

## As Muslim world embraces Israel, Bangladesh's holdout threatens its 'moderate' label -The Asian Age



Following Israel's stunning victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, the Arab League met in Khartoum, Sudan and unanimously passed a resolution that famously declared "no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it." In 1975, I was teaching in Chicago when a Muslim student from The Gabon in Africa told me how unhappy he and others were that his country, as part of the Muslim world's solidary reaction to the 1973 Middle East war, broke off relations with Israel and expelled the Israelis who were helping his people.

Since those days of ideology over justice, Muslim majority countries have been moving closer to Israel; and that movement threatens to become a tidal wave that could leave a fearful Bangladesh in the dust. Bangladesh's refusal to recognize what others do also could confirm a growing belief by many that its claim to be "moderate" is not accurate.

Of the 44 Muslim majority countries with at least one million people, 17 currently have full diplomatic ties with Israel: Albania, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Gambia, Guinea (which was effusive in its public praise of Israel for its help during Guinea's Ebola crisis), Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Another 18 have some level of relations with Israel short of full diplomatic ties: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Chad, Indonesia, Kuwait, Libya, Malaysia, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates. Only nine have no significant relations or cooperation with Israel: Algeria; Iran, Iraq, Kosovo (at Israel's insistence), Lebanon, Pakistan, Syria, Yemen, and of course Bangladesh. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina might want to look at the countries in each category and ask with whom she believes Bangladesh should be associated.

The extent and closeness of those relationships has increased dramatically over the past few years, especially between Israel and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. In public remarks earlier this year, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman told the Palestinians to accept Israel's peace offers and "come to the negotiating table-or they should shut up and stop complaining."

Last month, Bahrain's Foreign Minister, Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, defended Israel's retaliatory strikes against Iranian and other interests in Syria. And one year ago, the United States and Israel helped broker the transfer of two Red Sea islands from Egypt to Saudi Arabia on the condition that the Saudis take up the "military appendix" in the treaty that sets up mutual defense efforts among Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Israel.

According to reliable military and intelligence sources in the region, the four countries also set up a "joint war room" on one of the islands "coordinate the operations of the fleets and the air forces of the four countries" across the region. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi Crown Prince Salman met personally and worked out the agreement.

Not long ago, the thought of relations between Israel and the home of the Kaaba and Wahhabism would have seemed laughable to many. The same transformation is happening with all the Gulf States.

There is even a good deal of debate inside Qatar following the other Gulf States breaking relations over its defense of Iran and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Many former belligerents in the Middle East have concluded that Israel is not their enemy, but Iran and its terrorist proxies are. Elsewhere in the Muslim world...

\* Afghanistan uses the Israeli embassies in neighboring Muslim-majority nations of the former Soviet Union as unofficial embassies. Both recent Afghan Prime Ministers have had quiet discussions about this matter and indicated their personal desire for greater relations.

\* Bahrain has taken a decidedly positive public orientation toward Israel, as when its foreign minister defended Israel last month. Members of the government are forbidden from referring to Israel as the "enemy" or "Zionist entity." They use the country's proper name, as they would with other friendly states.

The two countries have extensive back room economic and security relations, with 60 Israeli Special Forces in Bahrain last year. Rabbi Marc Schneir, who has worked with the Gulf States for almost a decade said he has seen "remarkable and extra changes in their attitudes towards Israel and we are truly living in exciting and historic times."

He also notes that while all of the Gulf States are looking for full relations with Israel, he believes Bahrain is furthest along in that effort. Intelligence sources also confirm that we should see full diplomatic relations between Israel and Bahrain in the near future.

\* Chad, like many Muslim-majority countries in sub-Saharan Africa, broker relations with Israel in 1973. The past few years, however, have seen increasing relations with deepening bi-lateral cooperation and open talks at Chad Presidential level in late 2016. A resumption of full diplomatic relations, including security and counter terrorism, is expected. Talks are ongoing.

\* Indonesia uses its embassy in Ramallah for Israel-Indonesia contacts and has formally upgraded its ties with Israel. The two nations have signed agreements with one another, including one for medical cooperation; and Indonesia receives Israel tourism and security cooperation. Trade is ongoing, and the Israel Deputy Director for Asia and Pacific recently visited openly without incident or protest. Contacts are extensive and growing.

\* Kuwait had "quiet" trade relations with Israel until two Kuwaiti MPs revealed that their nation buys military equipment from Israel; and both said they "love" Israel. They and many Kuwaitis acknowledge that Israeli military trade and security cooperation has kept their nation safe.

Kuwait also broke precedent in 2016 when its UN delegation remained in the room to hear the Israeli Prime Minister's speech and did not boycott it. As another Kuwaiti MP said in urging official ties, "We have achieved only losses from boycotting Israel. We have gained nothing and we are losing access to good products."

\* Libya, while under Qaddafi, was moving toward having full diplomatic ties with Israel. With the country still in chaos, however, and the government yet to stabilize, things remain in flux. Democratic opposition forces have stated their desire for Israeli support and said they would recognize Israel once in power. There is some behind the scenes interaction.

\* Mali also broke full ties with Israel in 1973 but is decidedly pro-Israel today. Its president leads public displays of solidarity with Israel, and the two countries are expected to resume full diplomatic ties as soon as appropriate. Official statements have been signaling a definite shift toward Israel. Israeli arms sales to Africa have doubled as Sahel countries, especially, look to Israel's counter terrorism expertise and help.

