



## The Road to Israeli-Palestinian Peace: Constraints and Opportunities

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The former US President Jimmy Carter who mediated between Egypt and Israel during 1977-1979 for peace leading to the Camp David accords and the March 1979 bilateral peace treaty recently admitted that he had been meeting with the Hamas leaders for years. The Bush administration after 9/11 designated Hamas as a terrorist organization. He said he feels “quite at ease” about meeting Hamas leaders Khaled Mashaal over the objections of Washington because the Palestinian group is essential to a future peace with Israel. He said: “I feel quite at ease in doing this. I think there’s no doubt in anyone’s mind that, if Israel is ever going to find peace with justice concerning the relationship with their next-door neighbors, the Palestinians, then Hamas will have to be included in this process”. He further added: “*I think that it’s very important that at least someone meet with the Hamas leaders to express their views, to ascertain what flexibility they have, to try to induce them to stop all attacks against innocent civilians in Israel and to cooperate with the Fatah as a group that unites the Palestinians, maybe to get them to agree to a cease-fire-things of this kind*” Asked whether it was right to meet a group that has not renounced violence or recognized Israel, he said, “Well, you can’t get prerequisites adopted by other people before you even talk to them”. [1] This interesting development comes in the wake of stalemate in the so-called peace process after years of talks between Palestinians and Israelis. There has been no real progress towards the establishment of a Palestinian state due to Israeli refusal to withdraw fully from occupied Palestinian lands especially West Bank and East

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Jerusalem. All the peace plans from Fez, Fahd, Oslo, and the Road Map to innumerable peace attempts have floundered due to Israeli rigidity and US inability to put pressure on Israel to implement UN and other resolutions. This article makes an attempt to study India's decision to establish diplomatic ties with Israel in 1992, and growing ties since then, the Oslo Peace Process, Israeli responses to various peace initiatives, emergence of Hamas and the fratricidal conflict between Fatah and Hamas and finally assess India's linkages with Israel and the Palestinians.

**Growing Cooperation with Israel:** To the end, India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was convinced that his decision not to exchange diplomatic personnel with Israel [which he reluctantly recognized in September 1950 after Israel's establishment in May 1948] was a correct decision. Since then successive Indian governments highlighted the absence of full diplomatic ties with Israel as evidence of India's support for the Palestine cause. Apart from other reasons, it must be emphasized that the Kashmir problem propelled India not to establish diplomatic ties with Israel as perhaps that would have provided Pakistan an additional lever to undermine India's interests in the Muslim World. In the wake of the 1990-91 Kuwait crisis, end of cold war, disintegration of USSR, Madrid Peace Conference in October 1991, India decided to establish diplomatic ties with Israel on 29 January 1992 under the Congress government led by PM Narasimha Rao. Things changed dramatically after 1991 when the Arabs and the Israelis after more than 40 years of hostility, wars and boycotts decided to sit down and negotiate their problems. With this new development India was encouraged to break the ice with Israel. The Jewish state was no more a pariah as before. There were also major changes as far as PLO was concerned. After Yasser Arafat [PLO leader] appeared before the UNGA in 1974 and PLO was recognized by Arab States at Rabat Summit as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, the PLO went on a peace offensive under Egyptian influence after it moved from Lebanon to Tunis in 1982-3. In 1988 Arafat accepted UNSCR 242 and renounced violence and recognized Israel and the result was in 1991 PLO had more than 92 embassies and 28 lower level foreign representations. India was the first non Arab country to recognize PLO in 1975 as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and gave the Office of the PLO in New Delhi full diplomatic status of an Embassy in 1980. In 1988, India was one of the first countries to recognize the State of Palestine.

But now under the changed atmosphere after the end of cold war and disintegration of USSR and emergence of USA as the sole super-power, India voted in favor of resolution 46/86 in December 1991 at the UNGA which rescinded its 10 November 1975 resolution no.3379 equating Zionism with Racism. This was the first indication of change in India's West Asia policy [after the end of cold war and the disintegration of USSR] especially towards Israel. Soon thereafter, meetings between Israeli and Indian officials at the UN, US and elsewhere took place. Apart from India's support to UNSCR 687 of 3 April 1991 imposing terms of ceasefire on Iraq, this was a major shift. Some have even called this a "reversal" in India's policy towards Israel. India's decision on Israel was accompanied by many statements highlighting the benefits India stands to gain with its new policy towards Israel. India's Defense Minister (on 23 February 1992) Mr. Sharad Pawar said it paved the way for "drawing on Israel's successful experience to curb terrorism". He said that such an exchange would be of mutual advantage to the two states, adding that India would also like to get acquainted with Israeli experience in developing technology for anti-terrorist operations. It was also mentioned how India could play a significant role in the Arab Israeli Peace Process. Additional areas of cooperation were also cited i.e. defense cooperation and cooperation in agriculture. India's trade with Israel has increased manifold. Israel has emerged as a second major supplier of weapons to India. Major bilateral agreements have been signed in almost all fields and high level visits have taken place. Many Indian Chief Ministers and other state ministers have visited Israel. From the Israeli side, former Prime Minister and foreign minister Shimon Peres has been to India several times followed by Ezer Weizmann the Israeli President. However the most controversial has been the visit of Israeli PM Ariel Sharon [Sept 2003] during the BJP led NDA rule. L.K.Advani [Home minister] and Jaswant Singh [External Affairs] also visited Israel and generated lot of controversy over cooperation in nuclear field, terrorism and internal security. There was no doubt about the NDA govt. giving primacy to Israel and US in its foreign policy. But the emergence of UPA govt. under Manmohan Singh has apparently made not much of difference to Indo-Israeli ties. They remain same more or less as warm with India importing large quantities of arms from Israel. Even though the MEA is cautious but the Defense Ministry has been receiving delegation after delegations from Israel. Of course the left parties called for break in diplomatic and military [import of arms] of ties with Israel in

