**Notes from Manama**

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The Israeli project to depopulate Gaza is now six weeks deep. In keeping with the long-standing commitment of Israeli extremists – who are now the decision makers in that country – to evict and displace all Palestinians from Palestine, Israel has seized the opportunity Hamas created for it on October 7.

American support for Israel and its war crimes makes the Biden Administration complicit in some of the worst violations of human dignity that the world has witnessed since the Second World War. The international rules-based order that Western nations and institutions want everyone else to adhere to lies tattered under the rubble in Gaza, infused by the odor of the burning flesh of Palestinian children.

This past weekend, at the 19th annual Manama Dialogue on regional security in the Middle East, the threads of a dismantling global order were laid bare. The countries most affected by the genocide in Gaza convened with their Western counterparts in circumstances that are tailor-made for the further erosion of already waning US influence in the Persian Gulf region. Symbolic as it may have been, soundbites of Prince Faisal bin Farhan announcing a visit of the Islamic Ministerial Committee to China were synchronized with stark warnings at the Manama Dialogue, about the existential threat Israel’s genocide now poses to Jordanian and Egyptian national security and stability.

Stuck between those fragile countries and the Islamic Republic of Iran are the wealthier Gulf nations that have pursued the very path of normalization and de-risking in the region that the West has preached for decades. Those signatories to the Abraham Accords have been rewarded for their efforts with Israel’s continued brazenness on the one hand, and the mystery of just how deeply Iran was involved in preparing and launching Hamas’s October 7 assault.

Underpinning the slaughter of thousands of women and children and the undoing of two decades of work by leaders in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha is the relentlessly tone-deaf American position on the genocide in Gaza. If the objective of the post October 7 assault on Palestine was to eliminate Hamas, no one seems to be capable of explaining why Israel continues to launch operations in the West Bank, why settler terrorists are being provided safe cover for their seizing of Palestinian land, and exactly which interlocutors will take up the role of Palestinian Authority leadership after the widely discredited and aged Abu Mazen.

More perplexing is the question of how the current US administration will manage the growing distance between its own role in enabling and emboldening Israeli atrocities in Gaza and the vastly different position held by a fast-growing number of Americans – both Democrats and Republicans – on the issue of Palestine.

The complexity the region faces now is more profound than at any other point in history. Many old enough to recall Anwar El-Sadat and his Nobel Peace Prize winning deal with Menachem Begin of Israel will romanticize the possibility of a similar magnitude deal being reached between a bold and courageous Arab leader and the genocidal Benjamin Netanyahu. But neither young Arabs nor US, British or European voters are likely to be as forgiving of Israel as Sadat was willing to be of Israelis like Begin – who was party to atrocities like the Deir Yassin massacre.

The quality of democratic space and freedom across the Muslims world leaves much to be desired – of this there is little doubt. There is even less doubt about the degree to which Muslim elites – from Jakarta to Rabat, and from Nur Sultan to Dar Es Salaam – can bend backwards to accommodate Western pressure favoring Israel. To be more clear: Muslim elites may not hold proper elections or rule through fully functional parliaments, but it would be foolish to assume that those same Muslim elites can operate without consideration for the extremely profound pro-Palestinian sentiment that shapes the Ummah.

As I departed Bahrain – a country that has sought to be an exemplar of the modern Arab world, and a signatory to the Abraham Accords – I was struck by posters adorning the road to and from the airport: a singular picture of Masjid Al Aqsa with the words ‘One Ummah, One Body’ emblazoned upon the image. Like I said: there is no version of a Muslim elite anywhere that can ignore Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

Pakistan, by virtue of its enormous size and its continued relevance in the OIC, has a range of considerations that must shape its engagement with the issues. There are five things that the military and civilian leaders in the country will need to think about with respect to Israel’s genocide as the country heads to the February 8 election.

First, Pakistani officialdom must calibrate the degree of visibility and diplomatic capital that Pakistan expends on Israel with several considerations. These include the fact that the current leadership has the title ‘caretaker’ attached to it. It also includes the need for Pakistan to continue to secure rollovers from key debtors, and the need to maintain a working relationship with the US, UK and the European Union (in particular to secure the next IMF programme, as well as to secure Paris Club debt relief eventually). This does not mean Pakistan should not be robust in expressing its position, but it does mean that the manner of expression must be disciplined. A template for this may be the recent speech by Munir Akram at the UN.

Second, Pakistani authorities need to carefully track the fallout from the many narratives that are emerging from Israel’s genocide in Gaza. One common narrative that has long been a bonanza for terrorist groups’ recruitment is the ‘weakness of the response of Muslim governments’. Muslim elites are always keen to exploit religion when it suits them, but struggle to respond to religiously motivated compassion for Muslims. Pakistan is especially vulnerable in this way, given the recent policy decision impacting Afghans living in Pakistan – and leading political voices (as well as social architects keen to engineer a way out of the Imran Khan era) need to formulate cogent and sensible responses to legitimate calls for more robust responses from countries like Pakistan.

Third, Pakistani state organizations need to be especially conscious of Saudi Arabia and its evolving position on the issues. Despite its efforts to explore the path of normalization and de-risking with Israel, Saudi officials have voiced a consistently strong pro-Palestinian position – including its leadership in convening the Arab-Islamic Summit. Rather than moderating Israeli behaviour, some experts see the Abraham Accords as having emboldened Israel to continue to deepen its occupation and brutality. Riyadh is carefully calibrating and curating its path forward on the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Pakistani decision-makers may not have learnt the lessons from Shah Mehmood Qureshi’s anti-Saudi outbursts in August 2020 – it would be wise to revisit them now.

Fourth, the global calendar in 2024 is full of elections and therefore instability. The time could not be worse for Pakistan and could not be better for Israel-mimicry. Outside of the economy, the most likely first major test for Pakistani officials after the February 8, 2024 elections will be a heating up of the Line of Control, or worse, an incident of Kashmiri resistance that India will blame on Pakistan.

Remember, a weakening Narendra Modi in an election year is a formula for India stoking conflict with Pakistan. Sadly, there will be no takers for Pakistan’s position in this scenario – no matter how obvious India’s roguishness is manifest. The most important audience for Pakistani national security in such a scenario will be the people of Pakistan. A more robust election than people expect – more free, more fair, and more credible than people expect – will lend strength to any challenge posed by continued Indian adventurism and New Delhi’s revisionism on Kashmir.

Finally, Pakistan faces a nearly impossible counterterrorism challenge emanating from Afghanistan. The interim Taliban government’s refusal to address Pakistan’s concerns has helped inform some poorly conceived reactions by the caretaker setup. The TTP and other residual anti-Pakistan groups have only scaled up their rhetoric and operations. Terrorist groups will conflate their causes with the Palestinian cause, as they have done for decades. It won’t be enough to assemble Pakistan’s religious elites in Rawalpindi to fight the menace of the misuse of religion in Pakistan.

The strongest antidote to false narratives is a self-confident national discourse that is unencumbered by internal fissures and divisions. The sooner Pakistan heals from the post-2016 era and the excesses of the response to May 9, the easier it will be able to resist terrorism at home and the better it will be equipped to speak and act for the people of Palestine.

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