CHAPTER 1

INDIA’S WEST ASIA POLICY: AN OVERVIEW

It is perhaps in the fitness of things to approach the study on the theme, India’s relations with Israel in overall perspective that is India’s relations with the West Asian region. It would be pertinent; taking into account an overview of India’s concerns in West Asia in general that would lead us to a focused study of our relations with the state of Israel and ultimately its impact in the vicinity. The emergence of new entity, the Zionist state of Israel and its relations with India can only be studied in relation to India’s foreign policy vis-à-vis countries in the West Asian region.

West Asia is a land bridge which links three continents Asia, Africa and Europe, and thus gives to the occupants not only great land advantages but also a favourable position. It is called the gateway of Asia-Africa and the back-door of Europe. West Asia land mass meets three seas – the Mediterranean, Red and the Arabian Sea. It is a centre of international trade with different regions. The two most important waterways of the world, viz. the straits of Bosphoras and Dardanelles connecting the Black sea and the Mediterranean and Suez connecting the Mediterranean Sea and the Red sea are also located here.¹ The subsequent discovery of oil in this region has also immensely increased its importance. Strategic considerations have led the world powers to intervene in this region. Oil in West Asia is a heritage asset. Thus, the region is the life line

¹ Arora, Prem, Studies in International Relations Since 1945, (New Delhi, 1981-82), p. 294
of Europe. The West is interested in Mediterranean. Both the super powers after the World War II competed for influence in this area.\textsuperscript{2}

During the time of war, it becomes an area of prime military importance. According to military commentators, the North African campaign of World War II constituted a major turning point in that conflict. West Asia as a region was vital to the West in its cold war strategy for the containment of communism. President Truman announced the doctrine of containment in 1947 when the Soviet Union exerted pressure on Turkey. West Asia safeguards the southern flank of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It is a vital security zone for the West. The West has proof of it in the presence of the Soviet Union (Russia) navy in the eastern Mediterranean Sea.\textsuperscript{3}

Nevertheless for the students of the international relations, it may be said that Arab nationalism, Western Imperialism and Zionism are the three main factors that has conditioned the West Asian politics. West Asia, till today remains a global centre of ruthless intrigue and the region has burst into a kind of ‘Arab Spring’ where hot lava is spewing.\textsuperscript{4}

1.1 Rise of Zionist Colonization in Palestine and India’s Response

It was out of a feeling of hopelessness and insecurity that the desire for a national home was born and Zionism came into being. The Ghetto dream of a return to Zion, combined with the feeling of richer Jews of Western Europe who did not want to compromise their own position, led to the evolution of the

\textsuperscript{2} Horrabin, J.F., Jawaharlal Nehru, Glimpses of World History, (New Delhi,1982), p. 750.
\textsuperscript{3} Arora, Prem, Studies in International Relations Since 1945, op. cit., p. 294.
idea of a token colonization in Palestine. Negotiations for the same were started by Rothschild with the Sultan of Turkey and by the 1880s, after spending a considerable sum of money, a number of agricultural colonies had been founded in Palestine peopled by immigrant Jews of Poland and Russia.

The origin and birth of Israel is associated with the Balfour Declaration. It is the name given to a letter written on 2 November 1917 in which Lord Arthur James Balfour, British Foreign Secretary, made it known to Lord Walter Rothschild, a representative of British Jews, that ‘His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national Home for the Jewish people.’ This document marks the reappearance of the idea of the Jewish start in the Holy Land for the first time since the Roman Empire crushed the last Jewish rebellion in A.D. 135. Arthur Koestler later wrote that in the Balfour Declaration, ‘One nation solemnly promised a second nation the territory of third’.

