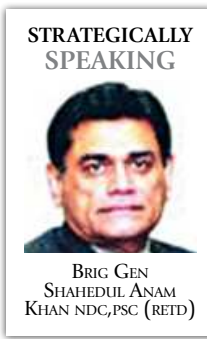


Removal of 'except Israel' clause demands clear answers



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING
BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

THE counterintuitive decision that the government has taken regarding the endorsement in Bangladeshi passports of travel to Israel demands clear answers.

The news of removing the "except Israel" clause from the e-passport—come as it did in the midst of the unprecedented Israeli violence on Gaza which is tantamount to genocide—has caused surprise and shock to the people of Bangladesh in general, since the word "Palestine" strikes a very sensitive chord in the hearts of many Bangladeshis.

The decision to remove the clause, which prevented Bangladeshi nationals from visiting Israel, has provoked conjectures, and one cannot be faulted for inferring that Bangladesh might be looking to make a shift from its heretofore held policy on Israel. I believe that the matter is considerably more significant than some in the policy circles would have us believe. It cannot be dismissed out of hand as being an administrative decision rather than a diplomatic one, as some erudite diplomats aver.

The situation has raised several questions regarding the decision-making process insofar as it relates to issues of national interest and security. The equivocal comments from the two ministers of home and foreign affairs have far wider consequences and graver implications than the comments suggest. It also, regrettably, betrays the absence of a coordinated thought process or a cogent policy in the realms

of our foreign relations. Further, it conveys to even the most casual observer of foreign relations that Bangladesh might be under some pressure to readjust its position on Israel.

Let me explain why the two ministerial statements are contradictory and self-defeating. According to the home minister, the changes are being made to ensure that our passports meet the "international standards". Pray tell us, Mr. Minister, what are the "international standards" that you are talking about? Since when has this requirement to conform to the so-called international standards become mandatory? And which international organisation has made this mandatory? How did we manage to carry on so long without meeting the newly revealed "international standards"? What should one make of the home minister's comment that "no country uses these words any more"? Are we dictated by what other countries do, or by our own policies and principled stand?

The changes to the passports are being brought in light of the DG of the Department of Immigration and Passports. What we demand to know is, how was the decision taken to effect the change? Was it a decision taken by the government at the highest level, by the cabinet? Apparently, the foreign ministry was not in the loop, if we are to believe the BBC report about the foreign ministry calling the home minister about the matter after it came to light, only to be told that the decision had been taken six months ago... so much for our decision-making mechanism. He and the nation came to know of it only after a tweet from an official in the Israeli foreign ministry (with a hopeful expectation from the Bangladesh government) came to our notice. If the matter is so innocuous,



A collage of photos reflecting the recent change in Bangladeshi passport.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

why wasn't the public informed of the decision when it was taken?

Something must be awry when the foreign minister is unaware of a decision involving a very sensitive foreign policy issue. Issuing passports may be the prerogative of the home ministry but our passports have long carried endorsements regarding the travel embargo on certain countries, which reflect our diplomatic position regarding those countries. And certain objective conditions merited the stand that we had taken. The recent changes, therefore, are bound to raise eyebrows and cause consternation, and carry the wrong message abroad and at home.

The foreign minister's comments have added to the confusion. To paraphrase what he said: dropping

the endorsement in e-passport is inconsequential, that travel to Israel remains forbidden, and that anyone doing so, without permission, shall have to face punishment. What that means is, although travel to Israel is barred, one could visit that country "with permission". How does one reconcile the contradiction? And how can a Bangladeshi be prevented from travelling to Israel now that the caveat has been removed? Does it stand up to legal norms? Reportedly, none of the several acts related to Bangladesh's immigration can put a bar on travelling to Israel. These stand in contradiction to the foreign minister's threat of legal action against those traveling to Israel "without permission".

Admittedly, pressure has been

building up on certain Muslim countries to normalise relations with Israel after four Muslim (Arab League) countries—Bahrain, the UAE, Sudan and Morocco—signed agreements in 2020 establishing diplomatic relations with that country. The Pakistani prime minister even went on record as saying that his country was under pressure to recognise Israel, without naming the source(s) of the threat.