view of continued occupation of Palestinian lands by Israel, the Congress appears to continue the ties started by PV Narashima Rao in 1992. The Indo-Israeli relationship is flourishing with two-way trade surpassing the \$ 3 billion mark and with no end to military exchanges. After the Madrid Conference and the Oslo Peace Accords of September 1993, between the PLO and Israel, UN members and people all over the world expected Israel to withdraw from Arab lands leading to peace between Israel and its neighbors and the formation of a Palestinian State. But the assassination of Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin on November 4, 1995 and the emergence of Benjamin Netanyahu as Likud PM of Israel and his opposition to the Oslo peace process including a Palestinian state and acceptance of US neo-con agenda calling for a “Clean Break” with the Oslo process while addressing US Congress on 10<sup>th</sup> July 1996 gave a severe jolt to the peace Process. Many accused Arafat of rejecting Israeli peace offers in Camp David talks in July 2000 with President Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. There are no reliable reports as to what was offered to Arafat. But what is clear is that Arafat was willing to concede 77% of historic Palestine and wanted Israel to withdraw from the 23% of Palestine i.e. Gaza, West Bank and East Jerusalem. Israel offered Gaza and parts of West Bank but refused to dismantle Jewish settlements and rejected the right to return of the Palestinian refugees and reiterated its stand that Jerusalem will remain the eternal and undivided Capital of Israel. The US proposed Tenet and Mitchell Plans and later the Road Map for Peace with UN, EU and Russia but so far no progress has been made. Meanwhile Ariel Sharon reoccupied the Palestinian territories, carried out indiscriminate arrests, killings of the Palestinians, imposed curfew on most towns and cities, carried out house demolitions, and humiliating check points to prevent free movement of Palestinians. The result has been that deprivation, destruction and death rained on the Palestinians. The Al Aqsa Intifada since September 2000 continued and suicide bombings and Israeli use of excessive force continues.

It needs to be recalled here that the State of Israel occupied the Palestinian territories of West Bank [5640 square km] and Gaza Strip [360 sq. km] and East Jerusalem in the third Arab-Israeli war of June 1967. On 28 June, 1967 Israel annexed East Jerusalem. Soon after, the Palestinian leaders wanted to establish an independent Palestinian state but Israel preferred to deal with King Hussein of Jordan. In return for

peace, Israel was required to withdraw from occupied Arab lands as per the UNSC Resolution 242. But since then, all Israeli governments have allowed Jewish settlements in all the occupied Arab lands. For the Palestinian leaders, the Jewish settlements represented a decisive rejection of peace. The Camp David Accords of 1978-79 between Egypt and Israel did not resolve the issue although Egypt's President Anwar Sadat pleaded with Carter and Begin for autonomy to the Palestinian territories. A combination of events starting from Israeli invasions of Lebanon in 1978 and 1982, tough policy by the Israeli military commanders and oppression by armed Jewish settlers made life for Palestinians difficult in West Bank and Gaza Strip [WBGs].

**The Oslo Peace Process:** In this backdrop, the Palestinian *Intifada* (Uprising-1987-1993) broke out, which paved the way for the Oslo Peace Accords of 1993-95 between Israel and the Palestinians under the leadership of Yasser Arafat. It was commonly believed that at the end of the Oslo Peace Process [OPP], the PLO would declare an independent Palestinian state over Gaza, West Bank with East Jerusalem as the Capital. The OPP had brought with it the hope and expectation among the Palestinians that a resolution to the conflict was "attainable". Unfortunately the OPP intensified rather than mitigated Palestinian "dispossession, deprivation and oppression", and so precluded a fair and workable settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Interestingly the OPP did not represent the end of Israeli occupation but its continuation, albeit in a less direct form. The structural ties between Israel and the Palestinians and the unequal power equations which attended it were not ended by the OPP but instead reinforced and strengthened. Surprisingly, the accords never mentioned the word "occupation" or acknowledged Israel as an occupying power nor did it recognize Palestinian right for statehood, borders or full equality. According to one writer the most critical feature of the OPP was the "abandonment of the entire body of international law and resolutions pertaining to the conflict that had evolved over the last 53 years in favor of bilateral negotiations between two actors of grossly unequal power". In other words, the Oslo accords reflected Israeli strength and Palestinian weakness, and "not the application of accepted international law or universal standards of justice". Soon it led to sharp economic decline for the majority of Palestinians living in WBGs mainly due to the policy of closures. International donors wanted economic change in the clear

absence of a political solution, as “placing the economic cart before the political horse was destined to fail because the locus of control remained with the occupier and reflected the occupier’s interests and objectives”. Palestinians came to be ravaged by widespread poverty, declining health position, eroding education, all-round destruction and more importantly with no real hope for the future. Thus “Oslo formalized and institutionalized the occupation in a manner that was altogether new”.

**The End of Oslo:** The Israeli Labor leader Yitzhak Rabin who had concluded with Arafat the Oslo Accords was killed in November 1995. His successor Shimon Peres lost the Israeli general elections of 1996 which brought a hard-liner Benjamin Netanyahu of the Likud party as PM. He employed all his powers to “freeze and undermine” the Oslo accords. The unwillingness and intransigence of Netanyahu to honor negotiated agreements was the crucial reason for the final collapse of the Oslo accords. Under the circumstances the “Clean Break” Study came in handy to Netanyahu. The study “**Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm**” was prepared by Douglas Feith, Richard Perle, and David Wurmser among others of the US neo-conservative group for the **Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies** in Jerusalem and published in June 1996. It was delivered to the Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu who quickly accepted the report on July 10, 1996. The report among other things called on Israel to abrogate the Oslo Peace Accords, annex West Bank, launch pre-emptive attack on Palestinian Authority, and thereby prevent the emergence of a Palestine state. In order to breathe fresh life into the peace process, US President Clinton had organized a summit at Camp David in July 2000 between PLO leader Yasser Arafat and Israel PM Ehud Barak but peace eluded them. Palestinians had already conceded 78 % of historic Mandatory Palestine to Israel as against the 55 percent allotted by the UN in 1947 for the Jews. Arafat was now being asked to compromise further on the remaining 22% that was WBGS. Barak was not willing to neither withdraw from the entire West Bank nor dismantle all Jewish settlements there. He rejected the right to return of the Palestinian refugees and reiterated Israeli stand that Jerusalem will remain the eternal and undivided capital of Israel. Soon, Israel painted Arafat in the darkest colors with Likud leader Ariel Sharon and his supporters declaring him “irrelevant and an obstacle for peace”. Arafat is our “Bin Laden” was a pet theme for Sharon. [2]

