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Israel 3

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The Straits Times

Leaders in South-east Asia condemn move to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital

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JAKARTA - Leaders of countries in South-east Asia on Thursday (Dec 7) reacted strongly to US President Donald Trump's controversial decision to reverse a decades-old American policy and recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

"I call on all Muslims across the world to let your voices be heard, make it clear that we strongly oppose any recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital for all time," said Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak in his speech at an annual gathering of ruling party Umno in Kuala Lumpur.

His comments follow a statement by the Malaysian Foreign Ministry warning that the move by Mr Trump could result in grave repercussions toward the security and stability of the region, making efforts to combat terrorism all the more difficult.

Also condemning the move was Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who urged the US to reconsider the move.

"Such a unilateral recognition violates various resolutions of the (United Nations) Security Council and the UN General Assembly, which America is a permanent member of," said Mr Joko in between meetings at the presidential palace in Bogor.

His comments came after Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said Indonesia would always stand by Palestine, echoing the fierce condemnation of the latest Trump decision from countries in the Middle East.

"We condemn this recognition," said Ms Retno, who was wearing the iconic black-and-white checkered Palestinian scarf while delivering her opening speech at the 10th Bali Democracy Forum on Thursday.

"I stand here... wearing the Palestinian scarf to show the strong commitment of Indonesia, of the people of Indonesia, to always be with the Palestinian people, for their rights, Indonesia will always stand with Palestine," she added.

Ms Retno had earlier in the week spoken with US Ambassador to Indonesia, Mr Joseph Donovan, to express Indonesia's deep concern over the issue of the status of Jerusalem, and to persuade the White House against recognising Jerusalem as the capital.

She said that any change in the status of Jerusalem "will endanger the peace process and peace itself".

Mr Trump's decision on Wednesday overturns decades of US policy and risks triggering a fresh spasm of violence in the Middle East.

Indonesia has been a strong advocate of the two-state solution for the longstanding Middle East conflict, which envisions an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital alongside Israel.

Malaysia's Foreign Ministry also warned that any attempts to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, establishing or transferring any diplomatic mission to the city, are considered aggression towards the Arab and Islamic world, and an infringement on the rights of Muslims and Christians.

"It is also an infringement on the Palestinian people's national rights, including their right to self-determination, and a grave breach of international law along with the Security Council's relevant resolutions," it said.

The ministry requested that United Nations member states not recognise any changes in the pre-1976 borders, including in connection with Jerusalem.

"Recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is not a recognition of the reality on the ground; it is an expression of support for Israeli policies, much of which is in contravention of international law," it said.

Both Indonesia and Malaysia are the two largest Muslim-majority nations in Asean.

Leaders of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, widely regarded as the world's largest Islamic organisation, also expressed concerns that Mr Trump's position on Jerusalem would disrupt and undermine world peace. "This attitude will lead to more heated situations around the world and endless conflicts," said the group in a statement on Thursday.

Separately, Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in a statement said the future status of Jerusalem should be decided through direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, as it reaffirmed the Republic's longstanding and consistent support for a two-state solution.

In response to media queries on Mr Trump's announcement on Wednesday, the MFA spokesman said the status of Jerusalem is a sensitive and complex issue with a long history, and any premature and unilateral action to alter the status of Jerusalem will impede progress for a peaceful resolution of the Middle East and Palestinian problem.

Singapore reaffirms its longstanding and consistent support for a two-state solution, which will involve the establishment of an independent Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with Israel, added the MFA.

In a Facebook post on Thursday, Singapore's Environment and Water Resources Minister, Mr Masagos Zulkifli, said the MFA statement reflects Singapore's stand on the issue - recognition of the two-state solution and its tandem resolutions.

"I wish the stakeholders keep the peace as many sound and fair-minded countries help to resolve this long-drawn, complex and sensitive issue. We must not add fodder to the situation that has for decades justified mindless violence by terrorists and enmity between neighbours - a dark history the human race can do without," he said.

From The Diplomat

China's Middle East Dilemma: Israel or Palestine?

China's balancing act between the two is increasingly difficult to maintain.

By Wang Jin

January 10, 2017

As a key state along China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative, Israel's unique geographic location, stable political and social order, as well as advanced technology are vital for China's successful economic involvement in the Middle East. At the same time, however, given the importance of establishing China's image in international society, especially among Arab states, China has to support Palestine's efforts for independence and statehood. Whenever Israel-Palestine tensions flare, China has to walk on eggshells to avoid offending either side.

