

Engaging Israel:

The Significance of the Istanbul Meeting between Israel and Pakistan

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Brief Analysis

The September 1 meeting in the Turkish city of Istanbul between Israeli foreign minister Silvan Shalom and his Pakistani counterpart, Khurshid Kasuri, was historic. There have been no public official contacts between the two nations since Pakistan was founded in 1947 as a home for Muslims in the Indian subcontinent just a few months before Israel, the Jewish national home, achieved statehood in 1948. The meeting represents a major breakthrough in Jerusalem's efforts to overcome diplomatic isolation and also indicates that Turkey is determined to play a more active role than previously thought.

High Stakes for Pakistan

Although Washington claims not to have been involved, it would have certainly been informed. The meeting was a success for the American policy of encouraging contacts between Israeli diplomats and officials from other U.S. allies, even if there are no formal diplomatic relations between the two. Such meetings, according to those who have taken part, can be a ritual exchange of negotiating positions, but also can facilitate more useful contacts. For Israel, any breakthrough can be seen as a reward for risks taken in the peace process. For the Palestinians, the Istanbul meeting is a reminder that the peace process is not static. The Palestinian leadership was clearly unhappy. Deputy prime minister Nabil Shaath said, "It is not good to give Israel gifts before it really implements the peace process, not only in Gaza, but in Gaza, the West Bank and Jerusalem."

For Islamabad, the public contact carries high risks. Several Pakistani political leaders from the Islamist opposition have condemned the meeting; a spokesman for the parliamentary alliance said it "is a move against the Islamic ummah (community) and reflects the pro-U.S. policies of the present government." Probably anticipating this, Pakistani officials are publicly downplaying the significance of the meeting. Foreign Minister Kasuri noted that

"Pakistan attaches great importance to Israel ending its occupation of Gaza" and that his country "had therefore decided to engage Israel." The ambiguous metaphor of engaging Israel provides little protection, given that Pakistan's military leader, president Pervez Musharraf, has hinted that he may move toward recognition. In the first instance, holders of Pakistani passports may be allowed to travel to Israel in order to visit Muslim holy places in Jerusalem and the West Bank.

The meeting in Turkey was not surprising, given that it had been earlier confirmed that President Musharraf was to address an American Jewish audience while attending the United Nations General Assembly in September. Islamabad explained that meeting as part of Musharraf's pursuit of interfaith dialogue, but it has to be understood in the context of the Pakistani military's support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan until the Sept. 11 attacks. During the same time period, Pakistan's top nuclear scientist, Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, was orchestrating the delivery of a uranium enrichment plant, along with a nearly complete blueprint of an atomic bomb, to Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi in circumstances of which Musharraf's government was supposedly unaware.

In the absence of official explanation, observers can only speculate about Pakistan's motives for the opening to Israel. Perhaps Musharraf, who has narrowly escaped at least two al-Qaeda assassination attempts, realizes he has no alternative to a closer relationship with the United States. When Qatar started to maneuver closer to Washington in the early 1990s, it sought to develop links with Israel, knowing that Washington would respond positively.

Islamabad no doubt is also concerned by the warmth of Israel's diplomatic, military, and commercial relations with Pakistan's neighbor and longterm adversary, India. (Israeli officials now consider New Delhi and Ankara their country's second most important diplomatic outposts after Washington.) Some commentators have spoken of quiet admiration for Israel's nation-building among members of Pakistan's military-bureaucratic elite, the permanent bedrock of its society. This is almost certainly overstated. Pakistan's former military leader Mohammed Zia-ul Haq reputedly fought alongside the Jordanian army against the Palestinians in 1971 while he was on a military training mission, but for decades Pakistan has almost slavishly adhered to a pro-Arab, pro-Palestinian agenda. Pakistan's own small Jewish community left for Israel and other countries in the 1960s.

The Turkish Role

Ankara recognized Israel in 1949; until Egypt's recognition of Israel at Camp David, Turkey was the only Muslim state that had diplomatic ties with the Jewish state. And those ties have been strong for decades. In the late 1950s, Israel and Turkey entered into a secret alliance, known as the Peripheral Pact, to cooperate on defense matters. In the 1990s, the Turkish-Israeli partnership was emboldened with new avenues of cooperation on security, intelligence, defense, trade, and tourism (see "[The Turkish Prime Minister Visits Israel: Whither Turkish-Israeli Relations? \(templateC05.php?CID=2302\)](#)" PolicyWatch no. 987).

Turkey has also maintained good relations with Pakistan since that country's establishment in 1948. At least since 2003, Turkey has been capitalizing on its position as a good friend of both Israel and Pakistan to mediate between the two countries. Prior to Israel's pullout from Gaza, the Pakistani government asked Turkey to bring Pakistan and Israel together to discuss direct political contacts, including the prospect of diplomatic ties, between the two countries. Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan relayed this message to Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon -- Erdogan additionally wrote a letter congratulating Sharon for the Gaza withdrawal. The Israeli response was positive, and the ministerial meeting was scheduled for Sept. 1. After the fruitful meeting, Shalom praised Turkey and underlined the importance of Turkey, "a big, secular, democratic country," hosting the meeting. Shalom also asked for Turkish help to mediate ties between Israel and other Muslim countries. With this latest development, and with Ankara acting to develop closer ties also between Israel and Azerbaijan, (see "[Good Relations between Azerbaijan and Israel: A Model for Other Muslim States in Eurasia? \(templateC05.php?CID=2287\)](#)" PolicyWatch no. 982) Turkey's role as a bridge between Israel and the Muslim countries has become into a more solid reality.

Advancing Normalization

While Pakistan's declared new policy towards Israel has yet to develop, its immediate effect may well be to dent Palestinian diplomatic efforts at the United Nations to claim that Israel still occupies Gaza even though the settlers have left and the Israeli army is soon to depart. Musharraf reportedly consulted Saudi Arabia before allowing the meeting with Israel, and Riyadh supposedly gave its approval, but most Arab states remain reluctant to have public contacts with Israel. Egypt, Jordan (whose King Abdullah II is expected to visit Israel next week), and Mauritania are the only Arab countries with formal diplomatic relations, and the latter's are in doubt following a recent military coup. Morocco, Tunisia, Qatar, and Oman maintain less formal links. Israel's ties with non-Arab Muslim countries have grown immensely since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Turkic Muslim countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

For Washington, the advance of the peace process and the public easing of tensions has to be balanced against the boost that Pakistan's engagement with Israel will give to the implacable hatred of the United States shared by Osama bin Laden and his sympathizers. This suggests that while Washington may well want to allow Turkey to take credit for the developments in Istanbul, U.S. officials should quickly follow up with coherent explanations of why not only Middle Eastern countries but governments throughout the Muslim world would do themselves a favor if, like Turkey, they promoted normalized relations with Israel.

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