Although Yasser Arafat died of illness in late 2004 but Israel had virtually confined the PLO leader much earlier to his Ramallah compound, which made a telling effect on Arafat's health. Under Israeli influence, the US President George W. Bush declared Arafat unfit to rule and called on the Palestinian people to elect a new leadership. Soon the *Al Aqsa Intifada* [second uprising] led to suicide bombings and Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation of WBGs resumed in right earnest. Meanwhile on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2005, Palestinians elected Mahmoud Abbas as the new President of the Palestinian National Authority [PNA] and many expected Abbas to put the peace process back on track and to end the cycle of violence. The *Intifada* had taken the lives of thousands of Palestinians with over 25,000 injured and hundreds still languishing in Israeli jails. At the outset Abbas initiated a dialogue with Hamas to persuade the latter to support his cease-fire efforts with Egyptian mediation. Abbas also effected substantial changes in the police and security structures. Some of Arafat's cronies who were corrupt were also removed. Ariel Sharon announced in December 2004 his "unilateral disengagement" plan under which Israeli troops and settlers were to withdraw from Gaza and four small West Bank settlements with 526 Jewish settlers by August 2005. Despite stiff opposition to his plan Sharon implemented what he had promised. Even though Gaza was free of Israeli army and settlers but the Palestinians who were looking for an independent state of their own didn't materialize. Also Palestinians had no free access to the outside world by air, sea or land as Israel continued to control these entries and exit points.

**Collapse of the 2003 Road Map:** The Performance-Based Road Map to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict-known as the Road Map for Peace was introduced on April 30, 2003. It was hailed as a historic compromise as it makes a clear reference to a provisional Palestinian state, although its boundaries are unclear. Unlike the Oslo, the Road map refers explicitly to Israeli occupation and to ending it at the end of the process, but doesn't call the occupation as illegal and that it must be brought to an end as per UN resolutions and international law. Unfortunately it has many of the structural flaws of the Oslo accords, like it calls for dismantling Israeli settlements established only since March 2001, leaving the bulk of settlements in place and reinforcing the geographic non-contiguity of Palestinian lands, whereas it expects the Palestinians to deliver great many things but is short on Israel.[3] The Road Map failed to

take off and with the US attention focused on Iraq, the Palestine issue was largely left to Sharon even though the EU, UN and Russia occasionally took some interest whenever there appeared a crisis. Meanwhile, Israel continued with its policy of targeted killings of Palestinian leaders especially of Hamas. In the face of continued hostile policy from Israel and inability of Abbas to get Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian lands led to continued increase in the popularity of Hamas. In the Palestinian local elections held in May 2005, Fatah won control of 52 of the 84 municipal councils, Hamas won 24 and smaller factions took four councils. Another four were undecided. Compared to previous elections Hamas made strong inroads in key urban centers in West Bank and consolidated its hold in Gaza. It must be mentioned here that Hamas had boycotted the 9, January 2005 Presidential election. Although Abbas had shown that he is capable of controlling the security situation but the real crux was how far Israel will be honest in implementing its part of the promises. As seen before, by the end of 2005, Israel had withdrawn from Gaza and parts of West Bank and released few hundred Palestinian detainees, but large sections of the Palestinians still remained under Israeli occupation. It was clear that after decades of Israeli occupation and use of lethal force, Palestinian will to resist couldn't be crushed by Israel. The US and Israel once again called for reforms in the Palestinian Authority [PA] and accused Abbas of not doing enough to contain Hamas and stop suicide bombings as well as the Qassam rockets. Abbas did control a very difficult security situation and in all fairness acted with wisdom and worked slowly, to regain confidence and trust of the Palestinian people.

Although Sharon was applauded for his brave step to withdraw from Gaza but no other Israeli leader had "killed more Palestinian civilians or done greater damage to Palestinian civilian institutions and installations than this individual". It was Sharon who transformed the idea of Greater Israel into reality. "For (Sharon) there was no green-line... there was simply the land of Israel. There was no entity called the West Bank... no Palestinians, only the Arabs of the land of Israel. His was the vision and vocabulary of the militant Zionists". [4] In the so-called *Operation Defensive Shield* launched by Sharon against the Palestinians on 29 March 2002, the declared objective was to destroy the infrastructure of Palestinian terrorism. But what actually Israel destroyed were the offices, equipment, furniture, computers, archives and records of Banks, Corporations,

