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Indian Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Speaker: HE Shivshankar Menon

Participants: Dr. Joel Peters; M.M. Ansari; Laila Carmi; HE Ahmad Kamal; Akrum O. Bitar; Kann Aggestan; Dr. Mohammed Jadallah; Movrjahan Ansari; Dr. Fred Halliday; Muriel Asseburg; and Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi.

Introduction by Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi

I want to welcome HE Shivshankar Menon, the Indian Ambassador in Tel Aviv, and you all to a Palestinian house. I am grateful that you came here today to share with us in this meeting. This comes as part of our ongoing roundtable meetings on international affairs; we have hosted such meetings on Middle East policies of foreign states for various diplomats from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. We are now in a transitional phase in which we are developing from an Intifada society to a civil society and we, as Palestinians, try to learn from the knowledge and experience of these diplomats.

We come together today under unusual circumstances and that is why there are so few of us present. Due to the closure, our meeting is restricted to the Jerusalemite community.

We are receptive to listen and to learn about Indian foreign policy. We are especially interested to learn about Israeli-Indian relations since we have heard various stories about military cooperation. Is it true that there is a deal on MIG 29s? What about the Indian position on the peace process? I do not want to preempt your lecture but these are questions that we are naturally interested in.

HE Shivshankar Menon:

I was not sure of what I was letting myself into but said "yes" immediately when Dr. Mahdi asked me to speak at PASSIA because I have read so much of your material and I know of the importance of PASSIA as a forum for Palestinian thinking. I was asked to speak about Indian foreign policy and the Middle East and I would like to start by going back into the history of Indian foreign policy to make its motives and stands more understandable.

India already had a foreign policy of sorts before it reached independence. It had some diplomatic experience as one of the founding members of the United Nations and even of the League of Nations. This was good in a sense that when India became independent, it already knew how the world worked. But India consciously decided to move away from the former British Indian approach to foreign policy and not to simply build on it after 1947. India as an independent nation naturally had another view of foreign policy and diplomatic relations than the colonial powers, and of India as part of a larger structure in this context, especially concerning the imperial experience in the Middle East.

India's approach at the time of independence was to look for new ways to build on historical relations with the rest of the world and the Middle East. Nehru put emphasis on a non-imperialistic India with an aim of not engaging in war. Foreign policy was to serve domestic priorities. Life expectancy in India at that time was 24 years, only 14% of the population were literate, and more than 50% lived below the poverty level. For a democratic government, there was no other option but to have an overriding domestic priority. It was necessary to break with older policies and to try a policy of non-alignment. The essence of this policy, according to Nehru's definition comprised "independence of judgment and

freedom of action."

In the beginning, it was hard for India to apply this policy, especially in the Middle East. India was urged in the UN in 1947 to take the same stand as British India had taken on Middle Eastern issues, but India voted against the Palestine partition resolution because it believed it to be wrong. When the resolution passed, India was willing to accept reality rather than to insist on a purely ideological position. Thus, it also recognized Israel in 1950. One can ask "why?" Was India's recognition due to domestic concerns, including the fact that there was a Jewish community living in India (40,000 Jews out of a population of over 360 million)? No, the primary concern was to enable peace to prevail in the region, enable de-colonization and to put an end to imperialism.

The Middle East conflict was perceived by Nehru primarily as a de-colonization problem, a problem of self-determination, and the 1956 events seemed to confirm these perceptions. Then, it was realized that non-alignment could not be pursued by statements only and that it was necessary to gather states having the same policy orientation and to enact policy. In 1956, one part of the problem was dealt with and imperialism's presence in the Suez Canal zone ended. The other part - the Palestine Question - remained unsolved.

India's approach was to build new and strong relations with the states of the Middle East, which basically consisted of economic ties, covering at that time about 2-3% of India's foreign trade. Today this figure has reached about 10%. Another facet was to ensure that Indian nationals living and working in the Middle East be a productive and welcome part of the host state's population.

