

The seemingly endless road to Palestinian sovereignty

The Israel-UAE deal is yet another instance of Palestine being abandoned by its ‘friends’



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If empty statements could produce peace, the new Israel-UAE deal, brokered by US President Trump and his son-in-law Jared Kushner, would be the beginning of the end of hostilities in the Middle East. The deal normalises relations between the two countries, making UAE the first Gulf State to establish official relations with Israel; in exchange, Israel have made a vague promise to stop the annexation of parts of the occupied West Bank. The joint statement released by Israel and UAE called it a “diplomatic breakthrough”, with Kushner praising Trump’s role in “making the Middle East safer”.

Israel PM Netanyahu spoke of “expanding the circle of peace” in the region; British PM Johnson tweeted about his “profound hope” that the agreement would lead to “a more peaceful Middle East”; a EU spokesperson called it a “positive step towards regional stability”; and Germany welcomed the “historic” deal that would make an “important contribution to peace.” A UAE spokesperson sentimentally referred to how Muslims would finally have a door to the revered Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem via direct flights from Abu Dhabi to Tel Aviv. Most US media outlets seemed equally gushing in their response—*Wall Street Journal* reported on how officials described Trump as “genuinely touched” by the breakthrough; *The New York Times* called it a “major diplomatic win”; and a *Washington Post* columnist, in all seriousness, called this Trump’s Nobel moment—referring to the “role of modern trios linked in Middle East History by the title ‘peacemaker’.” It is hugely ironic that he referred to the Camp David Accords between Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Israeli PM Begin and US President Carter in 1978, and the Oslo Accords between Jordan’s King Hussein, Israeli PM Rabin and US President Clinton in 1993 (he failed to mention Yasser Arafat, then chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation) to explain just how important this recent treaty is. The reason that the Palestinians are not mentioned in any of these

examples is because all three times, their voices were ignored, even by the parties that were supposedly there to champion their rights. The Camp David Accords were considered a betrayal by the Palestinians—in exchange for the return of the Sinai (which had been occupied by Israel in the Six Day War), Egypt ignored the right of return of Palestinian refugees and the status of Jerusalem, put the question of sovereignty of the West Bank and Gaza on hold and looked the other way while Israel aggressively pursued the annexation of Jerusalem, the expansion of settlements on occupied territory and the invasion of Lebanon. The Accord completely took the teeth out of UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, which were adopted after the Six Day War ceasefire and unanimously agreed on the withdrawal of Israeli troops from occupied territories. Similarly, PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, after being banned from the first round of peace talks in Madrid in 1991, bypassed the rest of the Palestinian leadership and opened backdoor negotiations with Israel that led to the signing of the Oslo Accords on August 20, 1993. At the time, the Oslo Accords were hailed as a milestone in Middle East peace negotiations; the fact that three million Palestinian refugees permanently lost the right of return (their homes now belonged to Israel) was quickly swept under the rug. The pre-1948 borders were lost forever as Palestine was divided up into different zones, and Israeli troops and settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip continued to grow. Yet even those poorly constructed zones were not set in stone—by 2000, only seven years after the Accord was finalised, 383,000 settlers had moved into West Bank and Gaza, including those in annexed East Jerusalem. In his book *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East*, award-winning journalist Robert Fisk wrote, “The Oslo agreement, hatched in secret, heavy with unguaranteed dreams, holding out false promises of statehood and Jerusalem and an end to Israeli occupation and Jewish settlement building, was greeted by the world’s statesmen—and by most of the world’s journalists—as something close to the Second Coming.” Twenty seven years later, the Israel-UAE peace deal—reached eight months after the US president unveiled the “Peace to Prosperity” plan for the region, negotiated by

Jared Kushner without taking into account a single Palestinian opinion—is seemingly being greeted with the same optimism. What do the Palestinians get out of this “historic” deal? At least during Oslo, phrases such as “self-determination”, “sovereignty” and “right of return” were being tossed around, albeit without packing any real punch. This time, all such lofty ideals have been abandoned—the only thing the Palestinians have been promised is that Israel will “suspend” their plans to annex more

humiliating deal for Palestinians—a promise to, for the time being, stop an activity that is considered by all international laws to be illegal, and has been identified as such by multiple UN resolutions. The UAE are claiming this as a diplomatic win that saves Palestinians from losing their land but in reality, Netanyahu’s policies, while popular at home, have been hugely contentious even with his allies, and this deal gives him a way to backtrack for the time being. The Camp David and Oslo Accords are also painful

