

# A grim future in Israel

India needs to go beyond token homage to the cause of Palestinian freedom



SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

With criminal indictment imminent on charges of corruption, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pulled off a fourth consecutive win in general elections to the Knesset on April 9. Though tied on seats with his main rival, Mr. Netanyahu has a clear pathway towards power in coalition with a bloc of right-wing allies. As with earlier wins, eked out by strongly running against counsels of sanity from the diminishing peace camp, he has pulled the political centre of gravity sharply, yet again, to the ultra-right.

## Sources of support

Two notable triumphs achieved against the tide of global opinion facilitated Mr. Netanyahu's win. In securing these, he counted on the unquestioning – and unthinking – support of the Donald Trump administration in the U.S. and the reservoir of evangelical fervour from which it draws sustenance.

Mr. Netanyahu's opponents within Israel say that Mr. Trump effectively created a publicity video for him with a decree during the late days of the campaign, recognising Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights. This followed

Mr. Trump's gift on the 70th anniversary of Israel's formation last year, shifting the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and consigning the Arab third of the city's population to a future of indefinite occupation.

The comatose peace process, which was never more than a charade enabling the U.S. to keep its coalition of allies in the Arab world, was declared dead then. Even Mahmoud Abbas, the normally acquiescent Palestinian Authority President, has refused all offers to resume talks since.

Despite his professions of hurt innocence at the Palestinian refusal, Mr. Netanyahu has proved them right in every respect. In July 2018, the Knesset enacted a Basic Law declaring Israel the nation-state of the Jewish people. Jerusalem would be its indivisible capital and Hebrew its language. The right to self-determination within the state of Israel would by law be unique to the Jewish people.

This is a law that puts the status of Israel's 1.26 million Palestinian citizens and the estimated 5 million living in the West Bank and Gaza into a permanent limbo. It marks the final fruition of an effort that began in 2007, when the U.S. resumed its token effort to broker a peace after all efforts at re-engineering the regional strategic architecture, beginning with the invasion of Iraq, had failed.

Condoleezza Rice, the U.S. Secretary of the State at the time, records her shock at the precondition set by her Israeli counterpart



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Zitzi Livni, for returning to the talks. Under no circumstances, Ms. Livni insisted, would a peace accord grant any concession to the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, since that would be a mortal danger to Israel's Jewish character.

Ms. Rice took a while to get over the implications of what she heard: "Though I understood the argument intellectually, it struck me as a harsh defence of the ethnic purity of the Israeli state... [and] shocked my sensibilities as an American. After all, the very concept of 'American' rejects ethnic or religious definitions of citizenship. Moreover, there were Arab citizens of Israel. Where did they fit in?"

The hesitancy was very brief since Ms. Rice quickly signed up for the project that had the endorsement of her right-wing fraternity in the U.S. After the George W. Bush administration vanished into history in 2008, Barack Obama sought to dissuade Israel from this insistence on ethnic purity. Mr.

Trump, in his part-comical effort to be all that Mr. Obama was not, has waded on the project of Zionist purity. In tearing up the nuclear deal with Iran, Mr. Trump has also reversed other steps his predecessor took to create a new regional architecture of power through conciliation rather than coercion.

## Strong campaign

Mr. Netanyahu's campaign rhetoric since his debut in politics was often called out for incitement against the Palestinians. He excelled himself this time, vowing in the last days of the campaign to never allow a Palestinian state and to annex parts of the West Bank.

He is also on record telling Knesset colleagues that controlling the entire territory between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean is indispensable "for the foreseeable future". And he has been unapologetic about "living forever by the sword" if that be Israel's need.

The people of Gaza have lived through this experience after the fraudulent Israeli withdrawal of 2005 which converted the densely populated strip into the world's largest open air prison. March 30 marked a year since the people of Gaza began their "great march of return", a mass mobilisation demanding the UN-mandated right of refugees to return home. No less than 70% of the 2 million people in Gaza are refugees from villages and towns razed to establish Israel.

Israel responded to the Gaza

mobilisation with brute force, killing nearly 300 people, including children and paramedics. After an inquiry, a UN Commission identified a pattern of violations of international humanitarian law, possibly amounting to war crimes, and urged individual sanctions against those responsible for Israel's actions in Gaza.

## The view from India

India continues to be among the biggest overseas patrons of the Israeli military-industrial complex. Increasingly, in the public discourse, Israel is portrayed as the role model that a "new India" should emulate in terms of its security posture in a troubled neighbourhood. The cause of Palestinian freedom continues to gain token homage, but the myth that this commitment can be "de-hyphenated" from India's relations with Israel looks increasingly hollow.

A renewal of India's commitment to Palestine should run concurrently with fighting back against the growing expressions of intolerance in political life and the shredding of the fabric of secular democracy. With Israel taking another perilous turn to the right, India's endorsement of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, today the only option to gain justice for Palestine, seems a moral imperative.

Sukumar Muralidharan teaches at the school of journalism, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat