

Prospects of Peace in West Asia: Issues and Concerns

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For many decades West Asia has been passing through severe socio-political crisis for a variety of reasons. One of the most important ones is the Palestinian issue, which is still a matter of major concern to the people of this region, especially the Palestinians who have suffered the most on account of the conflicts between Arabs and Israel. No lasting peace is in sight in this region at this juncture or even in near future. Why is this issue so complex and intricate? To understand its intricacies and complexities, we will have to look at the historical backdrop of this issue, which is associated with the land of Palestine, a holy place for three religious communities – Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Historical Backdrop

This complex issue is related to the holy land of Palestine where the Arab people had been living for centuries. The Jews started migrating here immediately after the first World War in the hope of making Palestine their homeland. Subsequently the concept of Jewish homeland in Palestine came up, which was contained in the Declaration made by Lord Balfour in 1917. The Palestinian Arabs naturally objected to the Balfour Declaration and got restive due to large-scale influx of Jewish immigrants. This immigration rose dramatically and Jews, thus, constituted almost one third of the total population of Palestine by 1937. Alarm bells rang in the Arab world accordingly because it was now no longer a question of land purchased by individual settlers but the threat of an alien state in land that had been inhabited by Arabs for many centuries.

This flow of immigration did not stop even after the British imposed sanctions against Jewish immigration. The ten thousands of Jews migrated to Palestine illegally. The Arabs became increasingly uneasy and consequently bitter fighting erupted. In order to restore peace, the British finally decided to place the entire problem before the UN in 1947. A specially constituted United Nations Commission on Palestine (UNCOP) recommended that Palestine be partitioned into two states- one Arab and one Jewish – with Jerusalem held as trustee of the UN. The Jewish state would include 55 per cent of the land and its population would be 59 per cent Jews, while the Arab state would comprise 45 per cent of the land and have a 99 per cent Arab population. This partition was eagerly welcomed by Jews but Arabs denounced it with equal vehemence because the Arabs did not accept the idea of a Jewish state in the land of Arab people.

In response to this threat, in December, 1947 seven members of the Arab League met in Cairo to discuss the issue of a Jewish state among themselves. They finally reached the consensus to prevent the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine and to recognise Palestine as a united

independent state. But at 4.P.M on May 14, 1948, two hours before the termination of British mandate, it was seen that David Ben Gurion announced the birth of Israel of as a new state. The USA immediately recognised Israel as a Jewish state. Shortly thereafter, the then Soviet followed suit. The recognition of Israel by two powerful states aggravated the problem further. The war between the Arab states and Israel broke out in 1948. Before the signing of Armistice agreements in 1949, Israel took over three-quarters of all the land in Palestine, which was inhabited by the Palestinian Arabs. Almost one million Arabs were rendered homeless by the conflict and entered Syria, Tranjordan and the Egyptian-controlled Gaza Strip as refugees. Thus the bloody birth of Israel set the stage for moral conflict between two nationalisms – one Arab and the other Jewish – both equally desperate or determined to secure what to each of them was their holy land.

In 1967, once again the war broke out because time did not heal but exacerbated the tensions between the Arab states and Israel. The Israeli airforce attacked Egyptian airfields in a series of lightning strikes. Within a week, the armed forces of Israel occupied the Sinnai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the whole West Bank of the Jordan, the entire city of Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. The armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria had been completely routed. The Arabs were of the view that their defeat was due to assistance given by the US and the UK to the Zionists by maintaining their security umbrella over Israel.

By 1973 the Arabs were encouraged to believe that at least some of the lost territories could be regained by force of arms. Thus, the stage was once again set for another violent encounter. But this time war had one positive result. Under pressure from the US and the then Soviet Union, Arabs and Israelis did agree to meet in a peace conference in Geneva in 1973. It was their first face-to-face diplomatic encounter in a quarter of a century. This meeting however did not produce any concrete solution for bringing about peace. The issue of Jewish settlement in Palestine aggravated the problem for peace and stability in this region.

Jewish Settlement Plan

From the end of the 1967 hostilities onward, the Israeli authorities tried their best to establish Jewish settlements in the occupied territories as a strategic ploy. The settlement system began to take shape through the rehabilitation of Israelis in the occupied territories and the building of housing and other infrastructure in specific locations. Initially, the security dimension was emphasised by the then Israeli labour government and settlements were first established in key security areas such as the Golan Heights. But in the mid-1970s, it was noted that this pattern of settlement was changed and it aimed at ensuring Israeli presence throughout the occupied territories, especially under the Likud government. This settlement plan was a gross violation of Palestinian national rights.

