

Thanks to Saudi Arabia, Pakistan's Recognition of Israel Is Now Inevitable

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Pakistan can't afford to remain the last Sunni Islamist bastion resisting Saudi normalization with Israel. But the country's rulers, both political and military, want safeguards against a frenzied domestic backlash

The [visit to Israel](#) of a group of Pakistani-Americans and Pakistanis last month has mainstreamed the debate surrounding the formalization of ties between the two countries. From [newspaper columns](#), [to blogs](#), [to YouTube videos](#), to [Twitter threads](#) in the local Urdu language – all are dedicated to the discussion. While the most visible narrative still betrays Islamist hyperbole and antisemitic hysteria, even the hyper-nationalist internet fora in Pakistan have found space for arguments [in favor of recognizing Israel](#).

That change which is in the air is clear from the surprisingly robust defense of former state television journalist [Ahmed Quraishi](#), who was part of the Pakistani delegation that visited Israel last month, who himself isn't the only prominent voice championing the formalizing of ties between the two countries today. Despite being [sacked](#) by the government affiliated Pakistan Television Cooperation, and being targeted by the recently ousted [Imran Khan](#), many mainstream journalists have [come to Quraishi's defense](#).

An expert I recently interviewed for a piece on the country's environmental policies reiterated that he has been saying for years that Pakistan should “learn from Israel” and use Israeli tech knowhow to bring about a green revolution. A similar argument was made [here in Haaretz](#) by Pakistani agriculture experts a couple of years ago, and back then, the backlash was severe.

A decade ago, when some of us found space in local English-language newspapers then willing to push the proverbial envelope, [questioning](#) the state's duplicity over Israel, highlighting the [similarities](#) between the two countries, and arguing for ties between them, it was an eccentric opinion that barely anyone would take seriously. Today, it is one of the top-level foreign policy deliberations in Pakistan's corridors of power.

This, of course, is not to suggest that these handful of Pakistani writers penning the occasional piece in local, and [more recently Israeli](#), newspapers have rejigged the national ethos. It is the new geopolitical realities that have transformed what was until recently unthinkable to now being increasingly inevitable.

Even so, decades of anti-Israel frenzy was never going to evaporate without a whimper, even if the push for formalization is coming from the [omnipotent military establishment](#).

On cue, Imran Khan, who had already been [fanning conspiracy theories about an “Israeli plot”](#) against him before his removal as the prime minister in April, is now amplifying them in front of crowds of many thousands. At one recent mass rally he declared that his government was “ousted because of a conspiracy to install America’s puppets,” and alleged that the Israel visit was not only masterminded by the Sharif government that replaced his, but that it was “an attempt to impose the Indian-Israeli-American agenda on Pakistan and enslave Pakistan.”

Further than that, Khan is increasingly spilling the beans on the military leadership which once secured his position but with which he’s now at loggerheads. Khan has been reiterating how his successors have been “[tasked with](#)” recognizing Israel and a settlement over Kashmir with India, because of course that is [precisely](#) what he had been “[tasked with](#)” when he was in power.

Again, ex-PM [@ImranKhanPTI](#) incites a crowd against me at a rally at Dir yesterday, linking my journalism to alleged [#US+Israel](#) conspiracy; 2nd time in a week. This has led to violent threats against me and my family.
[/1@pressfreedom @RSF_en @Mukhayriq_lpic.twitter.com/Pq5cymhXD2](#)

— Ahmed Quraishi (@_AhmedQuraishi) [June 4, 2022](#)

Last week, the day after Khan first made the allegation that Pakistan’s current leaders were effectively Israel’s pawns, his rival, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, attended the National Assembly session with a performative riposte, wearing a [Palestinian scarf](#) with “Jerusalem is ours” inscribed on it.

Antisemitic slurs are being hurled by both the government and the opposition. Maryam Nawaz, vice president of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) [saying](#) that Khan is the “only person in Pakistan with family ties to Israel,” alluding to his erstwhile marriage with Jemima Goldsmith. Fazlur Rehman, the Islamic cleric who is presiding over the ruling coalition Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), and who has spent the past couple of decades [directing antisemitic hatred](#) towards Khan, last week [said](#) that it was the ousted prime minister whose “agenda” was to recognize Israel and “taint Islam.”

Prime Minister of Pakistan Shehbaz Sharif is seen wearing a Palestinian scarf that reads "Jerusalem is ours" [#palestine #freepalestine #gaza #palestineforever #palestinewillbefree #palestinetx #palestinian #فلسطين #دس_____الـة # #photo #instagram #savepalestine #palestinefree pic.twitter.com/QrGpZwIYkw](#)

— Shahidullah Neezami (@Shahidneezeami) [June 2, 2022](#)

Meanwhile, as the current government, like its predecessors, gaslights its way towards ties with Israel, the leaders of Khan's Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) are digging out developments from the PML-N's previous tenure to suggest that the "plot" had been hatched even before Khan came to power. For [Shireen Mazari](#), the former Khan administration's human rights minister no less, the current government allowing a Jewish man, Fishel Benkhald, to correct his religion on official documents in 2017 came at the initiation of the "Israel agenda." Benkhald, Pakistan's "[last Jew](#)," was part of the delegation that visited Israel last month.

