 due to the US sanctions on Tehran. [If circumstances change](#) and conditions become ripe to renew the project, this would provide relief for the Pakistani economy and strengthen Islamabad-Tehran relations. Meanwhile, the [military cooperation](#) between Pakistan and Iran grew stronger with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, given the rise of the Islamic State, which is a threat to both countries.

Iran for its part seeks to weaken Pakistan's relations with its enemies from the pragmatic Sunni camp, and it sees Pakistan as an important strategic ally. The tension between the two regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, over Pakistan's loyalty also influences Islamabad's attitude toward Israel. The more Pakistan strengthens its ties with Iran, the less of a chance there will be warmer relations with Israel. In contrast, the more Saudi Arabia pressures Pakistan to oppose the Iranian nuclear program, the more the indirect strategic connection between Israel and Pakistan will grow.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Despite the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020 between Israel and various Muslim

countries, there are several main barriers that prevent Israel and Pakistan from normalizing their relations. First, since its establishment Pakistan sees its core ideological issue, the struggle with India over the state of Jammu and Kashmir, as related to the Israeli-Palestinian struggle. Second, the current Sunni Islamic radicalism in Pakistan since the end of the 1970s, along with Pakistan's Shiite minority and the ties with Iran, makes it hard for its leaders to take a firm decision to normalize its relations with Israel. Such a decision could harm Pakistan's relations with Iran and even lead to a response from its Shiite citizens.

On the other hand, the Abraham Accords have renewed the debate in Pakistan surrounding normalizing relations between the countries, although the opinions remain primarily negative. High profile delegations of Pakistani expatriates visited Israel, and there were initiatives by non-governmental organizations, along with statements by leaders, clerics, and the media. In addition, the tightening of official and unofficial economic and military relations since the signing of the Abraham Accords between Israel and the Gulf countries from the moderate Sunni camp, which Pakistan sees as strategic allies and on which it is economically dependent, sometimes prompts Islamabad to act in indirect partnership with Israel, especially in the military sphere and possibly in the future also in the economic sphere. Furthermore, Pakistan's relations with the United States, which have grown stronger in recent years, could be a basis for creating economic, social, and diplomatic ties between Pakistan and Israel in the future.

Consequently, in the near term it is unlikely that Pakistan will establish open diplomatic relations with Israel. Apparently, the harm to Pakistan's interests could be greater than the benefit of normalizing relations at this time. Therefore, Pakistan-Israel relations will presumably continue in a covert format, while serving shared strategic interests. Nevertheless, the cultivation of people-to-people ties and the

increasing internal Pakistani discourse on the topic, along with the expansion of unofficial bilateral ties, could lead the two countries toward diplomatic rapprochement in the long term. In addition, closer Israel-Saudi relations could pave the way for similar steps in Israel-Pakistan relations and Islamabad's alignment with the pragmatic Sunni camp in the long term, and normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel could be a catalyst toward normalization with Pakistan, perhaps even as widened Abraham Accords. Therefore, two policy recommendations are proposed for Israel that can advance normalization between the countries in the long term.

a. *Working behind the scenes:* For a long time before the discourse surrounding the Abraham Accords began, Israel maintained various unofficial relations with countries with which it did not have open diplomatic relations. On the one hand, the covert relations enabled the countries to maintain their foreign policy while presenting anti-Israel positions. On the other hand, those countries benefited from collaboration in various fields. From Israel's perspective, covert relations were and are a basis for open diplomatic relations later.² In other words, laying an economic, military, and diplomatic foundation without diplomatic commitment creates a basis and shared language between countries that do not have peace agreements. For example, in 2009 it was [reported](#) in the *Sunday Times* that Saudi Arabia had implicitly agreed that Israeli aircraft would fly through its airspace as part of a mission that would serve shared interests, that is, attacking Iran. It was also reported that for the 25 years preceding the normalization agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, in practice the latter [did not restrict](#) and did not supervise trade with Israel, held meetings with officials on military and economic issues, and even allowed the presence of an unofficial Israeli [mission](#) in its territory. With Pakistan

currently in a difficult economic and military situation, Israel should increase its covert contacts while focusing on counterterrorism guidance and training and on humanitarian and economic aid, in an indirect and quiet manner, and via the **emerging** Saudi channels.

- b. *Learning to tweet in Urdu*: In 2021 Gadi Hitman and Moti Zwilling **published** a study that examined 150 Twitter accounts of leaders and public opinion influencers in the Gulf countries during the years 2017-2018 in reference to normalization with Israel. The study found that only a quarter of the accounts expressed support for an agreement with Israel, and surprisingly the majority of these accounts were of users from Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The signing of the Abraham Accords two years later allows us to assume that the discourse on social media, even if it is mainly negative, ultimately increases the public debate, as we saw following the recent visits to Israel by Pakistani delegations. Israel would do well to increase the discourse on social and traditional media on a normalization agreement with Pakistan. Furthermore,

opening accounts in Urdu, the official language in Pakistan, would increase Pakistani curiosity about Israel and provide a platform for pro-Israel content. In parallel, Israel should support the initiatives of private organizations, such as Sharaka, and activists who are engaged in expanding the scope of the Abraham Accords.

Ido Gadi Raz is a researcher on Afghanistan and Pakistan, with an emphasis on terrorism and geopolitics, as well as a financial intelligence researcher. He interned at INSS in the Terrorism and Low-Intensity Conflict program, at the Asia desk and at the suicide terrorism desk. In addition, he specialized in South Asia migration studies at OP Jindal Global University (India) and at North South University (Bangladesh), and is currently a third-year student in Arabic and Middle East Studies at Bar Ilan University. idoraz96@gmail.com

Notes

- 1 See the extensive article by Moshe Yegar (2007). Pakistan and Israel. *Jewish Political Studies Review*, 19(3-4), 125-141.
- 2 For more on the topic of Israel's confidential relations with Muslim countries, see Elie Podeh (2002), *From Mistress to Known Partner*. Am Oved.