Britain, in the throes of a world war, hoped to improve its position by reconciling the Zionist movement which, since its creation in 1897, had grown in power and influence within the Jewish communities of Europe and America. British strategists thought that the promise of a ‘national home’ might turn the Jews into a trump card: in Palestine they would support the British army of occupation, in the US they would bring their weight to bear in favour of entering the war against Central European empires; in Germany and Austro-Hungary they would break away from their government and in Russia they

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5 For Balfour Declaration, See Appendix 1.
would slow down the radicalization of the revolution (many Bolshevik and Menshevik leaders were of Jewish origin) and prevent the country’s defection from the alliance against Germany.\textsuperscript{6}

But Britain also had wider aims. Obsessed by the security of its colonial system, it feared the ascendancy of another major European power in Palestine – France – which ‘so close to the Suez Canal would be permanent and formidable threat to the Empire’s essential lines of communication’ (Sir Herbert Samuel, first British High Commissioner in Palestine). From that point onward, the skill used to present the Zionist project made it all the more attractive to Britain: ‘A Jewish Palestine’, explained Chaim Weizmann, the Zionist Organization’s principal leader, and ‘would be safeguard for England, particularly in matters concerning the Suez Canal’.\textsuperscript{7}

There were no illusions on either side about the Balfour Declaration, Britain did not act out of sympathy for the Zionist cause, but to defend its own interests in Middle East, as several recent historical studies have underlined. The Israeli historian Mayir Verete demolishes the traditional interpretation that sees the lobbying of Chaim Weizmann in Balfour’s letter; Weizmann, he stresses, had no contact with British officials dealing with foreign policy in the two and a half years preceding the Declaration. Verete argues that the Declaration was a result of British government policy designed to balance the concessions made by Mark Sykes to his counterpart Francois Georges-Picot in


\textsuperscript{7} Flapan, Simha, \textit{The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities}, (London and Sydney, 1987), p. 28.
the negotiations over the future of the Ottoman Empire from 1916 onwards. Britain did not intend to internationalize Palestine, even if it did seek to secure a northern enclave around the cities of Haifa and Acre, and spheres of influence in Transjordan to the east and between Rafah and Aqaba in the south. To divide the Holy Land with France would be to lose control of a piece of land which was of vital strategic importance to the protection of British interests in Egypt on the one hand, and Iran, Iraq and the Gulf on the other. With the promise of a national home for the Jews, London sought to bring on side the Jewish community in its battle for Palestine over the long term, simultaneously lending its aspirations a veil of legitimacy. In the short term, it encouraged the Jews to engage in the world war already underway on the side of the Allies.\(^8\)

The Zionists were well aware of Britain’s reasons for involving itself in their project, and of the need never to relax the pressure required to ensure that Britain kept its word. For its part, London was conscious that the Zionist movement had other ambitions. In the words of Lord Curzon, Balfour’s successor: ‘While Weizmann tells you one thing and you are thinking in terms of a “national Jewish homeland”, he has something quite different in mind. He envisages a Jewish state, and a subject Arab population governed by the Jews. He is trying to bring this about screened and protected by the British guarantee’.\(^9\)

But in winning the Jews, it remained essential not to lose the Arabs, who still constituted the overwhelming majority of the Palestinian population, not to

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\(^9\) Hallahn, Benjamin Beit, op. cit., p. 89.
mention most of the countries of the West Asia colonized by the British, directly or indirectly. Did the Balfour Declaration ostensibly contradict the assurances given to Sherif Hussein and Ibn Saud? Diplomats thought so: the efforts undertaken by the British authorities to promote the ‘National Home’ of the Jews were tempered, in the text, by the need to do nothing ‘that would prejudice the civil and religious rights of the non-Jewish communities in Palestine’. Such artistic license was to prove expensive.\(^{10}\)

On the political front, Zionism can be traced back to Theodor Herzl, who first conceived the idea of a Jewish state. The Initial British response was seen to be favorable to the Zionist cause. Therefore, to cash in more on the sympathetic British altitude the Zionist organization was tempted to step up its demand for National Home in Palestine. Henceforth, the Zionist demand became Palestine or nothing.