While this deal is being touted as a breakthrough, the truth is that the UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have been improving their bilateral relations with Israel for years, cooperating in intelligence sharing, joint military exercises and diplomatic initiatives, united in their collective animosity towards Iran. This feeble attempt at placating the Palestinians while moving forward with the normalisation of relations shows that the Gulf monarchies have lost their patience with the Palestinian cause and are more interested in the political and economic payoffs of cooperating with the US and Israel. That this deal has been finalised between a populist, right-wing leader like Netanyahu and an authoritarian ruler like UAE crown prince Mohammed Bin Zayed, brokered by the most neoliberal US president in recent history, also demonstrates a disheartening trend in global politics—trade and economy continue to trump democracy and human rights. For now, the only friend and ally Palestine might look to might just be Iran, whose President Rouhani has criticised UAE for “a huge mistake, a treacherous act” and warned of severe consequences if an Israeli presence is detected in the Persian Gulf. Some Middle East experts have also focused on the need for a new Palestinian leadership that can represent the aspirations of its people in the wake of the Israel-UAE deal. According to social scientist Dr Carol Kasbari, “Palestinians have been aware of their leadership’s flaws for years, and that is why they are constantly calling to elect a new one. For them, the answer is clear... it lies in electing a new Palestine National Council for all Palestinians and generating the momentum to democratically elect a new leadership of the PLO.” Until then, this fresh betrayal of Palestine might be understood best through the words of Palestinian legislator and scholar Dr Hanan Ashrawi, who addressed Prince Zayed on Twitter and wrote: “May you never experience the agony of having your country stolen; may you never feel the pain of living in captivity under occupation; may you never witness the demolition of your home or murder of your loved ones. May you never be sold out by your ‘friends.’”

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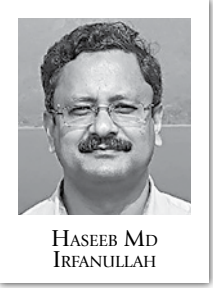
A man reads a copy of UAE-based *The National* newspaper near the Burj Khalifa, in the gulf emirate of Dubai on August 14.

PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian territory. Notice the use of the term “suspend”. According to the BBC, President Trump has confirmed that this in no way permanently halts the expansion of Israeli settlements in occupied territory—all it means is that “right now it’s off the table”. Israeli PM Netanyahu, who had wooed his huge base of right-wing voters by promising the expansion of settlements, said in a public statement—“We received a request to wait temporarily from President Trump. It is a temporary postponement. It is not removed from the table, I am telling you that.” It is difficult to think of a more farcical and

reminders to Palestinians that this promise will likely be as empty as the ones made before, and their Arab neighbours will look the other way as illegal Israeli settlements continue to expand. The new deal may not be “historic”, but it is definitely history repeating itself for Palestine. The fact that UAE officials have spoken of access to Al-Aqsa Mosque via Tel Aviv is adding insult to injury by its acknowledgment of Israeli sovereignty over the highly contentious area—East Jerusalem has been sought by Palestinians as the capital of their future sovereign state, which now seems even more unlikely than ever.

Providing permanent support to the people of Tanguar Haor



HASEEB MD IRFANULLAH

I always wanted to take two photographs of the same spot of Tanguar Haor—one in the driest month of the year and one in the wettest. I was successful in doing so in 2016. It was just remarkable to see how two-thirds of a 12,655-hectare waterbody gets dried up in Chaitra (April), but again becomes so full, like a sea, in Sraban (August), year in, year out! To the readers of *The Daily Star*, Tanguar Haor is quite well-known as a wintering ground of a huge number of migratory water birds coming from the colder north, like China and Mongolia. In January 2019, Bangladesh Bird Club, Bangladesh Forest Department, and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) counted about 150,000 migratory birds belonging to around 40 species—the highest count since 2012—in this wetland. The migratory birds make our Tanguar Haor a “Wetland of International Importance”. Recognising this fact, on July 10, 2000, this freshwater ecosystem was designated as Bangladesh’s second Ramsar Site (Our first Ramsar Site is, of course, the Sundarbans mangrove forest). Despite being a significant hub of global biodiversity with mesmerising scenic beauty, Tanguar Haor has a very depressing past. Since the 1930s till the end of the last century, Tanguar Haor was captured by powerful elites through leasing system that caused rampant exploitation of its fisheries resources. Over those seven decades, Tanguar Haor became a painful example of violating people’s rights. With power, money, and muscle, the leaseholders harshly stopped the poor haor-dwellers from accessing the resources of their haor. Tanguar Haor’s condition deteriorated so much that in 1999 the government had to declare it an “Ecologically Critical Area” (ECA). 2001 was a significant year for Tanguar Haor—the harmful leasing was stopped and, from the Ministry of Land, the management of the wetland was brought under the then Ministry of Environment and Forests. A couple of years later, the government put its resources, through Sunamganj district administration, to guard and to protect Tanguar Haor, which continued until the end of 2006. The National Conservation Strategy Implementation Project in the mid-1990s was the first-ever conservation initiative in Tanguar Haor undertaken by the government. But it was the “Community Based

Sustainable Management of Tanguar Haor” project (Tanguar Haor Project), which began a new era of conserving Tanguar Haor. In December 2006, the Ministry of Environment and Forests started this three-phase project with technical support from IUCN and financial support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). Other national and international NGOs, namely BELA, CNRS, ERA, GUS, and HELVETAS, also got involved in this initiative. That project came to an end in August 2016. Over a decade, a number of major changes were seen in Tanguar Haor. A people-centric system was introduced to sustainably manage Tanguar Haor. There was a three-tier community organisation—at village, union and haor levels—and an inclusive supporting authority led by the district administration.