Bangladesh has been a diplomatically coveted country for Israel since February 4, 1972 when it recognised the newly-born country, which was, very promptly and rightly, rejected by the Bangladesh government. Normalisation of relations with the third-largest Muslim country would be a feather in Israel's diplomatic cap. Such a development would extend the Trump-led push to persuade Arab and Middle Eastern countries to recognise Israel, and add to the tally of four Muslim countries that capitulated, falling for the US promise of diplomatic largesse and supply of defence weapons.

We believe that Bangladesh remains committed to its Palestine policy. The matter of removing the embargo on traveling to another country may have been an innocuous issue, were it not related to Israel. For Bangladesh, it is a moral issue, which cannot be overridden by the need to overcome any "administrative inconvenience". A decision such as this should be informed by the likely pros and cons of it, and its impact on our diplomatic positions, particularly those that relate to a people who have been under subjugation and fighting for their homeland for the last 70 years, much like what we did for nine months.

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (Retd), is a former Associate Editor of The Daily Star.

Why are Arabs so powerless?



PERVEZ HOODBHOY

FOR a terrible 11 days in May, the world watched hellfire rain upon the world's largest open-air prison camp, otherwise known as Gaza. The dazed, bleeding survivors crawling out of the rubble of collapsed buildings have experienced this before. Everyone knows this tragedy will repeat. In faraway Arab cities, as well as here in Pakistan, people glumly watched the unhindered, televised bombing by Israeli jets. But the most they could manage was a few toothless resolutions and a few impotent slogan-chanting demonstrations trampling the Israeli flag.

What makes Israel with nine million people—between one-half and one-third of Karachi's population—a Goliath of biblical proportions? Equally, notwithstanding their fabulous oil wealth, why are 427 million Arabs the pygmies of international politics? GCC Arabs can certainly control what happens in a few *miskeen* countries like Pakistan: their leaders can be summoned to Riyadh at a moment's notice and sent back with sackfuls of rice as wages of obedience. But before Israel—which has almost zero natural resources—Arab kings and sheikhs must perform bow their heads.

Blame the West if you want and, in particular, America. Indeed, from 2000 to 2019, armaments supplied to Israel by the Western powers (US, UK, France, Spain, Germany) are documented at a hefty USD 9.6 billion. But within that 20-year period, the same document shows this amount is dwarfed by arms sold by the same suppliers to Saudi Arabia (USD 29.3bn), UAE (USD 20.1bn), Egypt (USD 17.5bn), Iraq

(USD 9.1bn), and Qatar (USD 6bn). And yet, these expensive weapons will provide little protection if Israel ever chooses to attack Arab lands again. While the nine-country Saudi-led coalition has created a humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen, it is failing dismally against the rag-tag Iran-supported Houthi forces.

Okay, so then let's blame Palestine's ill-fortune upon Arab disunity. There's

up their differences, doing so will not change things fundamentally.

The secret of Israel's strength is not hidden in its weaponry. Instead, this still-expanding and still-colonising apartheid settler state uses the same magic that enabled just a handful of 18th-century Englishmen to colonise the entire Indian subcontinent. Let's recall that in ruling over 200 million natives for 250 years, at no time did



Smoke and flames rise during an Israeli air strike in Gaza City amid a flare-up of Israeli-Palestinian violence, on May 14, 2021. PHOTO: REUTERS/MOHAMMED SALEM

truth in this: Arabs are indeed bitterly divided. But when were they not? The period from about AD 634 to AD 750 is the only time in history when they stood together. Then, after Nasser won the Suez War against Britain, Arabs united again for a brief, euphoric moment. But this unity did nothing to avert their crushing defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, which forever changed borders. And while friends and activists for Palestine—including myself—would love to see Fatah and Hamas patch

Britain have more than 50,000 white soldiers on Indian soil. Although better guns and cannons gave them an edge, their real not-so-secret weapon was, in fact, much bigger.

That weapon was a system of organised thought based upon a rational and secular approach to life, a modern system of justice, and a new set of social relations. This was sustained and enhanced by Enlightenment-era education that deemphasised rote learning of the scriptures, was this-



worldly and future-oriented, and which focused upon problem-solving skills using systematic, scientific thinking. Having invented modern means of communication such as railways and telegraph, a mere island in the North Sea could boast of an empire over which the sun never sets.

In a nutshell, imperialist conquests showed that brains would rule over brawn—a stark truth that got still starker with time. But where are brains produced? Obviously, in the womb, but it is in schools, colleges and universities where minds are shaped and sharpened. Hence, everyone and their uncle rush to one single conclusion these days: fix education and this will level the playing field, greatly diminishing or perhaps ending the inequalities of power.

