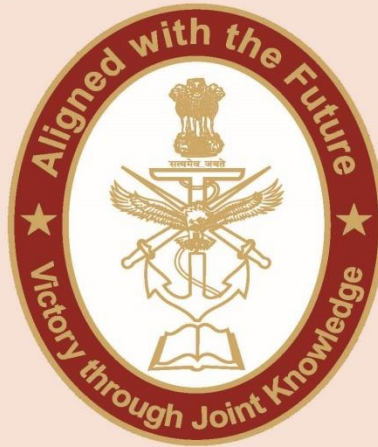


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ALLUDING TO ELLUSIVE PEACE : ISRAEL- PALESTINE POLITICAL SPIRAL

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The Palestinian - Israeli conflict dates back to a seven decade old politico-religious intrusion by the Jews into their habitat reclaiming their promised land, a mythological carryover for its justification. Religious persecution of the Jews across the Europe by the German Christian fanatics gave rise to their exodus to the safety with support of another set of Christians in the desolate deserts of Palestine. In that, the interests of the local Arab residents were sacrificed to make way to these European settlers. The Palestine of yore has been rechristened as Israel since 1948 and the original residents are refugees in their own habitat in a hope of getting an independent nation of their own, albeit a political consolation of sorts. The word Palestine per se is not religion specific, though majority constituents follow Sunni Islam.

The designated area lies at the junction point of three continents and also believed to be the holy land for three religious faiths. It obviously has seen mass movements of humanity across these tracks due to politico-religious afflictions alongside economic reasons. There are tell tale signs of multiple cultural footprints in varied proportions which is the rason' d etre' of clash of civilizations of sorts in present day context. The historical baggage, though unsubstantiated, is at play with deliberate intent of the powerful to seek and retain control over the energy rich region for their geo

political interests. In that, Israel is a proxy of the western world ensconced amid Islamic nations fighting for survival on daily basis.

The Israel is supported by the powerful and enjoys political buoyancy of incremental nature with pattern of unilateral territorial expansions and intrusions with impunity. The declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and recognition of sovereignty of Israel over the Syrian territories on Golan Heights by the US are part of their political approach. There are also electoral manifestos talking of expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank which speaks of intent of area consolidation by the Israel.

As a result there is an air of uncompromising political intransigence by the local Arab inhabitants thrown out of their lands to make space for the Jews. It is in this backdrop the latest tranche of peace plan has been coined by the US which apparently have electoral connotations both for the Israel as well as the US. The Israel is looking at additional space for Jewish settlements, a populist move from all accounts. The present US polity is seem to be appeasing the rich and powerful Jewish lobby with emotive connect with Israel. Time is at premium as there is a public pressure for US draws down wherein security & political interests of Israel needs to be taken care of on priority prior to such a move. Hence, the apparent haste reflective in the pro Israeli political moves by the US administration disregarding even the UN mandates on the disputed areas. On the face of it, there is a very lucrative economic package in the proposed peace plan; however the flip side lies in its political part which is far from the aspirations of the Palestinians. On one hand there is a promise of a bright future and on other hand there are 'conditions apply' tags for its delivery. The concept of two independent states has been diluted to the extent of making Palestine literally a protectorate of Israel. There is a distinct dilution of political autonomy proposed to be accorded to the Palestinians in major sovereign functions like foreign affairs, security and fiscal domain. The entire design is conditional wherein the new Palestinian dispensation is required to prove certain laid down bench marks prior to investing authority to them. As a result, the Palestinian President has taken recourse to cut off all ties with the US as their expression of displeasure and have rejected the peace plan.

If we look at the deal dispassionately, it may well be a reasonable proposal as survival of Palestine in absence of requisite economic, military and political institutions would be difficult. Moreover, given the institutional hostility amongst a section of Palestinians, it is reasonable to ask for internal security assurance by the financial contributors. What the proposal is talking about is economics, development and employment which

obviously cannot be facilitated without political stability. Therefore, the conditions in the proposal are reflective of sanitization of the new state from the regional inimical politico-military influences alongside internal stability.

Whereas, a fully Independent state has been the aspiration of the Palestinians for which they have been fighting for ever since their habitat was intruded upon by the outsiders. Now there is a deal on the table which is giving them a nation sans full sovereign rights, hence it obviously is politically unacceptable to them. The US proposal is seen to be perpetuating Israeli control over them, the very reason of defiance and their seven decade long struggle. In the proposed format the Palestinians would be given something akin to autonomous council powers and rest would continue to be heretofore under Israeli government. So, the notion of complete independence is missing from the Palestinian perspective in the peace plan.

Russia, China and Islamic countries are known to have expressed reservations in fully endorsing it in present format. Other countries are either neutral, or muted in their response. Overall, it is unlikely that this plan would be acceptable to the Palestinians despite the economic bonanza that it offers. **The main reason of rejection appears to be the high emotive quotient of the Palestinians which apparently has been ignored.**

While it may be pragmatic to agree to such an economically lucrative proposal, but what is the surety of honouring the commitment by a different political dispensation in the US, or Israel in future. From the Palestinian point of view, it is probably seen as a one sided proposal perpetuating Israeli sovereignty over them for times to come. A society which has been roughed up all through three to four generations is unlikely to move away from their political aspirations overnight simply with lure of money.