Tanguar Haor management a strong legal basis. At the end of 10 years, some challenges, however, still remained. The opportunity to improve alternative livelihoods of the local households to reduce their dependency on Tanguar Haor was limited. The capacity of the local community to generate and manage funds and savings was not enough. Local people showed inadequate confidence in the government’s initiatives and commitments for participatory management of Tanguar Haor. Negative propaganda from the local elites against the people-oriented approaches and interventions was another concern. There was a need for additional policy formulation. Translating the government’s policy level commitment on the ground, particularly at the district and sub-

Bridging Phase was to develop a much larger and longer project so that Tanguar Haor management could continue with the local people. But that did not happen by December 2018, when the Bridging Phase ended. Which means, for the first time since 2006, no conservation project has been operating in Tanguar Haor over the past 20 months. Nevertheless, the leadership of the central cooperative society remained vibrant. With a supportive district administration and political environment, they managed to engage in sustainable fish harvesting during November 2019 to March 2020, received their share, and continued with community guarding to protect Tanguar Haor as much as possible. The story so far of Tanguar Haor tells us how a community could be empowered

with other stakeholders to establish and practice their rights. An inclusive governance structure from the village to the ecosystem levels can give space for collaboration. When awareness, capacity, incentives, and governance all come together we can get an empowered community actively participating in ecosystem management. Such a community may, however, only work well, if there is a project acting as a facilitator. But as Tanguar Haor has shown, a supportive policy and legal regime can bring all elements of community-based ecosystem management together and bind them beyond the project tenure. During recent conversations, the local community leadership expressed that they still feel a need for a “new” Tanguar Haor project. The reason for that, however, is not



Same spot in Tanguar Haor photographed in April (left) and August (right) 2016.

PHOTO: HASEEB MD IRFANULLAH

The project built leadership capacity, empowered the local community, and facilitated women’s participation in natural resource management. The haor-dwellers’ right to fish was re-established with a sustainable participatory fish harvesting system. The income from fish harvests was shared among the fishermen (40 percent), the community organisation (36 percent), and the government (24 percent) according to a benefit-sharing protocol approved by the ministry in 2008. Livelihoods of the poor families improved through alternative income generating activities as well as with their own savings. The fish and wildlife sanctuaries, restored swamp forests, and patrolling by community guards protected and improved the haor biodiversity. Legal and policy instruments approved by the government also gave

district levels, was also a challenge. Realising this reality, at the end of donor funding, the government allocated its own resources to maintain the decade-old system in Tanguar Haor. In this unprecedented attempt, IUCN remained the technical lead, supported by CNRS and ERA. The Tanguar Haor Bridging Phase project (2016–2018) continued sustainable fish harvesting, benefit-sharing, and resource protection activities. The Bridging Phase also converted 41 village level community organisations into cooperative societies spread out in Tahirpur and Darmapasha sub-districts of Sunamganj. Under the “Cooperative Societies Act, 2001”, these societies were led by a central cooperative society for the entire Tanguar Haor with representatives from all village cooperative societies. One of the major purposes of the

while sustainably managing an ecosystem. If individuals and households can realise the wider importance of their ecosystems; if they have trust in the system and believe that change is possible—despite a gloomy past; and if their capacity, knowledge, and skills are developed in terms of leadership, fund management, and negotiation, they can move towards empowerment. But soft elements, like awareness raising and capacity building, are not enough to keep poverty-stricken people engaged in ecosystem management. Both households and the community as a whole, need incentives—access to ecosystem’s resources, receiving part of the financial benefits from ecosystem management, availability of better livelihood opportunities and market linkage, and access to saving schemes or loans. Local communities also need to interact

clear. Maybe from past experience, they felt that the currently supportive administrative and political systems may change within a short period of time. A project may always help them as a cushion or a support wing, as they have seen since 2006. The government also feels the need for a project in Tanguar Haor to harness its 12-year investment in participatory ecosystem management. But how long will we manage our precious ecosystems through short-term projects? Can we design a project with the people of Tanguar Haor that will allow them to manage their amazing wetland confidently, on their own and be free from depending on external funding, thus from external influence?

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