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ISRAEL-PAKISTAN: PRELUDE TO NORMALIZATION?

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The emotional responses to the meeting in Istanbul last Thursday between Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom and his Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Kasuri were hardly surprising. After all, this was the first time a senior Pakistani leader held a formal, public meeting with an Israeli official. The meeting, in the context of Pakistani President Parvez Musharraf's forthcoming address to the American Jewish Committee, naturally instills hope in some and fear in others of full normalization between the two countries.

Such a move would be the fulfillment of one of Israel's long-standing aspirations. Since its establishment in 1948, Israel has struggled to end its political isolation both within the Middle East and beyond. As a major Islamic country with considerable influence in the Organization of the Islamic Conference, Pakistan has always been on Israel's diplomatic radar-screen. That a meeting between foreign ministers of the two countries took more than half a century to materialize is entirely due to Pakistani inhibitions.

From its birth in 1947, Pakistan has always placed Islam at the center of its national identity and polity. This naturally makes the Middle East a prime focus of Pakistani foreign policy and compels its leaders to adopt pro-Palestinian positions in public. Since the Indo-Israel rapprochement, Pakistan's rivalry with India has

added a strategic dimension to anti-Israel positions; Pakistani leaders and commentators have periodically postulated an Indo-Israeli and Hindu-Jewish conspiracy against Muslims.

Portraying the Palestinian problem as part of an Islamic agenda has evoked strong sympathy among the masses, and support for the Palestinians has become an article of faith for many people. Indeed, since the outbreak of intifada, Pakistan has witnessed more anti-Israeli demonstrations than any other Arab or Islamic country.

That raises the question of why Pakistan should show any interest in Israel. The answer has to be sought in Pakistan's historically pro-western, especially pro-American position. Seeking to counterbalance their powerful Indian neighbor, Pakistani leaders have always looked to the US for political, economic and military support. A more receptive attitude toward Israel has been part of this calculation. Since the days of Pakistan's first foreign minister, Sir Zafrullah Khan, every major Pakistani leader has taken a realistic approach to Israel, interacted with its representatives, and even adopted positions that were consistent with Israeli interests.

For example, in 1956 Pakistan was the only Third World country to express sympathy for the Franco-British-Israeli attack on Egypt. Despite widespread popular support for President Gamal

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Abdul Nasser, the government privately congratulated Israel on its spectacular success. Decades later, Pakistan was instrumental in the return of Egypt to the Arab and Islamic fold following its peace treaty with Israel. Indeed, at the height of the Afghan crisis in the 1980s, Israel even maintained an unofficial mission in Pakistan.

Such attitudes were encouraged by prolonged American efforts to reduce Israel's diplomatic isolation. As a result, Musharraf has urged his citizens to enter into a national dialogue on Israel. Earlier this year, he even described Ariel Sharon as "a bold man, a great soldier, a courageous leader." Most of his calls for a re-examination of Pakistan's policy towards Israel preceded or followed a Musharraf visit to the US. In recent years, the "American" incentive for Pakistan to seek a dialogue with Israel has been reinforced by another strategic consideration: India. The normalization of Indo-Israeli relations in January 1992 was followed by rapidly growing military-security ties between those two countries. At first, Pakistan tried to portray India's new-found friendship with Israel as a conspiracy against Islam. It also urged the US to scuttle the sale of Israeli Phalcon spy planes to India. But when these efforts failed, some Pakistanis began to argue that Islamabad's refusal to establish ties was actually impelling Israel to move even closer to India and that Pakistan's strategic interest was to reverse this trend.

Thus, Pakistan's Israel policy has been a mixture of hostile rhetoric and political realism. While maintaining anti-Israeli positions in public, the leadership has simultaneously pursued well calibrated measures at variance with the mood of the public. The Istanbul meeting now raises the possibility that the rhetorical part of the dual-track approach will be progressively abandoned in favor of even more hard-headed policy leading to full-scale normalization of relations.

Since the mid-1990s, Pakistan's leaders have been hinting that they would move closer

towards Israel at an appropriate moment. The issue, it was argued, was not whether, but when. The recently cozying up of Indo-US relations lends additional impetus to the need for Pakistan to burnish its pro-American credentials. And the highly publicized Israeli withdrawal from Gaza seems to offer Pakistan an appropriate occasion on which to promote its interests in the US.

But is normalization really around the corner? As expected, the Istanbul meeting has generated widespread domestic criticism and the Islamic parties opposed to Gen Musharraf have found a more powerful platform around which to rally. Already facing serious opposition over his support for the American-led war on terrorism and his crackdown of Islamic militancy, Musharraf has very little room to maneuver. Nor has he expected external support for the demarche been forthcoming; initial claims that the meeting with Shalom had been endorsed by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas were quickly contradicted, and Palestinian opposition to the normalization of ties was manifested in widespread demonstrations in Gaza.

These factors probably explain the hasty clarification that full diplomatic relations with Israel would be contingent on the creation of an independent Palestinian state, and any open, formal ties before that do not appear to be imminent. But following the example of Jordan, Pakistan may well agree to establish a network of regular, high-level contacts. Israel, for its part, will also have to tread warily. On the one hand, it does seek closer ties with Pakistan. On the other hand, it cannot afford to jeopardize its burgeoning relations with India. India may well welcome routine Pakistani-Israeli contacts but it would be strongly opposed to any strategic relations between those two countries. Israel is not new to triangular relations between competing powers, but the Indo-Pakistan equation may be even more complex than anything that Israel has encountered until now.

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