The British-Zionist connection grew stronger with the emergence of Chaim Weizmann in Zionist organization. The policy of ‘divide and rule’ had always been successful in helping the British to consolidate their hold over far-flung colonies. Thus not satisfied with the breaching up of the Turkish Nations, put a permanent obstacle to Arab nationalist movement by diverting their attention towards the Zionist threat.

A letter dated 21 September 1882 from Vladimir Dubnow, a worker at the Mikveh Israel agricultural settlement, to his brother Simon, captures the sentiments and hopes of the early Jewish settlers:\(^{11}\)

\(^{10}\) Flapan, Simha, op. cit., p. 32.
My ultimate aim, like that of many others, is greater, broader, incomprehensible but not unattainable. The final goal is eventually to gain control of Palestine and to restore to the Jewish people the political independence of which it has been deprived for two thousand years. Don’t laugh this is no illusion. This means for realizing this goal is at hand: the founding of settlements in the country based on agriculture and rafts, the establishment and gradual expansion of all sorts of factories, in brief to make efforts so that all the land, all the industry will be in Jewish hands. In addition, it will be necessary to instruct young people and the future generation in the use of firearms (in free, wild turkey anything can be done), and then — here I too am plunging into conjecture — then the glorious day will dawn of which Isaiah prophesized in his burning and poetic utterances. The Jews will proclaim in a loud voice and if necessary with arms in their hands that they are the masters of their ancient homeland.

Right from the very beginning, various pressures have been exerted on India to influence its policy towards West Asia in general and the Arab-Israeli conflict in particular. Besides the anti-imperialistic forces within the country, the vast Muslim population of India wanted to actively support the cause of the Palestinian Arabs; while on the other hand some people, especially the right wingers, were sympathetic towards committed on the Jews by the European regimes (especially by the Russian monarchy in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century) inclined most people to view the Zionist cause with sympathy. The partition of India on communal lines in 1947 saw the secular fabric of the country being dealt a severe blow. It was but natural for a certain section of the Indian populace to vehemently oppose all actions in support of the Muslims whether in India or abroad. These sections of the Indian public were understandably in favour of the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. But though such sentiments persisted, the overall sympathy of the country and its leaders was towards the Palestinian Arabs and their cause.
The advent of India’s pro-West Asia policy and the Indian response to the Palestinian issue can be traced back to the post World War-I period, during which the Indian attitude was represented and articulated by the Indian National Congress. An examination of the internal situation of India is of particular importance because it helps explains the nature of the responses of the Indian National Congress as well as the extent of its involvement in Palestine question.

Leaders of the Indian National Congress such as Gandhi, Nehru and Maulana Azad were unanimous in their opinion that a country should not be split on the basis of religion. In keeping with this political belief, they supported the drab stand opposing partition of Palestine in the same way as they (the Indian National Congress) opposed the demands of the Muslim League for the creation of Pakistan by partitioning India.

From the 1920s onwards Jawaharlal Nehru utilized the Foreign Department of the Indian National Congress as an agency to oppose British imperial rule in India and abroad, including in West Asia. Though Nehru was sympathetic towards the Jews, he believed that the Arabs were fighting British Imperialism in Palestine. He was of the opinion that the Jews should not only rely on British support but should reach an agreement with the Arabs to safeguard their position in an independent Arab country. To Nehru, the British appeared to be exploiting the differences between the Jews and the Arabs in the same manner as they were promoting communal tension in India.
In 1936, the all India Congress Committee converged its greetings and sympathy to the Arabs in their struggle for freedom. The Indian National Congress observed September 27, 1936, as Palestine Day by holding meetings and demonstrations throughout the country in support of the Arab cause.

A resolution Bombay Citizens full sympathy to the Arabs in Palestine was adopted at a public meeting held under the auspices of Bombay provincial Congress Committee to celebrate Palestine. Sarojini Naidu addressing the audiences there, stated that the fight against imperialism was a world fight and therefore it was the more duty of the exploited people like Indians to sympathizes with the Arabs fighting for independence from British domination.