In 1975, India was the first non-Arab state to recognize the PLO and there has been a Palestinian representative in India since 1976. In 1988, India recognized the Palestinian state immediately after the Algiers Declaration of Independence, and today there is a Palestinian embassy in Delhi. An Indian representative office in Gaza was opened in 1996. Israel has had a consulate in Bombay since the 50s and an embassy since 1992. India's basic approach towards the Arab-Israeli conflict has been that the people of the region itself should decide and negotiate the problem. Therefore, India welcomed, for example, the Camp David agreements while stressing that all the people of the region have the right to self-determination and all states the right to exist within secure boundaries. Only after the Palestinians and Israelis embarked on real negotiations and came to a mutual understanding on basic principles, did India open an embassy in Tel Aviv.

Did the approach of non-alignment work? I believe the answer is "yes." This is the case because we have always made our position extremely clear, irrespective of whether or not it meets with the entire approval of others. Concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict, for example, we have always made it clear that we consider the Palestinian Territories occupied and the status of Jerusalem disputed.

In a broader sense, we can also say that the approach worked because it gave India a chance to concentrate on domestic policies. Today, life expectancy is up to 62 years, literacy has risen to 53% and only 19% of the population live beneath the poverty line. Of course, youth would always say that more should have been done. Nonetheless, I think we have come a long way and India today is at least capable of feeding itself; it even exports wheat to China. This is an achievement, especially in the light of the rapidly expanding population, which is now almost 930 million.

We have had a period of over 25 years of peace with our neighbors and we hope to establish a free trade area in South Asia by the year 2005. All the countries of the region, including Pakistan, are committed to this. Our security situation is better than it was 40 to 50

years ago thanks to interlocking security balances. We have been widely affected by the events in the Gulf at the beginning of the decade. Trade with the Middle East accounts for 10% of our foreign trade, the Middle East provides a major share of India's oil supply, and there are around three million Indians working in the Middle East. Therefore, the Middle East is an important and sensitive area for India.

Is India important for the Middle East? First of all, it is a growing market. Besides, in a world thought to be increasingly multi-polar, India can serve as an example of a country that maintains an independent stand and her own judgment. Thirdly, our experience could be useful to our Palestinian friends.

Dr. Mahdi asked about India's relations with Israel and military sales. India maintains science and technology and agricultural cooperation with Israel. Trade last year amounted to almost US\$600 million. This is mainly concentrated in the fields of diamonds, fertilizers and cotton. Concerning trade in military equipment, India is still discussing and considering this. Israel is one of the major arms sellers in the world. Up to now, there have been no such agreements in this field with Israel and no sale of arms has taken place between the two countries. Yes, we are talking to each other, but I can assure you that no Israeli deal on MIGs has been made with India.

Israel is seen in India as a market. When we asked where our relationship with Israel can lead, it was clear that an apolitical, purely commercial relationship with states in this region was simply not possible. Maybe and hopefully, it will be possible in the future. We are aware that basic issues need to be addressed, such as the rights of the Palestinian people. It is our hope that the negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis will solve these issues comprehensively and justly. We discussed these issues intensively with Chairman Arafat during his visit to India last month.

Discussion:

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: Allow me to thank you for this very interesting and informative presentation. Let me open the discussion by asking you about Indian plans, projects and mechanisms to support the Palestinians. Have special programs been set up to facilitate such endeavors?

HE Shivshankar Menon: In fact, Indian officials are meeting tomorrow with the PNA to hear how the Palestinians would like Indian aid to Palestinians to be spent. The figure involved is not very large, and amounts so far to only US\$2 million. Our policy is that the Palestinians themselves should decide on the kind of programs to be executed. At the present time we have an education and training program under the technical cooperation program ITEC, and we support Palestinian institution-building by giving training. I would prefer to call this cooperation, rather than assistance. For example, we now have proposals for a project to generate software exports from Gaza. As I said, we emphasize that the programs should be guided primarily by Palestinian wishes and choices.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: When the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem went to India in the 1930s, he was encouraged by the Indian leader to establish Al-Quds University at Al-Aqsa, but the project never materialized. I would like to ask you, what is your stand on Jerusalem, today?

HE Shivshankar Menon: You know that we have our embassy in Tel Aviv and you know why this is so. We will not move it to Jerusalem for as long as the status of the city remains unsolved. Once again, we will make up our own mind and not look at what others are doing. On Jerusalem, our position is very clear: We consider Jerusalem a final status issue and right now its status needs to be decided.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: But what is your stand? When the Palestinians entered the negotiations, they made it very clear that they want a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. In the culture of peace prevailing at that time, they accepted, however, to refer the Jerusalem question to the final status negotiations. Now, we have an Israeli right wing government that is Judaizing Jerusalem. We have lost our partner in the negotiations, and the Israeli society is divided. There is no international pressure on Israel to bring it back to the negotiation table and to make it fulfill its commitments. We are going through an episode of frustration: we are isolated, scattered in cities without cohesion, and we continue to suffer because of the weakness of the PNA and an ongoing occupation.