\* Mauritania had full diplomatic ties until 2010 and has maintained commercial and industrial ties with significant Israeli penetration of markets. A world renowned Israeli eye clinic continues to operate in Mauritania as it has for decades.

\* Malaysia is the 13th largest importer of Israeli goods in the world. Despite its role in the Organization of Islamic Conferences, commercial relations between the two countries are extensive. Malaysia also lifted its quota on the number of its citizens who could take pilgrimages to Israel.

\* Morocco and Israel had full relations under King Hassan, but they were severed after his death. The atmosphere eased quickly, and Morocco and Israel trade with one another, with the opposition estimating that about \$50 million worth of Israeli goods enter the Moroccan market.

Some officials deny the existence of these robust relations, but others do not. In September 2016, King Mohammed VI sent his personal adviser to Israel for the state funeral of former Israeli Prime Minister and President Shimon Peres.

\* Niger also was forced to break ties with Israel in 1973, but informal relations never stopped, and today Israelis continue to work in Niger and travel back and forth as part of commercial activity between the two countries. Also, as other Sahel countries, Niger looks for help from Israel counter terrorism expertise and arms. Expect a resumption of full diplomatic ties.

\* Oman, like other Gulf States, has been increasing ties with Israel. It now accepts Israeli passports for tourists and maintains trade relations. There continue to be meetings at the highest levels.

\* Qatar's up and down progress with Israel reflects Israel's close ties with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States. The presence of Israelis in Qatar is well-known, and Qatar twice tried unsuccessfully to get the Israelis to re-open its offices there.

Recently Doha began new discussions with Israel, hoping to benefit from Israeli anti-terrorist expertise; and last year asked Hamas leaders to leave the country. At the same time, Israel has shied away from open talks with Qatar as the latter's feud with the Saudis gets hotter.

\* Saudi Arabia: Israel-Saudi relations are perhaps the most interesting in the world. Crown Prince Salman's comments noted above never would have been uttered so publicly only a few short years ago. The ties are security and military, as well as trade, which ultimately will be part of how the Saudis transform and diversify their economy.

They were highlighted recently by United States President Donald Trump recently highlighted this strategic change as part of an "historic opportunity" to transform relations in the region and bring about peace.

The military and intelligence cooperation between Israel and the Saudis has long since left the quiet stage even though the nature of these relations is sensitive though strong. Good relations with the Saudis also removes one obstacle to an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities-flying over Saudi Arabia to get to the Iranian targets.

\* Somalia has had multiple meetings at the Somali presidential/Israel PM level. Israel provides medical and other aid to Somalis, and Somalia now formally allies with and other Middle East states in opposition to Iran as part of the regional re-alignment.

\* Sudan and Israel have primarily economic relations, with the political element as is an integral feature. The two countries are close to normalized ties, especially since South Sudan adopted full diplomatic ties with Israel. Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir has noted that Arabs have inflicted more damage on Syria than Israel would have "even if [it] had conquered Syria."

He also said that Israel never would have killed and exiled the number of people forces in Syria have. Sudan and Israel do maintain covert relations, and Israel has contacted the U.S. government to help Sudan, confirming the two countries' secret alliance.

\* Tunisia has had some level of interaction with Israel since the 1950s. Like Morocco, it was well on its way to normalizing relations with Israel, had an Israeli trade office in Tunis, and maintained a Tunisian interest office in Tel Aviv. But like Morocco after King Hassan's death, it closed those offices in 2000. Commercial relations and tourism continue, as well as contacts in other fields.

The debate on the degree of normalization in relations with Israel continues, and Tunisia formally rejected the maximalist Arab demands (e.g., right of return, 1976 borders) in the Israel-Arab conflict.

\* United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been more open than most in its relations with Israel, having an Israeli diplomatic mission in Dubai, openly siding with Israel against Hamas strategically, no longer denying entry to people with Israeli passport stamps, regular private aircraft flights between Tel Aviv and Abu Dhabi; extensive economic activity with a number of Israelis living in the UAE; and so forth. Look for extensive economic and strategic ties to continue growing steadily.

There is no information above that the Bangladesh government does not have. Yet, it seems to believe it knows its duties toward Jerusalem-which is 5442 kilometers from Dhaka-better than those Muslim nations in the region.

I have passed on offers from the Israelis to host Bangladeshi journalists regardless of their opinions or writings about Israel, only to be met with a stone wall of silence. Religious Bangladeshi Muslims have asked to visit Israel in order to pray at Al Aqsa mosque only to be turned down by the government. And I have personally brokered talks between Israel and Bangladesh officials from both major parties.

In one case, under the BNP, the initial talks were promising. Israel offered a package of medical and agricultural technological benefits. In the other, under the Awami League, contact with the Israelis remained indirect through me with a major party advisor asking for relations with Israel in exchange for economic benefits that would assure continued Awami League victories.

In both cases, I ended up suspending the efforts; not because the Bangladeshis rejected them on principle or made any statements in that regard. They just failed to follow up, depriving Bangladeshis of a range of solid benefits.

Thus, Sheikh Hasina and her government have a choice to make. They can continue to be associated with the most radical, terror-supporting countries like Iran and Pakistan; or they can live up to their cherished moderate moniker (which is wearing thin in many places) and join the rest of the Muslim world in choosing peace

with Israel. My offices remain open to them should they choose the latter.

The writer is an American scholar and human rights activist. Views expressed in the article are the writer's own

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