It was not that the leaders were insensitive towards the plight and suffering of the Jews. In spite of siding with the Arabs of the Palestine issue, they maintained that few good withhold their deep sympathy for the Jews who have undergone centuries of oppression and who were undergoing a very severe trial in Germany. In February 1938, the Indian national Congress condemned the plan for partition of Palestine, protested against the repressive policy of Britain and expressed sympathy with the Arabs by stating that “the congress holds that the proper method of showing the problem by which the Jews and the Arabs are faced in Palestine is by amicable settlement between themselves and appeals to the Jews not to seek the shelter of the British mandatory imperialism”.

1.2 Zionist Congress and Indian National Congress

The first Zionist Congress convened on Sunday, August 29, 1897, in the Basel, Switzerland with the prime objective of preparing a plan as how to colonize Palestine by the European Jewish settlers. The Congress brought together 204 orthodox reform and secular Jewish representatives from fifteen countries including the United States, Algeria, Palestine as well as Western and Eastern Europe. The Congress established as its instrument Zionist organization know as World Zionist organization. Herzl was unanimously elected president of the Zionist organization. The aim of the Zionist organization, as formulated by the first Congress was: “Zionism” strives to create for the Jewish people a “home” in Palestine secured by public law. The Congress contemplates the following means to the attainment of this end:

1. The promotion on suitable lines of the colonization of Palestine by Jewish agricultural and industrial workers.

2. The organization and binding together of the whole of Jewry by means of appropriate institution, local and international, in accordance with the laws of each country.

3. The strengthening and festering of Jewish national sentiment and consciousness.

4. Preparatory steps towards obtaining government consent where necessary to the attainment of Zionism.

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The most important policy requirement of political Zionism was the acquisition of an internationally recognized proclamation to colonize Palestine as for the Indian National Congress is concerned, its leadership was contemplating to liberate India from the British colonial rule. During the colonial period, especially in the later part of the 19th century, few educated Indian from Bombay and Calcutta met in London while preparing for their civil services examination or law. Later in India, these people formed Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885. Almost at the same period in Basle; the Zionist Congress was founded under the leadership of Theodore Herzl, which aimed for the creation of a homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine.\textsuperscript{15}

There has been a basic contradiction between the Zionist Congress and Indian National Congress. While the former is a colonizing movement, the later has a legacy of anti-colonial ethos. These two organizations were totally opposed to each other in their aims and objectives. Since the Indian National Congress was anti-colonial and directed against the Western colonial powers, the Zionist Congress was colonial in nature and sought the protection of the European colonial powers. The INC fought for independence against the colonial rule while the Zionist constantly remained a movement of cooperation with the same powers for the creation of a state for Jews in Asia.\textsuperscript{16}

Zionists intensified their brutal and harsh activities against the Palestinians under the protection of Western powers. To India’s National

\textsuperscript{16} Jansen G.H, \textit{Zionism, Israel and Asian Nationalism}, (Beirut , 1971), pp. 88-100
leaders, the Arab struggle for the preservation of their legitimate rights and retention of their land was a matter of basic importance. The aim behind the Indian National Movement was to expel alien rulers from their land while the Zionists were attempting to gain a foothold in another country from which local inhabitants by force or persuasion would have to be evicted. In this aim the Zionists succeeded. Palestine, which under the Ottoman and British Authority was an Arab majority area, now being converted into a Jewish majority and a reduced Arab minority under the authority of a Zionist state. The Zionists who captured Palestine were in collusion with Western colonialist movement.