Furthermore, it was found that financial incentives were given to the Israelis so that they could move to the occupied territories. These incentives were in form of low interest rate loans, free infrastructure services and employment of a high percentage of settlers in the public sector. In the beginning, the majority of the settlers were from the leftist and centrist leanings. But later on, religious Jews were also encouraged to be settled in a few specific urban settlements around East Jerusalem.

It was noted that the majority of settlers have always been armed and they have been the constant source of tension and harassment to the Palestinians. These settlers have direct contact with Israel and have interaction amongst themselves. They do not interact with Palestinian people in any matter. It is also amazing that Israeli army has different rules and regulations for the Jewish settlers and the Palestinians. Thus Israeli settlement along with the land acquisition policy, the exploitation of natural resources and the establishment of a separate structure of life are glaring examples of their discriminatory policy against the Palestinian people.

The fourth Geneva Convention that was applicable to the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 in which international law prohibited the destruction, seizure and confiscation of private or public properties in occupied territories. The United Nations Security Council also reaffirmed the applicability of the convention to the occupied territories comprising Jerusalem in Resolution 242. The Council dealt with the issue of settlement and established a commission called United Nations Commission on Palestine (UNCOP), in this regard. Moreover, the Council called for the cessation of all settlement activities and declared that all measures taken by Israel to change the demographic, physical character, institutional structure and status of Palestinian and other Arab territories occupied since 1967 including Jerusalem were null and void and had no legal validity.

Hence, this settlement, which might result in depriving the Palestinians of their right to self-determination, violates the charter of the United Nations, Human rights covenants and the United Nations declaration on human rights. It is also an obstacle to peace process.

Israel recently decided to construct 7000 new homes in East Jerusalem and announced plans to confiscate 130 acres of Arab land to facilitate the project. This proposed plan created international furore. The US Ambassador, Madeline Albright, even admitted that the new housing units pose problems as far as the peace process is concerned, but added that the Security Council was not the proper forum to discuss this issue. It must be noted that USA once again used its veto at the UN to defeat the resolution, which insisted that Israel should rescind its construction plan. All of the other 14 voting countries supported the resolution. It was the thirtieth time since 1972 that the USA had used its veto to prevent the censure of Israel.

Encouraged by tacit support from the US, the Israeli government did not exclude the possibility of building new houses. It also approved the construction of 9256 housing units. So far as the case of international law is concerned, the successive Israeli government maintained that the fourth Geneva convention is not applicable to them and then they would apply its humanitarian provisions. But Palestinian people consider Israeli settlements to be illegal and an obstacle to peace and maintained that no settlement activities should take place during the transitional period.

Although the positions of US varied from time to time, a common denominator has been the classification of settlement as an obstacle to peace. This position was recently reaffirmed by the US administration. The US stated in its 1991 letter of assurance to the Palestinian side in the Madrid peace conference that the US opposed and will continue to oppose settlement activities in occupied territories since 1967. The entire international community including the Russian Federation and the members of European Union unanimously agreed that the Israeli settlements were illegal.

In addition to the Jewish settlement issue, there are some other issues and challenges, which need to be understood properly so as to bring about enduring peace in this region.

Some Challenges

In order to achieve a lasting and genuine peace in West Asia, the challenges to peace have to be understood and fully met. Terms of the peace agreements between Israel and Arab states should be fair, positive and rewarding so that they could benefit their respective societies. They would have to realise that it is in their mutual interest to seek peace. The great majority of people in the region and not simply their governments have to understand the importance of peace. They would have to feel that the peace envisaged in the concluded agreement is a positive peace and not a negative one. It is positive in the sense that it will be advantageous for both the sides.

In short, the West Asian peace process would have to be transformed from a formal governmental concern into a people's concern and moreover, new conditions would have to be created to avert the possibility of resumption of hostilities. Despite this, there is still a remote prospect, unless Jews, Christians and Muslims in this region can bind themselves in a fraternity of peace.

The enduring peace is still a big challenge to the people of the region, which could be better understood, in the form of psychological, political, economic, social and cultural problems. The psychological challenges are by far the most important because since 1917 Arab-Jewish relations have been characterised by mistrust, hatred and above all fear. The Balfour Declaration in 1917 in actual sense planted the seeds of ethnic conflict between the Arab and the Jewish peoples.

Thus overcoming hatred, mistrust and fear appears to be the foremost challenge to permanent peace in this region. This challenge could be met with the help of short term and long-term confidence building measures. By doing this, peace agreements could be translated into a lasting peace in the region. The agreements between Israel and Egypt, on the one hand and Israel and Jordan on the other have resolved a crucial problem in Arab-Israeli relations by doing mutual recognition and acceptance to each other. The Camp David Accords that set the framework of peace in the region and the subsequent peace treaty of 26 March, 1979 provided the opportunity to end war, to understand each other and to establish full diplomatic relations between them.