Clearly, neither the government nor the Khan-led opposition wants the formalization of Israeli ties under their watch unless the military can guarantee protection from the inevitable electoral dent that the move would trigger. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has been keen on subservience to the military. However, his government still isn't certain of the depth and breadth of support it enjoys from the powers that be.

For instance, it took the government two months to make the commonsensical move on [removing the unsustainable subsidy](#) on fuel which had pulverized the [Pakistani rupee](#), exacerbated the current account deficit and crashed the markets. Where aligning fuel prices with global crude hike is politically touted as a "[tough decision](#)," recognizing Israel obviously goes off the difficulty charts. However, given that even in a crippling economic crisis, the government has managed to find a way to hike the [defense budget by six percent](#) shows that Sharif is willing to put it all on the line over the military bailing his regime out in the election now likely to be in 2023.

The military, of course, has much to gain from the godfathers of normalization with Israel, namely [Saudi Arabia](#) and the United States, and was increasingly alarmed by the strident anti-American tone adopted by Khan, particularly in his final months in office.

When Khan was [visiting Putin](#) and openly slamming the U.S. in the weeks leading up to his ouster, Army Chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa was orchestrating damage control with Washington in his [public statements](#) and diplomatic engagements, both [official](#) and backchannel. However, with Khan's [popularity escalating](#) following his unceremonious exit in April, both Gen Bajwa and the institution that he leads, are facing vitriol across social media. [#BajwaHasToGo](#) was the top Twitter trend in Pakistan on Monday.

Indeed, a behind-the-scene turf war has been brewing within the military leadership, with a faction backing Khan, whose exit was prompted by the [fallout](#) his attempt to exercise the prime minister's constitutional right to prolong the term of his spymaster instead of nominating Gen Bajwa's choice. With Bajwa's term ending in November, he wants a government willing to obediently follow his call and pick his choice as the next army chief.

But this has made Gen Bajwa enemies with Khan's party, the political grouping that dominates social media like no other. As result, pushing ties with Israel, a treasonous, "anti-Pakistan" argument until last year, is now a popular accusation directed at the military leadership.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, the principal force behind Pakistan's Israel move, cannot afford to wait too long for Pakistan's civil-military leaders to sort out their wariness over the consequences. With Israeli [businesspeople](#), frequenting Saudi Arabia, the kingdom wants to formalize the ties swiftly especially with Joe Biden's visit to the two countries - now postponed till July - likely to [fortify defense alliances](#) in [the region](#).

Formalizing ties with Israel, coupled with peace in Jerusalem – which, in turn, would require a settlement acceptable to the Palestinian leadership – is the final piece in the Islamic jigsaw of the al-Saud family, with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman pivoting, in recent years, towards selling a [tourism-friendly](#) version of Islam.

The hub of Salafi jihadism for the past four decades, Saudi Arabia, is now coping with new economic realities after losing out oil dominance to [U.S. shale](#) in recent years, and with Islam evolving from being the source of al-Saud family's control over Islamic sites in the Arabian Peninsula to now growing as the bedrock of the Saudi economy.

With Islamic pilgrimage already contributing over [\\$12 billion](#) to the Saudi economy, a reformed, moderate Islam will bolster Saudi geoeconomic power, especially if it can be coupled with hegemony over the Islamic heritage in the region. Easy access to Jerusalem would complete the Mecca-Medina-Jerusalem Islamic trail connecting the three holiest sites in Islam, with the [theological rationale](#) for brotherhood with Jews – fellow 'people of the book' in Islam – already being peddled by leading Saudi clerics in [official sermons](#).

With the seven-decade old Turkey-Israel ties recently [growing warmer](#) after years of frigidity, encouraged by Saudi Arabia which has petrodollars that [Recep Tayyip Erdogan desperately needs](#), and ever-closer ties between Israel and its Abraham Accords partners, it is Pakistan that remains the last Sunni Islamist bastion resisting Saudi normalization with Israel. Pakistan, too, will inevitably be offered sweeteners to soften its stance: massive financial gains to heal an ailing economy, which is once again at the [doorstep of the International Monetary Fund](#) for a bailout.

That bailout could allow the government, for instance, to pass a more populist budget next June in the lead up to national elections. A Saudi-backed influence campaign championing both subsidies for essential goods and access to Al-Aqsa could offer an enticing electoral slogan. Despite that, Saudi protection is largely for the military rulers invested in the country not imploding, financially or otherwise. The government wants safeguards from the army that in turn wants safeguards from Riyadh and DC, a veritable food chain of guarantees.

But with a significant chunk of Pakistanis, most notably Imran Khan's followers, no longer being under the army's control, it is already more difficult for both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia to leverage their influence. Biden and MBS will find little reassurance in solely incentivizing the military leadership, which has hitherto sufficed in guaranteeing Pakistan's position in regard to Israel. In the meantime, Saudi Arabia is likely to soon make [its move on Israel](#), with or without a Pakistan high on self-righteousness but running out of economic lifelines.

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