Politically, India has always looked upon the West Asian countries as brothers in arms fighting for their Liberation and for the assertion of their legitimate rights against Western imperialism, colonialism and exploitation. The freedom movements in Egypt, Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon, Algeria, Libya and Syria found among Indians and its national leadership an ardent love, sympathy and admiration. The Khilafat movement of the Indian National Congress in the post World War I era and the wide response it evoked in India served to bring India and these countries closer to each other. The leaders of the national movement in India had made conscious efforts to relate our own struggle for freedom with the struggle of peoples in other parts of Asia particularly in West Asia. The relations of certain top leaders and the INC, has been close and cordial with some of the leading leaders and organizations of the Arab national movement, particularly relations with the Egyptians were very strong.

18 Patriot, New Delhi, May 15, 1966
The origin of India’s West Asia policy goes back to the pre-independence years. In 1927, Jawaharlal Nehru participated in the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities in Brussels which left a deep impression on him and brought him into personal contacts with the leaders of the freedom struggles in various countries and lent them a helping hand. In 1928, the All India Congress Committee (AICC) recognizing the Afro-Asian nations struggle for freedom passed a resolution expressing India’s full sympathy with the Arabs. Consequently, Indian National Congress decided to hold a session of Pan-Asiatic Federation in India sometime in 1930. It also sent out letters of invitations to the nationalist organizations of Tunisia, Egypt, and Palestine inviting fraternal delegations to the annual Congress sessions. The Indo-Egyptian links which were forged during this era, proved durable in the post-independence period also. The Egyptian nationalist leader Saad Zaglol and Gandhi had intellectually came very close to each other because of their secular approach to national politics. It was because of this secular outlook that Indian National leaders never reconciled to the transplantation of a Zionist Enclave in Palestine. After independence in 1947, the common aspiration of Economic Progress and political consolidation of India and Arabs brought two people together. In his first broadcast to the nation as leader of the Indian interim government before independence, Nehru expressed his desire for the closest possible relationship between independent India and the Arab nations.

India’s independence in 1947 gave a big boost to the process of national liberation in Afro-Asian countries. Thus, the Indian interest in and support for
their struggle of independence was very helpful to them. Even before the formal proclamation of independence, India hosted the two Asian Relations conference in New Delhi in March 1947 and January 1949. These two conferences contributed a great deal towards bringing the newly independent countries together, especially in the UN.

India offered her good-offices for conciliation whenever peace seemed to be in danger such as in Korea, Suez, and Congo. In 1951, the permanent representatives of Egypt, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Syria joined together to form the Arab-Asian group at the UN. It gradually expanded to twelve countries – Afghanistan, Burma, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen.

It is significant to note that it was this Arab-Asian group which expanded itself to the countries of Africa and gave birth to the powerful Afro-Asian movement in world politics. Thus, Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) emerged on the world scene. The roots of NAM partly lie in the India-West Asian friendship. President Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt, who was the symbol of Arab nationalism and the leader of Arab struggle for independence and identity, was converted to non-alignment by Nehru.\(^{19}\)

Addressing a joint session of the Indian Parliament in 1955, President Nasser stressed the need for close cooperation between Afro-Asian countries to take due place in the world and serve the cause of peace and security. He

declared that Egypt would collaborate with India and other nations in maintaining world peace.\textsuperscript{20}

Our approach is not inimical to any country in West Asia region. It is friendly to all countries, but inevitably our sympathies are with the Arab countries and with Arab nationalism, which represents today the urge of the people. We are convinced that there can be no settlement and no return to normalcy till foreign troops are removed from West Asia.

1.3 Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) and West Asia

Non-Alignment is one of those phenomena of international politics which appeared on the international scene, after the Second World War and which represent an important force in the shaping of the nature of international relations. The idea of non-alignment was conceived by Jawaharlal Nehru, and later with the co-operation of Nasser of Egypt and Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia the movement came into existence and the first conference was held at Belgrade in 1961.\textsuperscript{21}