Businesses, Research Centers, Town Halls, Municipalities, Jails, Police Stations, Schools, Radio stations, Land Registry Offices, Courts, and Ministries across the administrative spectrum, including the ministry of higher education and the ministry of National Economy. Apart from this, there was systematic offensive by Israel against the Palestinian security apparatus – its personnel, checkpoints, parking lots, barracks, jails, headquarters and leaders. As one writer put it, “this policy could hardly increase the incentives for the Palestinian security forces to tackle the oppositional suicide bombers and may indeed have been pursued by Sharon with precisely this destructive purpose in mind”. [5] Even though Sharon accepted the Road Map on May 25, 2003 but had raised 14 objections which effectively stalemated negotiations and precluded the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. Under this plan, the Palestinians were to have an independent Palestine state by 2005. Instead what they got was unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and removal of handful of Jewish settlers from the West Bank. The Palestinians who had earlier seen the Johnson Plan, Rogers Plan, Allon Plan, the World Zionist Plan, the Begin Plan, Netanyahu’s “Allon Plus” Plan, Barak’s “generous offer” and now Sharon’s vision of a Palestinian state, have also seen Mitchell and Tenet Plans and many others too but daily life for them had become much worse. Israel even after its withdrawal from Gaza has at will, launched deadly attacks deep inside WBGS in the name of controlling terrorist attacks and has resorted to indiscriminate targeted killings. For the Palestinians all peace plans whether Israeli or otherwise “foresaw Israeli control of significant West Bank territory, a Palestinian existence on minimal territory surrounded, divided and ultimately, controlled by Israel, and a Palestinian entity that would assume responsibility for internal policing and civil matters”. This situation is not very different from what Rabin told the political council of his Labor party around the Oslo peace accords: “I prefer the Palestinians to cope with the problems of enforcing order in the Gaza [strip]. The Palestinians will be better at it than we are because they allow no appeals to the Supreme Court and will prevent the [Israeli] Association for Civil Rights from criticizing the conditions there by denying it access to the area. They will rule there by their own methods, freeing- and this is important- the Israeli army soldiers from having to do what they will do”. [6]

**Squeezing the Hamas Government:** It was in this background of deprivation, destruction and death that parliamentary elections were held in Palestine in January 2006, which brought Hamas to power for the first time. Palestinian hope of having an independent state was again dashed in 2005 for the second time after 1998. With the exit of Arafat the chances of reaching a lasting settlement based on 1967 lines became slim given the determination of Sharon to retain much of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. As early as in April 2004, Sharon had understood well the impact of his “disengagement” plan, when he stressed in an interview with *Haaretz*, “The Palestinians understand that this plan is, to a great extent, the end of their dreams, and a very heavy blow to them”. [7] Much later his advisor Dor Weisglass confirmed the idea of an independent Palestinian state as a non-starter. The election of Hamas by the Palestinians [42% voted for Hamas] is to be seen as an expression clearly of their frustration at the policies of Israel and continued US support. It also revealed the bankruptcy of the Fatah Group whose emphasis on diplomacy had been rebuffed by Israel. Soon after becoming President, Abbas had raised the hopes of Palestinians that he will end the Israeli occupation. As one Palestinian had remarked: “The only way to achieve statehood is through diplomacy. We are not militarily strong enough to battle with Israel and emerge victorious. We simply do not have the means. Abu Mazen is our best bet. With him, we will *Insha-allah* reach a peaceful settlement.” But the election of Hamas government not only gave Israel a handle to intensify its so called war on terror but the Israeli government put more pressure on Abbas to contain Hamas. The Palestinian National Council [PNC] elected Ismail Haniyeh as the new Prime Minister of Palestine. Hamas came to dominate the new Palestinian government, although others were invited to join. Not only the US declared Hamas, like Hezbollah, to be a terrorist group and boycotted the Hamas government, but it used the Quartet’s demand that Israel’s “right to exist” be recognized as a pretext to subvert the election verdict and starve the Palestinian people into submission. The EU, Israel, Canada and others followed US example. The new government under Hamas was deprived of financial resources as money transfer was banned to bring down the Palestine government so as to bring yet another “regime change”. The hostile Israeli, US, EU attitude towards Hamas is due to its policy of eternal “resistance” to Israeli occupation and rejection of Israel’s right to permanent existence on this land. But Hamas on several occasions has said it is willing to recognize Israel on the basis of equality

and reciprocity but they want to know what are the final boundaries of the Israel whose right to exist they are suppose to “recognize”. It is a well known fact that for the last several years Abbas has been trying hard to get Israel and US implement the Road Map for Peace but without much success. Hamas leaders support such peace talks with Israel conducted by Abbas promising to accept the results if approved by a referendum. Unfortunately the US and the EU have joined hands to blockade the Palestinians under pressure from Israel. But the Palestinians have in Gaza despite horrendous Israeli pressure have not abandoned Hamas nor surrendered to the US-Israeli dictates. As Robert Serry, the UN Special Coordinator for West Asia said in April 2008: “The collective punishment of the population of Gaza, which has been instituted for months now, has failed.”[8]

**Hamas-Fatah Clash:** Abbas and the Fatah, still smarting after its defeat in the January 2006 parliamentary elections, rejected Hamas demand to cede control of the Palestinian security services to the PM Ismail Haniyeh. Soon clashes erupted especially in Gaza between the Fatah led Palestinian security forces and the Hamas militia on the issue. The “World War III” which Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin had predicted in Gaza after Israel’s withdrawal way back in 1995 (before his assassination) now appeared a possibility. Gaza was soon heading towards a civil war mainly due to President Mahmoud Abbas’ refusal to integrate the Hamas militia into the regular Palestinian security force or allow the formation of a parallel security force. Abbas was not only keen to retain Fatah control over this key structure but he was adamant also due to US-Israeli objection to Hamas militia being inducted into the Palestinian security force. Despite Ismail Haniyeh’s statement that “civil war is not in our vocabulary” and that the clashes between Fatah and Hamas were regrettable, he was keen to see his militia men employed in the revamped Palestinian security force, in order to ease widespread unemployment in WBGS. This would have also strengthened his position in maintaining law and order. Many, of course, were killed (over 100) and injured as a result of inter-Palestinian rivalry especially since May 2006.