In a recent incident that shocked the Chinese public, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared his intent to limit diplomatic relations with China and other states that supported UN Security Council Resolution No. 2334, which denounced Israeli settlements in "Palestinian territory... including East Jerusalem." As a permanent member state of the UN Security Council, China approved the resolution. Resolution 2334 was heavily criticized by both the Israeli government and many Israeli political analysts. Their major concern was that the resolution was unbalanced and did not distinguish between the Western Wall and Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Many Israelis believed the resolution rewards Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' efforts to apply international pressure to Israel and thus makes Abbas less willing to participate in direct talks with the state.

The Israeli Embassy in China (where a new ambassador arrived at the beginning of 2017) lost no time in reassuring the Chinese media that cooperation between China and Israel would not be affected by Netanyahu's decision. Despite this, the Chinese public was disappointed by Netanyahu's remarks. For quite a long time, the Chinese public has viewed Israel as a reliable partner, cemented by historical friendship. There is a general impression in China that the steps taken by Chinese people in Shanghai to help Jewish immigrants from Germany in the 1930s are remembered by every Israeli. Some Chinese articles have even called Israel "the only reliable friend for China."

This high praise aside, China's perceptions of Israel are mixed and complicated. On the one hand, China views Israel as a close friend of the United States, even as a satellite-state for Washington in Middle Eastern politics. The special relationship between the United States and Israel hampered diplomatic normalization between China and Israel until 1992. On the other hand, China, especially during recent years, increasingly views Israel as a reliable source of economic and technology cooperation (although some conservative Chinese Muslims have their own objections to this). China also views Israel as an important bridge to help connect China and Western states.

The progress of Chinese President Xi Jinping's "One Belt, One Road initiative" has also promoted cooperation between China and Israel. Israel, which enjoys the reputation of a "start-up nation," has been viewed by China as a model for "economic transformation." When it comes to infrastructure projects in the Middle East, Israel's reliable and stable economic and social environment is attractive to China's construction companies. Meanwhile, the religious sites in Israel attract Chinese tourists. Numerous deals and agreements have been signed between China and Israel and Netanyahu is scheduled to visit China in early 2017.

However, there are still factors that limit the closer relations between China and Israel. On the one hand, China has to take Palestine's concerns into consideration. The normalization of diplomatic relations between China and Israel only occurred in 1992, when the Israel-Palestine peace negotiations were progressing. As an increasingly important power that lacks a direct military presence in Middle East, China needs "soft power" in Arab states. When the Israeli government, led by a right-wing coalition, delays peace negotiation with Palestine, when Jewish settlements expands endlessly in the West Bank, China has to stand up for Palestine to preserve a good image among Arab and Muslim states located along the "One Belt One Road" route.

On the other hand, although Israel realizes China's growing involvement in the Middle East and the increasing economic opportunities that provides, most Israelis know little about China. While many Chinese people (and the Israel Consulate in Shanghai) view Shanghai as the symbol of "Chinese-Jewish Friendship" given the fact that the city provided asylum for many German Jews during World War II, in the long run the city played only a marginal role in Jewish and Israeli history. Meanwhile, Israel is strongly influenced by (and also influences) the United States and Europe, while China is still a minor player in the international discourse system. There are even many influential Israeli scholars who challenge China's "One Belt One Road" initiative by comparing it with Saudi Arabia's efforts to finance Wahhabism around the world. Most Israeli political experts do not understand or trust China, worrying that China's growth may disturb the existing U.S.- and Europe-centered international system and ultimately threaten Israel's national interests and survival.

For China, pragmatic interests and the "One Belt, One Road" initiative necessitate increasingly closer cooperation with Israel. Yet China's moral philosophy and the necessity of strengthening its "soft power" in Arab states also push Beijing to support and help Palestine in the international arena. Given the tense and irreconcilable relationship between Israel and Palestine, China needs to more carefully maintain its "neutral" role and avoid excessive support for either side.

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From Haaretz

Opinion: Closer Ties Between India and Israel Must Not Become an anti-Muslim Alliance

There are many good reasons for Modi and Netanyahu to celebrate warming relations. But if they exploit that closeness to boost a shared narrative of extreme nationalism, exclusion and defining Muslims as the enemy - we, in India, must discredit it

Shairee Malhotra Jan 19, 2018 9:45 AM

It has been a ground-breaking year for India-Israel relations, with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visiting Israel in July 2017 and, this week, his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu making a reciprocal visit, all within just six months.