What is your reading of today's situation? Where do we go from here? What do you expect to happen? What is your stand on Jerusalem? What about your property in Jerusalem? Perhaps we should allow Sheikh Munib to tell us something about the actual issues.....

Sheikh Munib Ansari: Concerning Indian property in Jerusalem, there is only the Indian hospice in the Old City which was bombarded and severely damaged in the War of 1967. Since then, nothing has happened and the project of reconstructing the hospice remained frozen because of the lack of recognition between Israel and India. Since the opening of the Indian embassy in Tel Aviv, however, a renovation project has gradually moved forward without any Israeli interference. To date we have received approximately US\$220,000 in financial support from the Indian Government.

In Jerusalem, there were many Islamic hospices, such as the Moghrabi, the Afghani, the Sudanese and the Pakistani hospices, but the Indian hospice is the only one that has survived and is still present. The opening will be announced in the near future but first, we need to resolve the problems that we have with the Al-Aqsa School, which has been using some of the rooms.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: My hope is that you put Jerusalem as a priority issue on your agenda when meeting tomorrow with the PNA.

Dr. Mohammed Jadallah: First of all, I want to thank you for your excellent presentation. I would like to ask you about something that I read in the newspapers some time ago which left me stunned. I read that your trade exchange with Israel amounts to US\$600 million. I find this an extremely high figure, considering the fact that diplomatic contacts have only recently been established. Israel talks about arms sales to India amounting to half a billion US\$ in the coming years, stressing the Indian search for a bigger military role in the Arab Gulf area and India's desire to put an end to Iranian and Pakistani influence in the Indian Ocean. I find this whole issue very worrying and I ask, where are the Palestinians in all this?

HE Shivshankar Menon: As I said, there is no arms trade with Israel. I can provide you with detailed trade figures, which will confirm that there are no weapons included in our trade of US\$600 million. The motives that you have mentioned do not make sense to me; we have had declining defense budgets for the last six years and we do not intend to change this trend. Our approach is quite different. We long for cooperation: for example, in the Indian Ocean we hope to create a body of cooperation in the field of security as well as to establish closer economic links. Moreover, we have a steady, normal relationship with Iran. We do not seek a military role in the Gulf. Even if you ignore our record and our actions, our interests make it so.

We have more than enough to do at home. Our interests in the region are the access to oil and the well-being of Indian nationals in the Middle East. For example, during the Gulf crisis, we had to evacuate 1.2 million Indians from the region in less than two months. For

us, it does not make sense to send troops to the area as you suggest.

Dr. Mohammed Jadallah: We know that the general director of the Indian Defense Ministry has visited Israel, but the media was instructed not to report on this. There are only Indian representatives in the field of defense coming to Israel, or vice versa; no other visits take place. That gives us enough reason to worry.

HE Shivshankar Menon: The real test is to look at what we do. You do not even have to trust what we say. Just look at the record of what has taken place and you will see that there have been a lot of mutual visits in functional fields, such as the visit of the Israeli science minister, agricultural ministers, and so on.

Dr. Joel Peters: Maybe, I can try and bridge this question by reminding you of what the ambassador said earlier: "We, at the moment, look around and see where we can find the best qualities and prices." I can tell you, there are a lot of offers in the market, and the Israeli ones will not be the cheapest. Thus, there is no need to be concerned.

Dr. Fred Halliday: I have two questions: the first one concerns the Indian-Pakistani relationship. I think that the main threat to Indian security today, except China, is Muslim Pakistan. India has maintained security links with the Middle East. To what extent are these Indian links thought to counterbalance Pakistani links to the region?

The second question is: we have seen a lot of popular support for Iraq during the Gulf Crisis in Middle Eastern countries, and also in India. What about the Palestine Question? Does it arouse empathy with Indians in the same way?