**Elentless Israeli Pressure on Hamas:** In order to put pressure on the Hamas Government, Israel intensified its policy of indiscriminate arrests, targeted killings, indefinite curfews, large scale house demolitions, the frequent closures of WBGS, humiliating checkpoints, general shut downs

that prevented Palestinians from reaching to work in Israel and far-reaching restrictions that prevented Palestinians from attending schools, visiting hospitals and holding down jobs in their villages and towns. The resident representative of the Norwegian's People aid, Gudrun Bertinussen described the problem as thus: "New restrictions on movement within the WBGS have serious consequences for humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian population...with the new restrictions humanitarian agencies are no longer able to effectively reach the population in immediate need of assistance, and our capacity to provide sustained and quality support in the long term has been severely undermined". [9] In addition according to the humanitarian report prepared for the Quartet, travel by Palestinians between cities and villages has come to a complete halt. All productive activity has ceased in manufacturing, construction, commerce and private and public services. In other words the Palestinian economy has ceased to function in major areas. Former US President Jimmy Carter in his new book **Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid** writes: "For 39 years Israel has occupied Palestinian land and has confiscated and colonized hundreds of choice sites. Often excluded from their former homes, land and places of worship, protesting Palestinians have been severely dominated and oppressed. There is forced segregation between Israeli settlers and Palestine's citizens, with a complex pass system required for Arabs to traverse Israel's multiple checkpoints". The huge security wall or the "apartheid wall" which Israel has been constructing at astonishing speed in clear violation of international law and against the advice of International Court of Justice as also UN Security Council resolutions has exposed the colonial expansionist intentions of Israel. Due to the wall Israel has annexed large tracts of fertile Palestinian lands which also contain water wells. Thousands of Palestinians are trapped on either side of the wall. It has not only caused immense suffering, dispossession and impoverished them but has led to internal refugee problem. Slowly this is destroying the middle class and causing health problems and raising the number of illiterate people who are drifting towards extremism. Jimmy Carter justified the word apartheid: "...I knew that's an accurate description of what is going on in Palestine". He also said: "I would say that the plight of the Palestinians now-confiscation of their land, that they're being suppressed completely against voicing their disapproval of what is happening, the building of the wall that intrudes deep within their territory, the complete separation of Israelis from the Palestinians- all of those things in many ways are worse

than some of the aspects of apartheid in South Africa". Carter further says: "There is no doubt about it, and no one can go there and visit the different cities in Palestine without agreeing with what I have said. Combined with this wall, Israeli control of the Jordan River Valley will completely enclose Palestinians in their shrunken and divided territory. Gaza is surrounded by a similar barrier with only two openings, controlled by Israel. Crowded citizens have no free access to the outside world by air, sea, or land." Carter has been called "anti-Israel" because of his use of the words *apartheid* and *colonialism* in his book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* to describe Israeli policies in occupied Palestinian territories. It must be remembered that Sharon in the first place mobilized support among the Israelis for the security wall due to the Palestinian suicide bombings and soon created fact on the ground. [10]

Together with all this, targeted killings of Hamas leaders including Rantisi, expansion of Jewish settlements and the breakdown of peace talks have led to deep despair, frustration and anger among younger Palestinians against Israel. Notwithstanding these draconian security measures, the US and Israel were largely successful in starving the Palestinian people through an effective economic blockade. Israel which has collected millions of dollars as taxes from the Palestinians which legitimately should be given to the Palestine Authority has been successful in blocking money in Western and Israeli banks. Arab and other banks are also prevented by Israel from giving legitimate Palestinian funds to the Hamas led govt. as these banks fear US and EU sanctions. The result has been sharp fall in economic activity in the WBGS and further impoverishment of an already desperate people. Hundreds of thousands of people employed by PA like policemen, firemen, nurses, civil servants, teachers and others were not paid salaries for months sparking demonstrations. Even the security forces couldn't be paid who appeared to take law into their own hands with some storming police stations and even the PNC head quarters. Even hospitals couldn't procure essentials medical supplies due to shortage of funds. According to Jimmy Carter, "... UN has reported food supplies in Gaza equivalent to those among the poorest families in Sub-Saharan Africa, with half the families surviving on one meal a day". An already volatile situation was deliberately aggravated by the US and Israel with the clear intention to bring about "regime change". According to one writer "Washington has pulled out all the stops to

undermine the Hamas-led govt. US media reports say that US and Israeli officials have met at the “highest-level” to discuss “starving” the PA govt.” led by Ismail Haniyeh. The economic blockade imposed by Israel since Hamas had formed the Govt. in Gaza, continues to prevent exports and allows only limited supplies of food, fuel and aid. Israel has tightened the closures despite the sacking of Hamas led govt. By the end of April 2008 the UN-including the World Food Program, which was giving food handouts for up to 800,000 Palestinians in Gaza decided to stop it because of a severe fuel shortage brought on by an Israeli economic blockade. John Ging, Director of Operations in Gaza for the UN Relief and Works Agency, which supports Palestinian refugees, said there had been a “totally inadequate” supply of fuel-diesel and petrol- from Israel to Gaza for 10 months until it was finally halted two weeks ago. “The devastating humanitarian impact is entirely predictable”, he said. Gaza’s streets have largely been emptied of cars, except for those running on the last reserves of fuel, or on cooking gas or used vegetable oil. [11]

**Truce Breaks Down:** To compound the Palestinian woes, Israel killed more than 10 Palestinians including six women and three children in a completely unprovoked act on June 9, 2006 in Gaza. The innocent Palestinians were relaxing on the Gaza beach on a hot and sultry day when Israeli gun boats opened fire. More than forty Palestinians were seriously injured in this dastardly Israeli attack. Earlier in the first week of June 2006, Israeli Special Forces had killed Jamal Abu Samhadana, the head of the Hamas-led resistance forces in Gaza. Hamas reacted to the Gaza killings by immediately calling off the “truce” with Israel and launching Qassam rockets into Israel. It’s pertinent to remember that since August 2004 Hamas had respected the cease-fire arranged with Abbas and Israel, which had indeed considerably brought down the level of violence. Soon after the Israeli offensive, spokesman for the popular resistance committee, Abu Abir promised that “rockets would rain into the Zionist entity and our heroes will blow themselves into their dirty bodies”. It is very clear that Israel was determined to provoke the Hamas by its targeted killings of Hamas activists, including senior leaders and also striking at will with US made F-16s, Apache helicopters and Merkava tanks. Palestinians saw in Israel as an: “adversary (who) has no inhibitions in using his full arsenal against your homes and places of livelihood, and your only weapons are small arms, and when the international community and your neighbors are

unable to come to your aid, the temptation to turn suicidal is not so impossible to comprehend".[12] Palestine PM Ismail Haniyeh called Israeli killing of Palestinians on Gaza beach as "war crime" and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas who was critical of Haniyeh on various counts called the Gaza Israeli attack as "bloody genocide" and urged the international community to intervene.

