

## Indo - Palestine Relations: A Historical Study

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**Abstract:** - Anti-imperialistic forces within the country and the Muslim population of India wanted to actively support the cause of the Palestinians; Harijan, 11 November, 1938, Mahatma Gandhi's statement on the Palestine and the Jewish question. Yasser Arafat, President of PLO visited India on 20-22 November 1997 and again paid a one day visit to India on 10 April 1999. India is the first non-Arab country, which recognized the Palestine Liberation Organisation's to Palestinian personnel for specialised training courses during the financial year 1998-99, where 58 Palestinian officers completed their training. In March 2006, a group of Palestinian refugees from Iraq arrived in India.

**Keywords:** Immigrant, Balfour Declaration, Initiative, Bilateral, Diplomatic.

### Zionism – a brief history

After centuries of living in a diaspora, the 1894 Dreyfus Affair in France shocked Jews into realizing they had their own country. The Jews of Western Europe led to the evolution of the idea of a token colonization in Palestine. Negotiations for the same were started by Rothschild with the Sultan of Turkey and by the 1880s, after spending a considerable sum of money, a number of agricultural colonies had been founded in Palestine by immigrant Jews of Poland and Russia. The first Zionist Congress was convened on 29 August, 1897, in the

Basel, Switzerland. The Congress brought together 204 orthodox reformist and secular Jewish representatives from fifteen countries. The Congress formed World Zionist organization.<sup>1</sup> Herzl was unanimously elected president of the Zionist organization.<sup>2</sup>

### Balfour Declaration

Zionism became a popular concept by the time of First World War began under the leadership Nahum Sokolow, Russian Poland also pressured Great Britain to support a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Balfour Declaration was issued on November 2, 1917<sup>3</sup>, Arthur

James Balfour's letter to Lord Rothschild, president of the British Zionist Federation, made public the British support of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Balfour Declaration marks the reappearance of the idea of the Jewish start in the Holy Land for the first time since the Roman Empire crushed the last Jewish rebellion in A.D. 135. This declaration was accepted by the League of Nations on July 24, 1922.

The Balfour Declaration is said to have laid the foundation for the formation of the state of Israel which finally happened thirty-one years later in 1948.<sup>4</sup>

#### **India's Concerns:**

India was under tremendous pressure from very beginning, to sharpen its policy towards West Asia in general and the Arab-Israeli conflict in particular, Anti-imperialistic forces within the country and the Muslim population of India wanted to actively support the cause of the Palestinians; while on the other hand, the right wing people were sympathetic towards the Jews. The partition of India on communal lines in 1947 saw the secular fabric of the country being dealt a severe blow. A certain section of the

Indian population has been vehemently opposing all actions in support of the Muslims whether in India or abroad.

The leaders of Indian National Congress, like, M.K. Gandhi, Nehru and Maulana Azad took unanimous stand that religion should not be the basis to divide a country. Therefore, on similar ground, they supported the Arab stand opposing partition of Palestine in the same way the Indian National Congress opposed the creation of Pakistan by partitioning India as demanded by the Muslim League. Jawaharlal Nehru knows as a architect of the India's foreign policy. Nehru's world-wise vision reflected in his foreign policy when he along with other Indian nationalist leaders supported the people of Palestine from 1920 onwards for Independence and condemnation of Zionists.

The Indian National Congress observed September 27, 1936, as Palestine Day by holding meetings and demonstrations throughout the country in support of the Arab cause.<sup>5</sup> In his Presidential address at the AICC Session at Faizpur on 27 December 1936, Nehru said that "The Arab struggle against British imperialism in Palestine is as much part of this great

world conflict as India's struggle for freedom.<sup>6</sup> In February 1938, the Indian National Congress condemned the plan for Partition of Palestine, protested against the repressive policy of Britain and expressed sympathy with the Arabs by stating that the Congress holds that the proper method of resolution of the problem which the Jews and the Arabs are faced in Palestine is by amicable settlement between themselves.

The origin of India's West Asia policy goes back to the pre-independence years. In 1927, Jawaharlal Nehru participated in the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities in Brussels which left a deep impression on him and brought him into personal contacts with the leaders of the freedom struggles in various countries and lent them a helping hand. In 1928, the All India Congress Committee (AICC) recognizing the Afro-Asian nations struggle for freedom passed a resolution expressing India's full sympathy with the Arabs. Consequently, Indian National Congress decided to hold a session of Pan-Asiatic Federation in India sometime in 1930. After independence in 1947, the common aspiration of Economic Progress and political

consolidation of India and Arabs brought two people together. In his first broadcast to the nation as leader of the Indian interim government before independence, Nehru expressed his desire for the closest possible relationship between independent India and the Arab nations.

India's foreign policy which is based on non-alignment had demanded through NAM conferences the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflicts and has also demanded Israel's unconditional withdrawal from the Occupied Arab Territories, along with the recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians to go back to their own home 'Palestine'. India and the Arab world have shared common destiny in the past.