HE Shivshankar Menon: Of course, Pakistan played a role in Indian thinking. For the Pakistanis it was more of a religious issue. India was seen as the secular, democratic alternative to Pakistan. The nature of India's involvement in the Middle East is very different from Pakistani involvement. We have never been involved militarily and directly, and Indian troops have never fought in a Middle Eastern state. Our economic stakes are much greater than the Pakistan's. On the other hand, Pakistan is much more dependent on remittances from the Middle East. We might have started from similar positions but we have taken different paths. Pakistan's involvement in CENTO was not India's approach.

Concerning public opinion on Palestine, the polls have shown stable support in India since the mid-50s for the Palestinians and their right to self-determination. This has never been controversial.

Dr. Joel Peters: I want to make a comment and try to sum up what I have understood so far. It seems to me that we have widely over-estimated the potential Indian role in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Israel had great hopes in India. Is India just trying to keep clear?

My other question concerns India's relationship with Israel since 1991. What is the economic capacity of Israel and Palestine for India? Isn't it rather marginal, or can we say that India is using this connection as a jumping board to get into the New Middle East that India bought in to?

HE Shivshankar Menon: I do not think that we have kept clear. We have actually always had an explicit stand. However, I have to make a frank admission: there are things that we can do and things that we cannot, including, for example, sending troops abroad. I ask you - what more could India have done?

Concerning your second question, I would answer yes, we hope for a new Middle East as does everyone here. When we do so it is in the hope of not facing an "either-or-situation." What worries us is that we are now returning to a situation where it is possible to talk to only one side. It was not our primary motivation to "buy into" something; we saw that something totally new was developing and we found it important to communicate with all the states involved.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: You said you opened the embassy in Tel Aviv after the negotiations in Madrid. Now, we have lost this (Israeli) partner that we had in Madrid, and the basis on which you took your decision is gone. Would you close your embassy to put pressure on Israel's right wing government to move ahead with the peace process?

Laila Carmi: I also expect a multi-polar situation in the future. India and Israel are both nuclear powers - is a desire to establish a joint position of strength the reason behind the India-Israel relationship?

HE Shivshankar Menon: No, we do not have the bomb. You are right in that we have the capability to build it, but we do not have the bomb. We will maintain communication because we think communication is basic. A multi-polar world is actually something positive that gives us more freedom to maneuver - not only us, but also the Palestinians and all other states, too.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: Maybe, HE Ahmad Kamal, the Egyptian diplomat in Tel Aviv, can add something on the Egyptian-Indian relationship.

HE Ahmad Kamal: The Egyptian-Indian relations have been stable and friendly since Nasser. We have always had a lot of faith in the Asians and their application of the notion that "right is might." We both want the peace process to go on and we are both trying to convince the Israelis that they must proceed.

Kann Aggastan: You have given a long introduction during which you spoke about the 50s, the policy of non-alignment and the following period. If you now put aside all the declarations that you then talked about, what was India's practical policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict?

HE Shivshankar Menon: In the 60s and 70s, we built up relations with the countries of the Middle East, for example with Egypt as you have just heard. Concerning the Palestine Question, there was very little happening at that time. We were not here on the ground and nobody asked us to be here. What we did at that time was to respond to Palestinian needs. They were to build international opinion with declarations and work in the United Nations. We helped.

Today, of course, the situation has changed dramatically. The Palestinians have also improved their position dramatically. I am full of respect for the practice of Palestinian diplomacy.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: You should contribute by trying to convince the Israeli government to implement what was agreed upon in the first phase of the peace process, Oslo I and II. Its members underestimate the anger of the Palestinian people. The Palestine Question is the core of the whole Middle East conflict, and Israel should be made to realize that its current policies are capable of dragging the entire region into a state of war.

HE Shivshankar Menon: I want to thank you very much for the opportunity to talk with you.

It was especially useful for me to hear what worries you. We should talk to each other and not allow others to interfere in our communication - especially in situations as tense as this one.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: Thank you very much and let me just make two final points. First, there is a need to take a strategic decision. I know that your government cannot afford to allocate money the same way the Americans or the Europeans can, but the US\$2 million in aid that you spoke about will not enable much to be achieved! The other point is that I suggest you devote more attention to the issue of Jerusalem. We should remain in contact and talk about these issues. I thank you, your Excellency, for your time and for your informative contribution to today's meeting.

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