A lot is being said about the undeniable strategic cooperation and benefits of the relationship.

But underlying these practical considerations are talks amongst prominent analysts in India of an "ideological affinity" between the two. Do India and Israel really share an ideological affinity?

Let us start by briefly revisiting Israel's ideological roots. The State of Israel was created as a nation-state and safe homeland for the Jewish people, not least as a consequence of their historical worldwide persecution. Within Israel's identity lies an exclusive national and religious conception: a purportedly democratic and secular state that primarily expresses the sense of belonging of Jews. This sociopolitical conception inherently renders Israel's Arab minority second-class citizens.

Post-independence India, on the other hand, is an ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse pluralistic state based on the ideals of democracy and secularism laid down by its founding fathers. This ideological conception resulted in the marginalization of religion in the national identity of the state.

The communalization of Indian politics in the 1980s with the advent of vote bank politics, and the subsequent emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a right-wing, Hindu nationalist party, chaired by PM Modi, has since challenged this identity. But still, the multi-ethnic secularism of the Indian state at its foundation is fundamentally different from Israel and other religiously conceptualized states, like Pakistan.

Narendra Modi

Like a kite soaring high, India-Israel friendship is scaling new heights and will benefit not only our citizens but also the entire humankind.

Proponents of the 'affinity' idea assert that for both countries, confronting Islamist terror is a key common ground. Dr Vivek Dehejia, Professor at Carleton University in Canada and Senior Fellow at the IDFC Institute in Mumbai, is one of several commentators calling for a tripartite alliance between India, Israel, and the U.S. on the basis that the three countries have suffered "from the scourge of Islamic terrorism."

Israel, since its birth in controversy, has suffered consistently from terrorism emanating from groups with a radical Islamic orientation, most notably Hamas and Hezbollah. The displacement of the Palestinian people through the creation of Israel, the consequent non-acceptance of its existence in majority of the Islamic world, and the numerous wars that ensued, have inevitably resulted in Israel becoming a state prioritizing security over other values. But India's situation is markedly different.

India has an abysmal ranking in the Global Terrorism Index, which measures the number of attacks and casualties, ranking just a few spots below Afghanistan and Syria. But in contrast to Israel, most terrorist attacks in India are not perpetrated by Islamist fundamentalists but by internal insurgencies fuelled by very different ideologies, including Maoists and the Naxalites.

Furthermore, it is not without reason that India is touted as a case study within Europe in terms of not just its successful federal union, but also its relatively successful assimilation of Islam. India has the world's second largest Muslim population after Indonesia, a community of over 180 million people.

Policemen reinforce barricades during a protest against the visit of Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu near the Israeli Embassy in New Delhi, India. Jan.15, 2018

Policemen reinforce barricades during a protest against the visit of Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu near the Israeli Embassy in New Delhi, India. Jan.15, 2018Oinam Anand/AP

But at a time when Islamist fundamentalism remains a major global challenge, a miniscule number of Indian Muslims, only 23 individuals as of the end of 2016, have left to fight for ISIS. Contrarily, the tiny state of Belgium with a population of less than half a million Muslims has produced nearly 500 ISIS fighters – the highest per capita in Europe.

India has historically been a hotbed of Islamist extremism, but India's complex relations with Pakistan must be de-hyphenated from India's massive domestic Muslim population.

Indian Muslims are far less attracted to violent Islamism, not least because of India's secular nature and the opportunities for full participation within the political system, and the persistence in India of the moderate traditions of South Asian Islam and its relative lack of exposure to the fundamentalist Wahhabi Islam propagated in Pakistan. Indeed, scholars Fearon & Laitin posit that despite occurrences of religious conflict, cooperation not conflict remains the norm in India.

Indeed, India needs to secure its borders and citizens from internal and cross-border terrorist attacks, whether Islamist-oriented or internal Maoist assaults, and cooperation with Israel is vital in this context. But that should not be paraphrased in terms of building an anti-Islamic coalition.

PM Netanyahu has, during his current visit to India, reiterated the importance of strengthening security cooperation against radical Islam. But even though a certain degree of religious turmoil does exist, a tacit anti-Islamic alliance wrongly signals Muslims as the common enemy, and disproportionately and erroneously singles out Islam as India's key security threat.