The US and Israel along with their allies in EU and elsewhere had been calling on the Palestinians to elect a new leader even when Arafat was alive. Although reluctantly Arafat had appointed Mahmood Abbas as Prime Minister but he resigned later on due to an adamant Israel not ready to end occupation and help create an independent Palestine state. Even after Arafat's death, election of Abbas as the Palestinian President in early 2005 and in a true democratic spirit did not satisfy the US and Israel to speed up the implementation of the Road Map. Palestinians were now being punished by the US, Israel, EU and others for exercising their democratic rights. This was brilliantly articulated by Khalid Mishaal, head of the Hamas political Bureau based in Damascus, Syria. He wrote, "Since the elections of January 2006 our people have been boycotted and punished by the International Community for exercising their democratic rights. In the meantime, Israel has continued to kill and detain Palestinians on a daily basis, demolishing hundreds of houses and making thousands homeless. Today, Israel has more than 11,000 of our brothers and sisters in jail and continues to deny millions of refugees the right to return to their homeland. It has defied International law by proceeding with the construction of the Apartheid Wall and building settlements in land expropriated from Palestinians".[13]

**Expansion and Consolidation of Settlements:** Not only the Palestinians are under pressure from Israel on financial, security, political and diplomatic fronts, but they are also being forced to part with their land. Israel's settlement policy which is presented as a defensive one is seen as a form of "ethnic warfare" and therefore "outrageously wrong". Since the OPP started more than a lakh new Israeli settlers joined the illegal settlements in WBGS whose number is anything but growing leading to seizure of ever more Palestinian land, institutionalization of closure policy leading to massive unemployment and hence growing poverty for the Palestinians. The Israeli military checkpoints with entry and exit points severely controlled are suffocating the people which have led to the division of WBGS into

territorially non-contiguous enclaves. At the same time there is no doubt that more and more Israelis are benefiting from the occupation. Jewish settlements are now regarded as “natural outgrowth, a needed constituency providing protection and security, with important familial links to Israel proper. Israelis no longer feel uncomfortable with the occupation at a time when occupation has grown more repressive and perverse”. To make matters worse the Israeli PM Ehud Olmert announced in Nov 2006 a new Israeli plan for a final settlement of the Palestinian issue. The plan proposes the creation of a Greater Israel by 2010 under which Israel will formally annex the whole of Jerusalem and big chunks of West Bank including those taken behind the apartheid wall. Under this plan, Olmert claimed to follow David Ben Gurion. It was Ben Gurion who proclaimed “no partner” mantra and also of creating territorial facts on the ground. Like Ben Gurion, Ehud Olmert also excels at creating facts on ground. Despite his call for large scale evacuation of land and settlements in WB, the Israeli settler population in the WB (excluding East Jerusalem) increased by nearly 6 percent in 2006, more than quadruple the 1.4 percent growth rate in 2005. There were 268,379 Israelis living in the WB at the end of 2006, according to the Israeli Interior Ministry, compared to 253,748 in 2005, a 5.8 percent increase. The increase in population in WB has led to new settlements – both those formally authorized under Israeli law and others without authorization but with the state’s active connivance – have been created or expanded. Recently Olmert appeared less optimistic than he was, when he proposed withdrawal: “A year ago, I believed that we would be able to (withdraw forces and settlers from part of West Bank) unilaterally. However, it should be said that our experience in Lebanon and Gaza Strip is not encouraging. We pulled out of Lebanon unilaterally and see what happened. We pulled out of the Gaza Strip completely to the International border, and every day they are firing Qassam rockets at Israelis. Under the existing circumstances, it would be more practical to achieve a two state solution through negotiations rather than (unilateral) withdrawal”. Despite good intentions expressed by Olmert, the harsh ground reality is that Palestinians have less land now than before on which to establish an independent Palestine state. As Khalid Mishal said: “We Palestinians have been the victims of invasion, occupation and oppression for almost a century. Yet we have been constantly blackmailed to make concessions and give up yet more of our legitimate rights. There must be no more blackmail of Palestinians, for there is nothing else they can give

away. Global powers should have learned by now that neither sanctions nor any other form of pressure or bribery will force the Palestinians to abandon their struggle for freedom and independence".[14] Thus, Israeli settlements have become an intractable hindrance in the creation of a viable Palestinian state.