Harijan, 11 November, 1938, Mahatma Gandhi's statement on the Palestine and the Jewish question was carried out in editorial.<sup>7</sup> Gandhi's Harijan editorial is an emphatic assertion of the rights of the Arabs in Palestine. The following oft-quoted lines, "Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French. In September, 1938, Delhi AICC passed a resolution that British should leave and

let the Jews and the Arabs settle the issues among themselves, and the resolution urged the Jews”not to take shelter behind British Imperialism.”

#### **Arafat’s Initiative:**

Yasser Arafat, President of PLO visited India on 20-22 November 1997.<sup>8</sup> India-Palestine signed a Memorandum of Understanding on bilateral Co-operation in 1997 in areas of commerce, trade, culture, science & technology, industrial collaboration, information and broadcasting, amongst others. Arafat also laid the foundation stone of an auditorium to be built by the Indo-Arab League in Hyderabad. In April, 1997, Arafat addressed a special session of the 12<sup>th</sup> NAM Foreign Ministerial conference. The PLO’s Executive Committee member, Sulaiman Najjab participated in seminar on “Prospects for Peace in the Middle East,” in New Delhi organized by the United Nations’ Department of Information on 3-4 February 1993.

The Director General of the Palestine Election Commission also visited India in February, 1998 for election process exposure, where he visited Gandhi Nagar and Mumbai to witness the election process. The Palestinian Minister of Housing and

Energy, Abdel Rahman Hamad, visited India in April, 1998 to attend another seminar organized by the Council of Arab Ambassadors.<sup>9</sup> He met with the Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas and the Minister of External Affairs during the visit. A Member of the Executive Committee of Al-Fateh, in charge of foreign relations and a member of the Palestine National Council, Hani Al-Hasan, visited India as a representative of the PLO to attend the 17<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of India (CPI) held at Chennai from 18-20 September 1998. He also met with the Minister of External Affairs.<sup>10</sup>

Indian official delegation visited Palestine in May 1997 and delegation met with President Arafat in Gaza. Besides this, Minister for External Affairs, Saleem I. Shervani, met with the Foreign Minister of the State of Palestine, Farouk Kaddoumi, at Tunis on 5 September 1997. MOU between the Government of India and the PNA on Bilateral Co-operation was signed in November, 1997. There was a strengthening of co-operation in the field of trade, culture and information.

A gradual shift in India’s policy towards Palestine has been registered

since 1990s. India moved closure to Israel and became a major arms buyer from Israel. It is difficult for India to go back to its previous policy and stop its military and business ties with Israel. The country is looking for a future in the region. The super power precisely Britain has created Zionist state and Palestine has been left alone in this struggle. Though the shift in India's policy started in the late 1980s and 1990s as the recognition of Israel led to diplomatic exchanges, the ultimate support for the Palestinian cause was still an underlying concern. Beyond the recognition for Palestinian self-determination ties have been largely dependent upon socio-cultural bonds, while economic relations were neither cold nor warm. India provides \$10 million relief to Palestine annually. The fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of Islamist anti-state activities in both countries paved the way for a strategic alliance. Since then, Indian support for Palestine has been lukewarm although India still recognises the legitimate aspirations of Palestine. India recognised Palestine's statehood following its own declaration on 18 November 1988; although relations were first established in 1974.

India is the first non-Arab country, which recognized the Palestine Liberation Organisation's authority as "the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people" In 1975, PLO office was set up in New Delhi with full diplomatic relations established in March 1980. Maintaining bilateral relations, India opened a Representative Office in Gaza on 25 June 1996. India has consistently supported the legitimate right of the Palestinian people to a State and peace in the region based on United Nations Security Council as well as the Principle of "Land for Peace". Besides, India has also supported the Madid Conference of October, 1991. With the Government of India's aid, two projects were completed in the field of higher education i.e. Jawaharlal Nehru Library at the Al Azhar University in Gaza city and the Mahatma Gandhi Library- cum- Student activity Centre at the Palestine Technical College at Deir Al Balah in the Gaza Strip. Under India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) Forum's assistance, an Indoor Multi-Purpose Sports complex has been constructed in Ramallah. Al Quds hospital in Gaza is in the process of reconstruction and the process of

building a rehabilitation centre in Nablus has started. India always supported Palestinian bid for membership of the United Nations and in 2011, India showed its historical support gesture again by supporting Palestine for permanent membership in UNESCO. November 2011 making Palestine a full member at UNESCO. Recently Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas visited India for a state visit in 2012, the fourth of its kind since 2005. New Delhi pledged its full support for yet another time. India's displayed a balancing act between its Israeli and Palestinian friends in the recent decades.

Middle East Peace Conference held Annapolis on 26-28, November, 2007. Mr. Kapil Sibal, Minister for Science and Technology accompanied by Ambassador Gharekhan the Special Envoy for West Asia participated in the conference. On 26 November, 2007, Indian delegation in Washington had bilateral meetings with Secretary General of the Arab League Mr. Amre Moussa when the two leaders discussed bilateral issues but more significantly the Israel-Palestine issue and regional developments in West Asia. Mr. Kapil Sibal met with Mr. Amorin and Dr.