Ah! That's so much easier said than done. To have buildings and classrooms with teachers is one thing but to coax the potential out of a student is altogether different. With their vast wealth, Arab countries have built impressive university campuses with well-equipped laboratories and well-stocked libraries. They have even imported professors from America and Europe. Yet, the needle has barely flickered so far. That's because attitudes towards learning take forever to change—and only if they are somehow forced to change.

Ditto for Pakistan which follows the Arab model as best as it can, together with *abayas* and *jubbas*. No university here has a bookshop, a centre for students that hums with open debate and discussion, or a theatre where

classic movies are screened. Looking for a philosopher or a high-grade pure mathematician will be in vain. For 20 years, papers and PhDs have been churned out at a frantic rate. But I suspect that many of Pakistan's decorated "distinguished national professors" with hundreds of research publications would be judged unfit to teach in a high-end Israeli high school for lack of scholarship.

The problem is not genetics—Arabs have a brilliant past and are probably just as smart as Ashkenazi Israelis. But the two groups have different attitudes towards success and different role models. The Ashkenazi child wants to be Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, John von Neumann, George Wald, Paul Samuelson, Gertrude Elion, Ralph Lauren, George Soros, or a thousand other such names that fill textbooks on physics, philosophy, technology, medicine, and business. Compare this with the Arab boy who wants to be Salahuddin Ayubi, or the Pakistani lad who dreams of becoming Ertugrul Ghazi on horseback. He does not know about Abdus Salam, our discarded Nobelist.

We live in a cruel world which, of course, we must try our best to make less cruel and more humane. But making a socially just world requires much more than condemning the oppressors and crying with the oppressed. Instead, the weak must be made stronger. That strength does not derive from oil or nuclear bombs. Instead, it springs from the human brain, but only when that superb gift of nature is appropriately tutored and trained within a system of secular values that cherishes and rewards logical thinking, questioning and creativity.

Pervez Hoodbhoy is an Islamabad-based physicist and writer. The article was first published in Dawn. Courtesy: Asia News Network (ANN)

QUOTABLE Quote

THOMAS À KEMPIS
(1380-1471)
German-Dutch canon

All men desire peace, but very few desire those things that make for peace.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Prepares for a fight
- 6 Prohibits
- 10 Finish, as a skirt
- 11 Aids illegally
- 13 Singer Piaf
- 14 Intensify
- 15 Fall behind
- 16 Big beagle feature
- 18 Hoopla
- 19 Legislative VIP
- 22 Hive resident
- 23 Talk crazily
- 24 Trio of myth
- 27 Computer type choices
- 28 Without repairs
- 29 Ulna's place
- 30 Pep rally participant

DOWN

- 1 Cupboard part
- 2 Bike part
- 3 Barcelona buddy
- 4 Tire track
- 5 Balls
- 6 Ballet handrail
- 7 Lincoln nickname
- 8 Reno resident
- 9 Pupil
- 12 Newspaper section
- 17 Pub pint
- 20 Heavier than heavy
- 21 Fragrance
- 24 Element
- 25 Red-faced
- 26 Reason for overtime
- 27 Worried
- 29 In the style of
- 31 Gathers
- 32 "Spish Splash" singer Bobby
- 33 Put up
- 34 Takes ten
- 39 Solo of "Star Wars"
- 41 Groom's answer

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

T I N D E R S A C T S
S I X E R H I L T S
A N I S E E L I O T
V O L T A G E M O E
E R E M O N T A G E
R E D H O T O X E N
O N T A P
S P A S A B S O R B
H O S T A G E R O E
O U T C O T T A G E
E R U P T T A T E R Y
S E T T O E M E R Y
D E A R D A D S

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO SERVE WHEN YOU HAVE SARGE OVER FOR DINNER?
WELL, HE'S A MEAT AND POTATOES KIND OF GUY
ALSO, A FISH, CHEESE, PASTA, PIZZA, CAKE, PIE AND ICE CREAM TYPE OF GUY

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

HEH! THIS IS THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE! YOU LIEP TO US!
I DIDN'T LIE. I JUST SORT OF FUDGED FACTS A LITTLE.
NO FAIR. I HATE IT WHEN THEY LEARN OUR SKILLS.