The concept of non-alignment in India’s foreign policy had greatly influenced the newly independent Afro-Asian group of nations and it contributed to India's distinctly independent image during the years of cold war. India's foreign policy has been described as one of non-alignment between the two Super powers, namely Soviet Union and the United States, as India was keen to keep away from these blocs. Nehru said:\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{quote}
If by any chance we align ourselves definitely with one power group we may perhaps from one point of view do some good but I have not the shadow of doubt that from a large point of view, not only of India, but of the world peace, it will do harm.
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{20} Nehru’s Inaugural Address at the Asian Relations Conference, (New Delhi, March 23\textsuperscript{rd} 1947).
\textsuperscript{21} Sami, Mansur, \textit{Adarn-Al Inhyaz Rehl ala Tariq Bila Malin}, , Centre of Strategic Studies in Al-Ahram, (Cairo,1981), p. 3.
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Because then we lose the tremendous vantage ground that we have of using such influence as we possess and that influence is going to grow from year to year in the cause of world.

He further asserted:\(^{23}\)

I feel that India can play big part and may be an effective part, in helping the avoidance of war. Therefore, it becomes all the more necessary that India should not be lined up with any groups of power which for various reasons are in a sense full of fear of war and prepare for war.

At the Asian-African conference at Bandung Nehru, while asserting own uniqueness and cultural superiority, he lamented: “We are not copies of European or Americans or Russians. We are Asians, and Africans. It would not be creditable for our dignity and new freedom if we were camp-followers of America or Russia or any other country of Europe.\(^ {24}\) The Arab leaders also emphasized the importance of non-alignment for the improvement and strengthening of this movement. King Husain of Jordan said, “I appreciate and respect the founders of Non-alignment movement, Nehru, Nasser and Tito. Today the leaders of NAM should settle all types of conflicts among them, through NAM; therefore, the movement will get the respect from the rest of the world, which will lead NAM to play a very good role in international world system”.\(^ {25}\) Nasser of Egypt one of the founders of NAM stated, “The changes in the international camps do not affect the policy of NAM, but the policy of NAM will always remain solid, unchangeable in which it is based on

\(^{23}\) Ibid., p.570.
humanitarian consciousness of United Nations, whether there are two or three or four camps”.

Many other Arab leaders have supported NAM in one way or the other. Saddam Hussain emphasized on NAM when he said “NAM was formed in the modern century to represent the need of unity for those people who have suffered from the domination, threatening of the colonial powers to their own freedom, wealth, nationality, national cultural heritage and other type of stealing and colonial exploitations. I emphasized on the faith and confidence of NAM for which our people are waiting for.” Michael Aflaq the founder of Baath party in the Arab world observed “The interests of the Arab countries do not lie in a way or another with the western camp or in any other member of it but finally the Arab leaders should follow the policy of non-alignment-escaping any conflict between two super powers”.

The basic reason for independent India adopting the non-alignment as the basis of the foreign policy was to maintain and reinforce India's newly won independence. Nehru and the Government of India were convinced that any alignment would definitely curtail freedom of policy and action in world affairs. Non-alignment was suitable to India's national interests and India’s policy makers were convinced that adherence to this policy of non-alignment was equally in the interests of maintenance and promotion of international peace. Nehru said: “By aligning yourselves with one power, you surrender

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
your opinion, give up the policy you would normally pursue and pursue the policy somebody else wants you to pursue. Non-alignment is a right policy for us to adopt. If we did align we will neither be following the policy based on our ideals inherited from our past or the one neither indicated by our present nor will be able to adopt ourselves to the new policy consequent on such alignment”.

India’s foreign policy which is based on non-alignment had demanded through NAM conferences the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflicts and has also demanded Israel’s unconditional withdrawal from the Occupied Arab Territories, along with the recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians to go back to their own home ‘Palestine’.

India and the Arab world have shared common destiny in the past. In the recent past they have together built a resistance movement, when they were colonized. Indo-Arab national movement was very close affair against the onslaught of European Colonialism. Hence, it was but natural for Indian national movement and its leadership to oppose in all sincerity the British – Zionist colonization of Palestine.