A hoarding welcoming Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu featuring him along with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the International Centre for Entrepreneurship and Technology. Ahmadabad, India. Jan. 16, 2018

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Ajit Solanki/AP

The India-Israel relationship is also commonly being framed in terms of a natural convergence of ideas between their ruling BJP and Likud parties.

The ethno-nationalist political movements of the BJP's Hindutva and right-wing Zionism represent exclusivist conceptions of the state based on their majority populations, thereby naturally discriminating against other ethnicities or religions. Both parties and have moved rightwards from earlier, more liberal versions of Hindutva and Zionism.

Identities, including religious and ethnic, are by nature instrumental and malleable. The rise of Hindutva has in parts resulted in a subsequent weakening of an Indian national identity in preference to a Hindu identity, and threatened the secularism of the Indian state.

Hindu nationalist parties have managed to unify a diverse Hindu polity through their clever construction of a narrative of Hindus as historically victims at the hands of Muslims – an idea that resonates amongst the masses, given India's bloody legacy of Partition and its ensuing turbulent relationship with Pakistan.

In fact, Israel's biggest fans in India appear to be the Internet Hindus who primarily love Israel for how it deals with Palestine and fights Muslims.

The normative positing of Indo-Israeli relations in the context of such intellectual parallels once again frames the Muslim threat against a Jewish Israel and an allegedly Hindu India, whilst simultaneously legitimizing Hindutva politics. And whilst parallels between the two political streams exist, Hindutva does not equate to India, just as right-wing Zionism does not equate to Israel; these ideologies should not be the foundation of the Indo-Israeli relationship.

None of this is intended to critique Israel, or to oppose closer India: Israel relations per se.

Israel has been enormously successful in confronting its traditional enemies and securing its borders. It has achieved significant technological sophistication and developed expertise in realms beyond defense and security to include areas such as water management and agriculture that remain a top priority for India. The two countries are working on a five year agriculture and water cooperation plan, which fit in perfectly with PM Modi's deployment of vigorous diplomacy to achieve India's development goals.

Thus, by all means, India must continue to pursue a strong strategic, economic and security relationship with Israel. But this kinship should be regarded as more pragmatic and transformational than ideological.

India's foreign policy makers recognize the complexities of its alliances and decisions, and those same considerations relate to India's relations towards Israel and towards the Palestinians. There may be a growing realization of the diminishing returns its pro-Palestinian policy has incurred, but India's UN vote against the U.S. decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel exhibits a pragmatism that even repeated statements by Israel, about a 'marriage made in heaven', won't significantly shift.

It is naïve, even perturbing, to couple India and Israel as ideological sisters. India should have no interest in resembling further an exclusivist conception of the nation-state legitimizing one ethnic or religious group's primacy. It must instead try harder to ideologically safeguard itself from the menace of Hindutva becoming a guiding principle for the state and a tool of incitement among its citizens.

Its exclusive and discriminatory conception that India belongs only to Hindus is dangerous, not least at a time when the lynching of minorities and Dalits in the name of cow vigilantism are becoming more commonplace.

Indian children wave to a vehicle carrying Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu and Indian PM Narendra Modi as they arrive at Sabarmati (Gandhi) Ashram in Ahmadabad, India. Jan. 17, 2018

Indian children wave to a vehicle carrying Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu and Indian PM Narendra Modi as they arrive at Sabarmati (Gandhi) Ashram in Ahmadabad, India. Jan. 17, 2018Ajit Solanki/AP

This is where the talk about an "ideological affinity" between India and Israel is not only erroneous but could potentially have serious repercussions for India, by giving a green light to the politics of extremist Hindutva.

That language draws simplistic and amateurish conclusions from superficial similarities, whilst failing to take into account the disparate foundations, unique circumstances, and consequent paths that both countries have adopted.

And it's critical both for India's domestic and international relations that the narrative of an anti-Islam 'front' underpinning the two countries' relations be publicly discredited.

PM Netanyahu's current visit to India has focused on many diverse arenas of cooperation: innovation, technology, and tourism; he's even made a pitch to lure Bollywood to make movies in Israel.

That kind of broad spectrum of interactions would indeed lend credence to the idea that the India: Israel relationship goes beyond a convergence of right-wing Hindu nationalists in New Delhi, and right-wing Jewish nationalists in Jerusalem.

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