

Why recognize Israel at this juncture?

By S.H. Zaidi

Middle East - Dawn July 19

THE present government has mooted a matter which no previous government could ever dare to initiate: the recognition of Israel by Pakistan. Indeed, Musharraf deserves all the credit for displaying an unpleasant frankness and admirable courage in floating such a sensitive question that had all the potential of hurting a traditional Pakistani's sensibilities. However, the political climate in which the so-called bold initiative has been taken makes it, at best, a suspicious proposition for one hardly finds it a matter of such great import to be pursued in earnest without delay in 'national interest.'

What puzzles one is its timing. Why has this issue cropped up at this juncture? The common perception is that since the Musharraf government, as the present government can truly be described, is under strong influence of the US, it is only on the prodding of Washington that matters like recognition of Israel and sending of troops to Iraq (agreed in principle by Gen Musharraf at Camp David) are being raised. But implicit in it is an attempt to convince the public that these measures were in national interest and hence should be taken.

It is argued that two prominent Arab 'front-line' states, namely Egypt and Jordan, recognize Israel and maintain full diplomatic relations with it. But the general view among the public is that these two states have acquiesced in to American pressure to do so, and their odd decisions have not dampened, in the least, Israeli hostility towards the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular, and its policy of usurpation of Palestinian rights.

The Camp David accord that Sadat agreed to sign with Israel at least resulted in the return of the Sinai peninsula to Egypt and adequate economic assistance from the US, in return for recognition. But the much more important reason could have been that it generated, for them, a peace of sorts with

Israel. After all, they are frontline states.

What did Musharraf get at Camp David for Pakistan — a promise of 3 billion dollars, half of it in military assistance, spread over 5 years, and subject to the approval of American Congress and vagaries of US politics. Even in a world of realpolitik, there are limits to pragmatism. And if our vision of national interests is confined to keeping the incumbents in power and getting financial aid packages from abroad, irrespective of whether we get it with dignity or otherwise, then we should at least try to sell ourselves at a good enough price!

This is hardly the time to consider recognition of Israel, or even moot the question. The matter cannot be taken up until the Palestinian issue is resolved and Israel gives proof that it has started giving respect to the rights of the hapless Palestinians. By not bringing up the issue at this juncture, we have nothing to lose, but by initiating such a sensitive debate leading to ultimate recognition we can lose much. Moreover, the government will be inviting the opposition parties to launch a protest movement in which it will be a clear loser and only the latter can gain.

Above all, it will end up confusing the common man. For over half a century, we have brought him up on a diet of anti-Israeli sermons under which a Jew can never be believed to be a good person (as our history books describe a Hindu as well) nor can Israel be seen other than an evil state (which to a large extent it has always tended to act like). And now suddenly if he is told to be prepared to swallow Israel as a normal state like others and think in terms of what "suits our national interest." There was a time our passports carried the stamp, "All countries of the world except Israel." It was as much unnecessary to carry such a stamp — it was a kind of deliberate snub to Israel — as it is now to open up the question of recognizing Israel. Why this abrupt change of heart?

If at all we are to change heart in 'national interest,' it should be

towards India, which is our next door neighbor and our immediate concern, as relations with it affect the country profoundly. By maintaining continued hostility towards India and making overtures towards Israel, perhaps we lose both ways.

But the pointer is unmistakable. This is the present government's view of 'acting in national interest.' Perhaps it suffers from the illusion of becoming part of the 'inner circle' of US allies after this recognition. Many governments in Pakistan had indulged in such fantasies before, but in the end were disillusioned. After a few years in power and pandering to America, President Ayub's lament was: "We want friends, not masters!" Yahya Khan kept waiting for the 7th fleet to arrive during the Indo-Pakistan war in 1971, but none came and Bangladesh was created with direct Indian help. The plane carrying General Ziaul Haque, the cleverest of the military rulers, crashed in mysterious circumstances in August, 1988, killing him and more than two dozen high ranking military officers.

Would the current military regime fare better in aligning itself so completely with US interests? It had justified the ditching of the Taliban, after two decades of the military's support to the Afghan jihad, on the ground that this was the only option after 9/11, and majority of the people accepted this plea, because the sole superpower seemed to be charging like a mad bull after that event. Now, is Israel's recognition the only option at present? Is it even necessary to contemplate it? For domestic reasons, it is better to let the matter rest where it is. The same is true of sending troops to Iraq for peacekeeping, and being seen as aiding the occupying power and hence allowing our soldiers to become target of Arabs' wrath for no sound reason. Managing the occupation is primarily in the concern of the two coalition powers.

Establishment of full diplomatic ties will provide a direct access to Israel through its diplomats to Pakistan and Pakistanis. This is not to say that they cannot have such

access through intermediaries and third parties, but direct, legitimate and official access is quite another matter. What makes us believe that the Israelis would be more favourably disposed towards Pakistan after Pakistan has recognized Israel? Perhaps the assumption is that recognition may lessen the hostility the two countries feel toward each other. However, as long as the Palestinian issue is not resolved to the Palestinians' satisfaction, it would be counter-productive to accord recognition to Israel.

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread! In the current situation, the issue should be seen as more than just a simple recognition of a state. It is a change in perception, attitude and views and a big change in foreign policy. Perhaps time might come when this could be the right and the normal step, but at this stage it seems to be driven more by external pressure than by Pakistan's national self-interest.

At a time when the US is threatening more Muslim states, and Israel is stronger than ever vis-a-vis its Arab neighbours, the move could greatly benefit Israel politically and become a major setback for the Arabs. If nothing, the move could at least create a split in the ranks of Muslim countries. Reciprocal benefits to Pakistan would be doubtful.

There is gainsaying the fact that such a decision would do us more harm than good. As far as the talk of 'building up a consensus' before recognition is concerned, it can only be taken with a pinch of salt. On which other major issue were the people taken into confidence: providing unstinted support to the US over Afghanistan and handing over airbases for 'logistic support'; or 'deciding in principle' to send troops to Iraq for peacekeeping; or bringing real democracy to the country through Legal Framework Order? It could rather be viewed as a feeler meant to gauge public reaction to a possible recognition of Israel, in all likelihood under US pressure. Even if it does provide some benefit in terms of pleasing the US, it could also erode our sense of independence as a nation. ■