Likewise, Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty of 26 October, 1994 ended the state of war between Israel and Jordan. This treaty recognised the international boundary of both countries. Israel also returned to Jordan a small territory, which was occupied in the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1967. The treaty thus allayed Arab fears in general and Jordanian fears in particular regarding Israel's territorial ambitions. It could be further argued that Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, had recently announced that more territories could be restored to Palestinian people under the Wye River Agreement. This clearly indicates Israel's positive attitudes towards bringing peace and stability in the region.

The PLO-Israeli 1993 Agreement also provided for mutual recognition between the two parties and laid the principles of Palestinian Interim Self-government in the occupied territories starting with Jericho (West Bank) and the Gaza strip. Under this agreement, Arafat related the PLO's recognition of the right of the state of Israel to exist in peace and security, its acceptance of the UN

Resolutions 242 and 338 and its commitment to the West Asia peace process, and to a peaceful resolution of the conflict between two sides as well as to the settlement of all outstanding issues relating to permanent status through negotiations. In response to the PLO commitments, the Israeli government has decided to recognise the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and commence negotiations with the PLO within the West Asia Peace process. Thus these agreements were important turning points in the modern history of West Asia.

Although these agreements and accords were vital in many ways, there were some issues, which were either not discussed or vague. The Camp David Accords did not prepare a general formula to deal with Palestinian demands. They left Palestinian issues such as claims to sovereignty over the West Bank and Gaza Strip, demands for Israeli withdrawal from and moratorium on new settlement in the occupied territories, and demands for recognising the Palestinian right to self-determination.

In Israeli-Jordanian agreement critical issues such as the position of Palestinian refugees are vaguely discussed. There is no conclusive provision in the treaty about the refugees, the displaced persons, and the status of Jerusalem. Since these issues are of serious nature, they may create problem for peace process in the region. Because of their serious nature, their solution does not seem feasible at this juncture and near future.

The PLO-Israeli Agreement is also not very promising. The status of Jerusalem, refugees, security arrangements, border relations and cooperation with other neighbours, and other issues of common interest were deferred until after the election of a Palestinian Interim Self-government. The outstanding issues are in fact critical which could be easily manipulated by dissatisfied elements among the Jewish and Palestinian peoples in order to wreck the entire peace process. So we can argue that as long as these issues are not resolved to the satisfaction of all the parties concerned, they will continue to threaten the West Asia peace process. For instance, unless the issue of Palestinian diaspora is fairly addressed, this challenge will continue to constitute a threat to any peaceful settlement in the area, and in any time it may lead to another cycle of unrest in this region. Hence it could be argued that granting Palestinians statehood would mean installation of quite a reliable safety vale for pace in West Asia.

Another major issue relating to West Asia peace process is economic disparity between Israelis and the Palestinians of West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. This disparity is likely to become an obstacle in any effort that aims at fostering meaningful economic cooperation between the Israelis, Palestinians and the Arabs. Economic conditions are found to be deplorable among Palestinians of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. Their localities are pockets of poverty and they will continue to be natural breeding places for alienation, agitation and violence. It is thus true that no country can enjoy peace for long with pockets of poverty within, around or adjacent to it. In terms of unemployment it is estimated to be 11 per cent in Israel while 15 per cent in West Bank and 20 percent in Gaza Strip. These differences will probably continue to have impact on the attitudes and behaviour of both Palestinian and Israeli populations. Thus disparities in standards of living are not healthy conditions for the normalisation or the promotion of cordial relations among nations.

An enduring peace in West Asia thus, can not be achieved without focussing attention on whatever contributes to relative parity in the economic conditions of the parties to the peace. Without fulfilling these conditions, peace will evolve only into a temporary arrangement.

In cultural matters, it is found that the Arabs and Jewish societies are linguistically, religiously and socially different, despite having many similar traits emanating from their common semitic heritage. They have different aspirations, outlooks and ways of life. There is thus cultural estrangement between them. As long as this estrangement persists, West Asia peace process will remain tenuous. Thus the joint Israeli-Arab effort is required to overcome this cultural estrangement. This effort must be on the basis of the universal principles of Judaism, Christianity and Islam rather than the narrow chauvinistic, selfish and narrow notions of nationalism. Arabs and Jews would have to reinterpret their modern histories along new lines. They would have to start thinking of their respective states not as states for the Arabs or Jewish peoples but as territorial states much like many other states, providing full and equal rights for all their inhabitants. Moreover, it is also required that participation and support of peoples of this region should be taken into consideration in the peace process.