**Mounting Opposition to Settlements:** More and more settlements are being established in the West Bank [WB] also to accommodate the families who were evacuated from Gaza in August 2005. There are over 140 settlements, 68 populated towns, 3 cities and 9 Kibbutzim, 14 local councils and six regional councils in the WB. There is feverish attempt to "Israeli-ize" the WB Jewish settlements where the Jewish population growth has been far higher than in the rest of Israel. More and more Palestinian land is also being taken over on the Israeli side of the separation barrier or apartheid wall. Palestinian farmer villagers are getting separated and have to wait humiliatingly at the entry gates to cross the line and the permit checks drain the time and resources of hapless Palestinians. More and more Palestinians are sad because the patrol roads along the separation barrier are being built on the land grabbed from Palestinians, mainly cutting the olive trees. As one farmer rued: "It's a horrible feeling. This land is burning underneath my feet. Two hundred good trees went". Thus, relentless creation of settlement facts on the ground is a harsh reality for the ordinary Palestinians who are also deprived of water, basic amenities and are being virtually forced to leave their land, property, villages and face uprooting to become refugees. Abu Rish Brigades-a militant Gazan offshoot of Fatah that opposed the Oslo accords with Israel has recently moved closer to Hamas. One Abu Rish member said, the 1993 Oslo accords "were useless and benefited Israel. No one can resist with stones or build a nation without violence". He said: "Hamas and Fatah are so divided, the goal of Palestine disappears. I talk about willing my children to be martyrs for Allah, but I honestly wish for them to be safe and healthy, that's all." Due to the bleak future most young Palestinian wants to go out of WBGS for jobs. "Almost any place, where I can work and live a normal life'. There's no hope here. You see the situation. It's useless to think it will improve. You see it, it just gets worse." [15]

**Hope Turns into Despair:** The young in Palestine are most radical; violence has become way of life and has become most despairing. Life under occupation is seared by violence, occupied by Israel largely cut off

from the world and segmented by barriers and checkpoints. Budding Nihilism and a loss of hope; one Palestinian said “we never see anything good in our lives”. Generations of young Palestinian’s have grown up stateless seething at Israel as the visible agent of oppression and humiliation. Israeli checkpoints, barriers and closures, installed to protect Israel from Palestinian suicide bombers, have lowered these young people’s horizons, shrunk their notion of Palestine and taken away virtually any informal interaction with outsiders, let alone with ordinary Israelis. The security measures have become even tighter since the election to power of Hamas, which preaches eternal “resistance”, to Israeli occupation and rejects Israeli right to permanent existence on this land. During 1980’s and 90’s about 1.5 lakh Palestinian’s went to Israel daily for work and other things. Now most sit idle and Hamas exploits them easily. It must be mentioned that the West Bank is cut into three parts by Israeli checkpoints.

No wonder Palestinians have become skeptical of Israeli leaders talk of withdrawals and peace plans as the reality on the ground is fast changing against them. It is this which made Hamas leader and PM Ismail Haniyeh articulate thus: “We will fight the Israeli plan(s) and continue to struggle until the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. Israel is trying to set up a country with a Jewish majority and preserve Jerusalem as its capital. This shows that the Israeli government wants to maintain the occupation. Unfortunately, the Americans are also on their side”. [16] With the completion of the security wall, Israel by 2010 would have taken over 45% of the West Bank which might become part of Israel. Only about 1350 square miles of territory equivalent to 12% of historic Mandatory Palestine would be left for the proposed Palestinian state to accommodate more than four million Palestinians. Is this not a sure recipe for disaster?

**Mounting Global Interest:** To make matters worse the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in July 2006 called for a referendum towards the end of 2006, mainly to regain the initiative for Fatah, stave off pressure from US, Israel and others. The clear objective of Abbas was to undermine the Hamas government’s credibility and obviously questioned Abbas’ motives, because parliamentary elections are due only in 2010. The referendum idea was seen as a “recipe for civil war”. Soon enough, fighting broke out between Hamas and Fatah especially in the Gaza. Among all the countries Russia took the lead in inviting the Hamas leader Khalid

Mishaal to Moscow for talks. Putin also urged a speedy end of the boycott of the Hamas led government at the Quartet meetings. Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and others followed Russian example in inviting the Hamas leaders despite US, Israeli objections.

Israel's attempt to paint Palestinian struggle as a form of terrorism has also failed and so has its attempt to divide the Palestinians into moderates and extremists. For the last 20 years, Israel has been talking about civil war in the Gaza. Of course, repeated clashes have broken out between the Hamas and Fatah, but both the groups have shown utmost restraint, vision, and foresight. They now appear more united in their determination to put an end to Israeli maneuvers, oppression and occupation. All the major powers who support the creation of an independent Palestine state have understood the fact that it is the key to peace in the volatile region. There can never be peace and stability in the region without settling the core Palestinian issue. Of course, for lasting and comprehensive peace, the Palestinians have to rebuild their democratic structures and organizations both in WBGS and also among the refugees in Diaspora. Once they put their house in order and gain the trust of their people and the international community and their leaders reach out, perhaps we can see progress being made. Meanwhile, international pressure on Israel and the US has to be maintained so as to get justice to the Palestinians. The former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw recognizing that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was fuelling unrest throughout West Asia said its resolution was even more important than Iraq. "Its effect is so powerful, not just in West Asia but around the whole Islamic world. It is the engine of so much trouble around the world".[17] The West needs to wake up and realize that time is no longer on the side of Israel and its policies of occupation, destruction and expansion are universally rejected.

The Mecca Agreement in February 2007 between Hamas and Fatah at Saudi King Abdullah's initiative is an attempt to create a national unity govt. Its high time the international community lifts the siege against the Palestinians who are "dying in their thousands owing to lack of medical care. Women are selling their precious possessions to buy essentials. An entire nation is being starved owing to the whims of a super power and its client state". It appears the US, Israel and EU are still unwilling to recognize the Saudi brokered national unity Palestinian government in which Hamas is a partner and this is a depressing situation for the future of peace in the

region. If Israel and the West persist in their rejection of Palestinian rights as represented through their governments the entire region “will be driven towards another cycle of bloody escalation that may last for many years to come—and an entire Palestinian generation, which might not be willing to accept what we accept today, will be left profoundly embittered”.

