**Recognising Israel**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2020-11-25

THE planned futuristic Saudi city of Neom on the Red Sea coast was the venue of the G20 virtual summit last week, but something of greater importance happened there on Sunday night that may mark a tectonic shift in regional geopolitics. The reported covert meeting between the Israeli prime minister and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is seen as the most significant move yet towards the recognition of Israel by the kingdom.

While the Saudi foreign minister has denied that any such meeting took place, some Israeli officials have confirmed that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the head of Israel`s Mossad spy agency had flown to Saudi Arabia on Sunday night.

There have been reports of informal contacts between the two countries in the past, but it would be the first direct interaction at the highest of ficial level.

Many analysts believe that it is a just a matter of time before the two sides establish diplomatic relations. The kingdom has already blessed the recognition of the Jewish state by the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan. The development may be seen as a diplomatic triumph for outgoing US President Donald Trump, but it also illustrates the fast-changing dynamics of Middle East politics mainly resulting from SaudiIran rivalry.

Curiously, it is all happening as the government of Prime Minister Netanyahu pursues a more ruthless policy of expanding Jewish settlements into occupied Palestinian territory and annexing them to Israel. Unstinted support from the Trump administration gave further impetus to Israeli expansionism.

Trump not only shifted the US embassyin Tel Aviv to Jerusalem but also approved Israeli expansionism.

In January this year, President Trump announced what he described as the `deal of the century`, which attempted to impose a one-sided `solution` on the Palestinians. It provided for unilateral Israeli annexation of significant territory in the West Bank and all the settlements. It virtually buried the two-state policy by further sidelining the Palestinians. Meanwhile, Jared Kushner`s peace plan succeeded in persuading the UAE and Bahrain to ecognize their secret liaison with Israel.

Trump`s son-in-law is seen as the architect of theTrumpian Middle East policy.

The expected recognition of Israel by Saudi Arabia would certainly be the biggest coup for the maverick president. It is true that Riyadh for long had maintained secret contacts with Israel, but they became more pronounced with the rise of the ambitious crown prince who has developed a special relationship with Trump and Kushner.

A major reason for their closeness was Trump`s aggressive policy towards Iran. Saudi Arabia, along with Israel, was among the nations who hailed Trump`s decision to pull America out of the Iran nuclear deal. Trump had also looked on the other side of Saudi military intervention in Yemen. Their mutual hostility towards Iran has also been a major f actor in bringing Israel and Saudi Arabia closer.

Over the past few years, Riyadh has been sending out signals that it was ready for greater cooperation with Israel. Mohammed bin Salman has been quoted as saying that he didn`t consider Israel an enemy. But the fear of a backlash from extremist elements stopped him from establishing open of ficial relations with that country. The absence of a public reaction from the UAE and Bahrain over their recognition of Israel might have given him the confidence to break the taboo. In a marked shift, Riyadh lifted restrictions on the publication of news and articles about Israel.

With Egypt and Jordan having ecognized the Jewish state a long time ago, there are now fewer Middle Eastern Muslim countries that have not ended their boycott of Israel. A major justification given by the UAE for formalising its relations has been that it could stop Israel from establishing new settlements in the occupied territory, but there is no indication of Netanyahu agreeing to any such demand.

Normalisation of ties with Israel without a twostate solution could further isolate Palestinians and intensify conflictin the Middle East. There is no likelihood of any major change in American policy in the region under the incoming Biden administration except for the possibility of revival of the Iran nuclear deal.

Surely any Saudi move to open up to Israel would be welcomed by the incoming US president whohails from the Democratic Party. It remains to be seen whether the new administration is able to persuade Israel to suspend the establishment of new settlements and its planned annexation of part of the West Bank.

The shifting sands of the Middle East have also opened a discussion on whether Pakistan should revisit its policy towards Israel. In a recent interview, Prime Minister Imran Khan mentioned pressure from some unspecified foreign leaders to normalise relations with the Jewish state. But the foreign ministry denied there was any suggestion to review Pakistan`s policy.

While the stated policy is that there is no question of changing the country`s stance without Palestinians getting their rights, there have been reports of Pakistan maintaining covert contacts with Israel as in the case of the latter`s country`s military help during the 1980s` Afghan resistance against the Soviets.

There had been some public encounter between officials of the two countries after 9/11, eg a brief meeting between Khurshid Kasuri, the then foreign minister, and his Israeli counterpart in Istanbul in September 2005. Israel hailed the meeting as `historic and a huge breakthrough`. But the event drew criticism at home.

A major demonstration of Israel`s desire to improve relations with Pakistan was seen when Gen Musharraf was invited to address the American Jewish Congress during his visit to New York in September 2005. The military ruler was greeted by a standing ovation for initiating public diplomatic contacts with Israel. A moved Musharraf said he did not expect a Pakistani leader `to be greeted by this community with this sort of ovation`.

Musharraf spoke about Pakistan-Israel relations, and said there was no natural enmity between the two countries. But it was not possible for him to normalise relations with the Jewish state without risking his survival in power. Any move to recognise Israel will be seen as a betrayal to the Palestinian cause.  The writer is an author and journalist.

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