This peace proposal when hyphenated with the US draw down from the Asian landscape reflects their political calculations aimed at bringing about stability in the region. The security and political stability of Israel is a big concern for the US before they reduce their military foot prints in the region. **Dilution of anti Israel stance amongst the Islamic world, neutralization of military capabilities of anti Israel forces and consolidation of territories tactically important for defence of Israel, seem to be the tenets of US policy.**

The US over period of time has been able to reduce the anti Israel stance of most of her immediate neighbours except Syria and Lebanon. Saudi Arab, the most influential Sunni country is in reasonably good terms with Israel as of now. So is the case with other countries as they seem to have shifted their focus on development and economic pursuits. The Islamic world, apparently, has reconciled to the reality of existence of Israel. While the anti Israel feelings continue to exist due to its religious connect, however the tone and tenure has diluted to quite an extent. It is Iran who continues to talk about complete annihilation of Israel as the carry over agenda of their Islamic revolution. Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Shiite section of Iraqi society also continue to be political opponents of the Israel as well as to Saudi Arab.

Iran with her nuclear capabilities is seen as the biggest threat to the Israel as well as Sunni regional allies lead by the Saudi Arab. Looking at the ground realities, the President Obama along with five big powers engaged Iran to sign the Iranian nuclear deal in July 2015. The idea was that Iran would restrict her nuclear programme for the peaceful purposes only. Iran also agreed for inspection of her facilities by an international monitoring mechanism. While Iran was cooperating and adhering to all the laid down terms of the deal, the Trump administration pulled out of Iranian nuclear deal in May 2018 and called for total roll back of the nuclear as well as missile development plans. The US intends to defang the nuclear calculus of Iran and its missile capability simply to ensure security of Israel and her regional allies.

The US complicity in the Syrian theatre is also connected with security of Israel as there is a dispute over Golan Heights which was occupied by Israel in 1967 war. The US sponsored Syrian (Sunni) rebels to rise against their Shiite President for the purpose of regime change. The plan got halted with Russian intervention in September 2015 which changed the dynamics of the Syrian crisis. The recent recognition of Israeli sovereignty over Syrian Golan Heights by US is part of their plan as these heights are tactically important for defence of Israel. It provides legitimacy to illegal occupation of these areas by Israel defying the UN charter. Earlier the US declared Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and shifted their embassy there to provide legitimacy to their claim. Similarly supporting the Israeli plans to expand into Palestinian West Bank is also linked to territorial consolidation of Israel.

Taliban in Afghanistan are known to have links with Iran and are in sync with Iranian political thought on certain religious issues. Accordingly, one of the objectives of US in signing of a peace deal with the Taliban

appears to ensure US political interests are taken care of once they move out from the region. The timings of both the peace deals appear to be by design as the Palestinian deal, though in different context, do convey a message of dimensions of US financial and development package. If the US manages to sign the peace deal with the Taliban on 29 Feb as reported, it may well have a cascading effect on Palestinian intransigence also. Both the deals are talking of lucrative development package provided that the insurgents cease their indulgence in violence and join the main stream.

Given the differential in the aspirations of Israel and Palestinians in the current proposal, the convergence seems to be difficult. While the development package sounds good and pragmatic, the political package may need to include adequate sovereign powers invested with the proposed Palestinian state. **It is well understood that the institutions of governance would take time to mature and Palestinians may need some support from the Israeli/ US governments. Inclusion of such facilitation should be provisional and not subservient to Israel on permanent basis, as is the case now.**

The US has launched a diplomatic campaign to sensitize selected influential countries to garner support to their peace plan. The present proposal appears to be tilted in favour of Israel from Palestinian perspective as reflective in their reservations. Bringing about political balance through infusion of sovereign powers probably would be more acceptable instead of economy centric approach. **In case of Palestine, what seems to be more important is restoring the disturbed emotional fabric of the displaced population, who continue to distrust the Israel and her supporters.**

There are two main reasons of cognitive conflict in the West Asian region, namely inter religion Jews vs Islamists ante and intra religious sectarian divide amongst Muslims themselves. Both these factors have energy centric geo political connect of the Western world for the existing political differentials across the region. **The Israel – Palestinian peace plan is the key to the de escalation of politico-military ante in the region** to take care of the first fault line to large extent. It would require restoration of occupied territories by the Israel plus an honourable package for the Palestinians with full sovereignty. As far as the sectarian divide is concern the enlightenment has to come from within as there are adequate mineral resources to provide adequate economic pie and political space to all stake holders.

If it happens then the passions and antipathy towards Israel is expected to mellow down paving way for resolution of other issues of major political differences. There is an air of positivity in US-Taliban negotiations in the Afghanistan which would have cascading effect on other sub regional standoffs. **What remains contentious is de escalation of US – Iran standoff on the Iranian nuclear deal and reconciliation amongst the Syrian society.** These issues need to be settled through mutual political accommodation to usher in peace and stability of the West Asia.

India, with more than five million expatriates working in West Asian region despite the volatile situation, has high stakes in bringing about political stability in the region. India, with her traditional cultural connect plus being one of the bigger economic partners, can play an important role in facilitating reconciliation amongst the disturbed relations in the region. To do that, Indian diplomacy has to be pro active in reaching out to our friends across the region. India has good relations with both Israel as well as Palestinians and look forward to fructification of the US sponsored peace plan, albeit with due modifications as acceptable to the Palestinian polity. Earlier it happens, better it would be for the world peace and also Indian national interests.

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