**Dark Future:** According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 56% of the Palestinians are under 19 and in Gaza 75% of the population are fewer than 30. Gazan men under 30 are virtually unable to leave their tiny poor and overcrowded territory. Few Palestinian’s now talk of peace, almost all talk only of “a lifetime of resistance”. Current generation of young Palestinian’s has been thoroughly radicalized. According to Waleed Ladadwal of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, young Palestinian’s are most supportive of armed struggle and terrorism than their parents. This generation has lost faith in political solutions. “They haven’t lived one moment in a period of real hope for a real state”, said Nader Said, a political scientist at Bir Zeit university in Ramallah. Some 58% of those under 30, the center’s polls show, expect a more violent struggle with Israel over the next 5 to 10 years and only 22% believe that there will be a peaceful negotiated solution between Israel and the Palestinians. About 48% believe such an agreement is impossible and 20% more believe it will only come “in a few generations”. It’s interesting to note that in 2000 only 7% of all Palestinian’s were for Hamas and 46% for the more secular Fatah. In 2007 even after an extremely difficult year of Hamas rule, the two Palestinian factions are roughly equal. More and more Palestinian parents find their young children becoming violent. As one parent said: “I was shocked but it’s [all] in the news, the environment, the sound of Apaches and the F-16’s and the cannons. It all affects them and they get nervous.” She said: “And when you think about the violence, and what future will we have here? It will be a very violent future”. [18]

**India’s Response:** Even though India opposed the partition of Palestine by the UN in 1947 but Nehru recognized Israel in September 1950. But ever since India’s decision to establish diplomatic ties with Israel in 1992, Indo-Israeli ties in military, intelligence and economic spheres have improved quite rapidly, especially during the BJP led NDA when there was even talk of a strategic alliance with the Jewish state. The common “war on terror’ and great deal of talk about Hindu-Jewish common values and ancient ties gave Indo-Israeli collaboration under the BJP a distinct

ideological and communal direction. No wonder Israel has become India's second largest supplier of arms and its second largest trading partner in Asia. Moreover, Israeli PM Ariel Sharon visited India in 2003 (Sept 9) and talked about his determination to act against terror and called for greater Indian support to Israel in UN and NAM foras. Although India was keen to join the Arab-Israeli peace process after the Madrid (1991) Peace Conference but this did not survive for long. India more recently was also excluded from the 2003 Road Map of the Quartet. Mahmoud Abbas visited India in May 2005 and India promised Rs.65 crore in aid for infra-structure projects in WBGS including the building of a library-cum-activity center at the Palestinian Technical College at Deir al Balah and one at the Al Azhar University in Gaza. India has been offering scholarships to Palestinian students for studies in Indian universities through the ICCR as well as giving training in security to Palestinian police officers. Medicine and other humanitarian aid has also been going regularly to the Palestinians. India has reiterated its support to the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and also called for an end to violence. Fully aware that the UPA government led by the Congress Party is as keen as the NDA to consolidate its ties with Israel, cemented by a steady stream of ministerial visits and growing arms purchases, Abbas confirmed that India's ties with Israel were its own bilateral affair. Nonetheless the visit of Abbas could have been used to expose Israeli policies against Palestinians and a firm call issued to end Israeli occupation in a time bound schedule. Notwithstanding the so-called "enlightened self-interest", India's *defacto* support for continued Israeli occupation is perceived as not in harmony with its widely acclaimed anti-colonial policy of the past. Israeli policies especially the construction of settler-only [Jewish-only] by-pass roads on the West Bank is nothing short of what the South African racist and apartheid regime pursued. India cannot and should not maintain silence over such monstrous Israeli policies. [19]

There is no doubt that the Palestine issue remains widely popular in India with overwhelming support from all sections of Indians for an early end to the misery and sufferings of the Palestinians. Many Indians see the continuing violence in Palestine mainly due to the oppressive Israeli policies. Although India is keen to join the Arab-Israeli peace process but it has become imperative to coordinate its efforts with Russia, China and the regional states like Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and others. But with

India taking a “less strident position against Israel in the UN forums much to the chagrin of the Palestinians” and having “made considerable attempts to moderate anti-Israeli resolutions” at the NAM meetings in Durban [South Africa] and elsewhere, it is obvious that the expectations of many especially in the Arab and Islamic world that the Congress led UPA government would restore the balance it had pursued in its policy towards West Asia earlier remains largely elusive. Any contention that Israel is a major arms supplier to India and hence the government should soft pedal any firm stand against Israel will affect India’s credibility not only in the Islamic world but also on the global stage. As an urgent humanitarian task India should work to lift the boycott of the Palestinian government and the unfair financial sanctions by the US and Israel on the Palestinians who are being deprived of the basic necessities of life. India in order to regain genuine global respect must not only continue to support wholeheartedly the Palestine cause and work with other interested states to bring about complete end to Israeli occupation but also ensure justice is given to the Palestinians. An ally of the UPA govt. the CPI [M] in January 2008 charged the UPA govt. “collaborating” with Israel and aiding Tel Aviv’s military efforts by launching a spy satellite for Israel from Sriharikota. The Party’s Polit Bureau also criticized the UPA govt. for “maintaining a shameful silence” over Israel’s “criminal” blockade of Gaza Strip. “It is instead, collaborating with Tel Aviv to enhance that country’s military capability by launching Israeli satellite Teccsar, which has the capability to track activities in Iran and the region. The UPA govt. should demand an end to the blockade of the Gaza strip forthwith. It should call for an urgent Security Council session to discuss the matter”. It further said: The blockade violated “all international and humanitarian norms. Israel was treating 1.5 million people of the Gaza Strip worse than a colonial power. The UN should immediately intervene and take steps to penalize Israel and see that the blockade is lifted”. Actually one wonders what prevents India from taking the diplomatic initiative along with like-minded states in resolving this conflict especially when it has good relations with both the US and Israel. Surely India can take the initiative with Russia, China and the EU in opposing Israel’s illegal settlements and Apartheid Wall and jointly take a forthright position that would surely make it much more difficult for Israel to avoid reaching an acceptable and just solution based on UN and other relevant resolutions. This should be done sooner than later as any delay in resolving the Palestinian-Israeli issue will positively lead to more violence and instability

in a crucial area where Indian interests are growing especially economic [energy].[20]

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