Hence it is the need of the hour that the peace process must be transformed from the government to government peace to a pax populi. Thus the peoples of this region must be taken into consideration, while taking any major step towards peace process.

Peace Process

The beginning of peace efforts could be traced back to Sadat's 1977 Jerusalem visit, which exerted the greatest impact on the course of the Arab Israeli conflict. His visit started a series of dramatic events in West Asia, which subsequently led to a string of peace agreements and accords and the initiation of the ongoing West Asia peace process. For the first time since the start of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the official representatives of Israel, Palestinians and several Arab states opted to cultivate the possibility of peace and to put an end to a conflict that continues to leave tragic marks on their respective peoples, societies and economy. For a variety of reasons, the parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict have expressed a desire for genuine peace. Each of them have now cooperation with other parties as crucial to their strategic interests, as well as to meeting their respective national objectives.

But as a matter of fact, the Gulf crisis of 1990 created circumstances, which facilitated the launching of the peace process in this region. Mr. James Baker, the American Secretary of State promised that the US would address the larger issue of West Asia after the crisis was resolved and it was this promise which enabled him to resist demands to link the invasion of Kuwait, with Arab-Israeli dispute. The close working relationship between the US and the Soviet Union led to the convening of the Madrid conference in October 1991. The representatives in the conference were from Israel, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and the Palestinians.

The conference started a two-track process- a bilateral one and a multi-lateral one. The bilateral process would involve direct negotiations between Israel and its Arab neighbours, including the Palestinians. The multilateral tracks would include other regional and non-regional security, refugees and water. India is a participant in the multilateral track.

It is noted that Madrid conference broke the psychological barrier to direct talks between Israel and Arabs which led to the 1994 peace treaty between Israel and Jordan and generated several rounds of direct talks between Israel and Syria. The multilateral tract has been suspended for the past two years but it is expected to start again as a result of positive response from the new Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Barak.

When one talks of the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations today, one immediately thinks of Oslo. But Declaration of Principles (DoP) was signed on the lawns of the White House on September 13, 1993. This DoP contains a framework, a road map for further detailed negotiations on the extremely complex and sensitive final status issues such as refugee settlements, borders, security arrangements, Jerusalem and other issues of common interests. It stated that the aim of the negotiations was to achieve a permanent settlement based on the Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 which led many to hope that Israel would withdraw from the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area within a specified time frame. This transitional period will not be for more than five years for negotiations leading to the final settlement. The idea behind Oslo agreement was that this process may inculcate enough confidence between the parties involved to tackle the issues and reduce hostilities and mistrust.

The Gaza-Jericho agreement was signed in Cairo on May 4, 1994. It provided that the five-year interim period mentioned in the DoP would commence on that date. Israel and the PLO signed the interim agreement also known as Oslo 2 at Washington in 1995. This agreement remained substantially unimplemented, which led to a freeze in Israeli-Palestinian track since March 1997. The US president invited the then Israeli Prime Minister and Mr. Yasser Arafat to Washington in October, 1998. After eight days and nights of marathon negotiations Wye River memorandum was signed. But after the initial phase of implementation, the process froze once again.

Let us hope the peace process would start again with Ehud Barak sworn in as Israel's new Prime Minister. He said that his government would strive to make peace with all the Arab neighbours. He also promises to launch parallel peace negotiations with Palestinians, Syria and Lebanon, and strengthen the ties with the two states— Egypt and Jordan. Thus it seems that Barak's government is solidly pro-peace. But how far this peace process would be successful due to his efforts, remains to be seen in the days to come.

Conclusion

The aforesaid agreements, treaties and accords are, no doubt, the beginning of a long journey towards establishing the conditions of a genuine and enduring peace in West Asia. But they could provide only dormant peace unless these three steps are taken –first, justice must be given to all concerned, especially the Palestinian people. Secondly, the peace process must widen its scope and coverage to include most of parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Finally, the peace process must be transformed from a state to state peace into a people to people peace process.

Permanent peace in his region is not possible without expanding the process to incorporate at least majority of Arab states. Dealing with few states may appear tactically sound but strategically speaking, it may be counter productive due to the nature of power contest within the Arab World.

It is also important to mention here, that the peace agreements, treaties and accords that were concluded between Israel on the one hand, and Egypt, Jordan and the PLO on the other, are still government to government achievements. As long as they are not transformed into people to people agreements, the West Asia peace process will continue to be based on shaky and unstable ground.

We now conclude that the durable peace and stability in this region can be established inspite of the current impasse and possible setbacks in the future, because the seeds of Arab-Israeli peace have already been sown. The Arab-Israeli conflict also seems to be over. The cooperation between Israel, Palestinians and Arab neighbours have begun. One hopes they will come round together and make the peace process a lasting affair.