Zuma. The three leaders were of the view that the Annapolis Summit was a positive development that needs to be supported by the international community, in order to assist the peace dialogue between Israel and Palestine.

As a gesture of solidarity, India has gifted four hectares of land to Palestine in Chanakyapuri diplomatic enclave of the capital to build its embassy of the Palestinian National Authority's President (PAP) Mahmoud Abbas. "We are thankful to the government of India for the gift which would have cost millions of dollars at market price". President Mahmoud Abbas paid a State visit to India in October 2008. Apart from his meeting with President of India, Vice President, Dr. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister, Smt. Sonia Gandhi, Shri L.K. Advani, the Leader of the Opposition and in the presence of Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh laid the foundation stone of the Chancery-cum-Residences complex of the Embassy of Palestine being built in New Delhi as a gift of the Government and people of India. Prime Minister announced a grant of \$10 million as budgetary support to the Palestine National Authority as well as an additional \$10 million in project

assistance for Palestinian development programmes. The US \$10 million budgetary support was remitted to PNA in March 2009. During the visit, a MoU for construction of Jawaharlal Nehru School at Abu Dees was signed and a sum of US \$1.8 million is to be financed from the commitment made in May 2005. Indira Gandhi and Yasir Arafat, India and Palestine have good relations and these relationships are improving day by day. We are very glad with the help and the support of the Indians to the Palestine. In a statement, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said, that "India believes that the solution should be based on the relevant U.N. Resolutions, the Arab Peace Plan and the Quartet road map resulting in a sovereign, independent, viable and united state of Palestine living within secure and recognised borders, side by side at peace with Israel." A joint statement was also released that "India also called for an end to the expansion of Israeli settlements in occupied Palestine and for an early and significant easing of restrictions on the free movement of persons and goods within Palestine." On the visit to India Abbas reiterated that the country's "growing

relationship with Israel is immaterial for the Palestinians" as New Delhi's unwavered support for Palestinian independence remained clear. While talking about India's growing engagement with Israel, particularly in the field of defence, Abbas said, "India's relations with Israel are its sovereign decision. We are not going to interfere. We know very well that India is supportive of the Palestinian struggle for achieving its own independence."

India pledged for US\$1 million assistance to the Palestinian people in Washington Donors Conference had held in October, 1995. However, in Paris conference in January, 1996, India pledged another US\$1 million aid to Palestine for construction of a Library-cum-Activity Centre at the Palestinian Technical College in Deir-El-Balah and another Library at the Al-Azhar University in Gaza. In another International Donors Conference on 30 November 1998 in Washington DC, India pledged for US\$1 million additional donation. The sum of US\$300,000 was disbursed to Al-Azhar University for the construction of two additional floors to its library. The remaining amount was utilised for a Human Resource Development

Programme. A security delegation headed by the Head of the Palestinian Security Forces, Maj. Gen. Nasser Yussef came to India in March, 1997; India offered 51 specialised security training slots to Palestinians in various disciplines during the year 1997-98, which accounted for an estimated expenditure of Rs. 5.5 million. ICCR offered 8 scholarships to Palestinian students for higher studies in India. The country also offered several slots for training courses under the ITEC Programme. India granted more than 50 training programmes worth Rs. 4063,000, to Palestinian personnel for specialised training courses during the financial year 1998-99, where 58 Palestinian officers completed their training. During the financial year 1999-2000, 38 more Palestinian officers utilised the facilities for training.

India pledged US\$10 million as aid to Palestine in September 2012 during PNA President Mahmoud Abbas visited India. According to Indian official's information, it was the third donation to Palestine that New Delhi was committed to helping other development projects. India also supported Palestine's bid for full and

equal membership of the UN. Three pacts – on building schools, on Information Technology and imparting vocational training – were signed between the two side after the talks. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said: "Support for the Palestinian cause has been a cornerstone of India's foreign policy. I reiterated India's firm support for the struggle of the Palestinian people to achieve a sovereign, independent, viable and united state of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital."

In March 2006, a group of Palestinian refugees from Iraq arrived in India. Because of language problem (Arabic), generally, they were unable to find work in India though some found employment with the UNHCR's non-governmental partners. All of them were provided with free access to governmental hospitals. Of the 165 Palestinian refugees from Iraq in India, 137 of them found clearance for resettlement in Sweden.

### **Conclusion:**

As far as India's policy towards Israel-Palestine problem is concerned, in the changed scenario the country cannot deny the very existence of Israel. India has been pressuring the UN to get



Palestine to be recognized as a independent nation but still there is need for a strong campaign by India to put pressure on international institutions so that Palestine could be a reality, refugees could be rehabilitated and violence must be stopped. India has to sharpen its policy towards West Asia. As of now, it looks like Indian foreign policy is more US oriented India needs to clean its pro-American image and adopt an independent and neutral foreign policy.

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