

Growing Ties With Israel

Why Muslims are concerned

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The Island's growing ties with Israel have become a cause for serious concern among many especially within the discriminated and discarded Muslim community which fears that this may spell disaster for them.

This fear emanates from Israel's long record of hostility towards Muslims and its crucial role in the United States led western global campaign demonising Islam and Muslims under the guise of fighting a so called war on terrorism. The situation becomes worse because a small minority of Sinhala nationalists who, openly call for the expulsion of Tamils and Muslims from the country, are now in influential positions while Muslims parliamentarians remain subdued and ineffective under a political system which provides for a democratically elected dictatorship with absolute power and no accountability.

In the recent past ministers, top officials and private sector officials, tourists and many others started visiting Israel while Israeli entrepreneurs began investing in many sectors, besides military ties, demonstrating the flourishing relations facilitated by globalisation and the open economy.

Israel sought to establish ties with Sri Lanka way back in the 1950s. Answering a question on foreign affairs the late premier Mr S.W.R.D. Banarajane said in parliament on August 14 1958 that "on assuming office Israel continued to pressurise to send an Israeli diplomatic representative as agreed by the previous government. Well, I said, "Yes you may do so" Then the question of appointing our representative to Israel arose and I have just laid by for further consideration."

It was during Prime Minister W. Dahanayake's period a non resident ambassador was appointed to Israel in 1958, but he was recalled by Prime Minister Mrs Srimavo Bandaranaike. The Sri Lankan Ambassador to Rome looked after the Israeli affairs during the UNP government between 1965 and 1970.

Deception- an Israeli tool

During this period the Israeli Charge d' Affaires in Colombo was a hyper active person. For example it was just after the June 1967 Israeli aggression on neighbouring Arab countries and I had just started my journalistic career with the now defunct

Independent Newspapers which thrived on communalism and racism. I had seen the Israeli envoy visit this office frequently and spend long hours with Mr D.B.Dhanapala who was in charge of the editorial. They were often joined by Mr Sepala Gunasena, the Owner and Managing Director. During these visits he never failed to meet Dr Gamini Wijewardene, the Editor of English language daily SUN and Mr David Karunaratne the Editor of Sinhala daily DAWASA. It so happened that often the day after the Israeli envoy's meeting with Dr Karunaratne, Dawasa used to carry cartoons ridiculing Islam and Muslims using derogatory words such as "thambiya", in trying to please the Jews. They didn't bother about insulting Muslims - citizens of this country - when using such derogatory terms.

Once Mr Dhanapala asked me whether I would like to go abroad. I was thrilled and said "yes" as going abroad was a dream in those days. Then came the shock when he told me "get ready to go to Israel". Shattered, within seconds I politely turned down the offer in view of the hostility of Israel towards Muslims, its continuous oppression and brutalisation of Palestinians and the damage caused to Jerusalem, Islam's third most important holy place.

Few days later our colleague S.H. Yoonos, Sports Editor of Sun, accepted the offer despite vehement opposition from the community and his hastily arranged flight schedule by Air Ceylon was arranged via Ratmalana, Bombay, Rome and Tel Aviv. He left Ratmalana Airport around 11 am and by 12.30 in the afternoon, even before he reached Bombay, a proof copy of the next day's SUN first page carrying a despatch supposed to have been filed by Yunoos from Tel Aviv stating that the Muslims in Israel were very happy under Israel, was on Dr Wijewardene's table.

We were all shocked only to realise what the Israeli envoy was up to and what he was capable of. Such a fraud was unimaginable in those days when honesty and integrity were an integral part of the Island's intellectual community. This utterly false and deliberately misleading story was not written by Yunoos but by the Israeli legation in Colombo - without his (Yunoos's) knowledge. Few days later when I politely asked Dr Gamini Wijewardene "how could Yunoos write a story about the situation in Israel when he had not even reached the Tel Aviv airport, the always cheerful Dr Wijewardene said with a smile "ask LOKKA"-meaning Dhanapala.

It's well known that Israel has a well established and longstanding policy of exploiting the media to mislead the public. Judging from the number of distorted stories in the local dailies these days one cannot help but suspect that they had successfully penetrated the local media from Mulpita, Medapita and Anthima pita to even junior magazines trying to portray a rosy picture of Israel hiding their never ending criminal records and gross human right violations while at the same time never missing an opportunity to demonise Palestinians.

During the 1970 general elections the United Front made a pledge to expel the Israeli mission in Colombo to attract Muslims votes. Fulfilling her promise Mrs Srimavo Bandaranaike closed down the Israeli mission in Colombo despite threats of an economic boycott by western nations. It was during her time in the mid 1970s the Palestine Liberation Organisation opened its representative office which was elevated to full embassy status in 1982. The Island's fiercely independent and dignified policy and the overall attitude towards Israel was such that in 1979, the Sri Lankan Cricket Team refused to play its match against Israel in the 15 nation qualifying competition in the 2nd Prudential World Cricket Competition in England.

Then came the disastrous July 1983 anti Tamil riots and the government was compelled to deal with the rising Tamil militancy in the north. When both the United States and Britain refused to help the country in its hour of need, President Jayewardene turned to other countries. Israel grabbed the opportunity to help which eventually led to the establishment of an Israeli Interest Section in the United States Embassy in Colombo with David Matnai as its resident head. It was revealed later that he was connected to the Israeli intelligence service, Mossad.

Muslims opposed the move. Leading a delegation, respected senior Muslim politician and Chairman of UNP Dr M.C.M. Kaleel, met President Jayewardene to express Muslim concerns. But dismissing them President Jayewardene stated "well, I will go even to devil to get help. If the Muslims wish they can remain in the government, otherwise they can leave". Muslim parliamentarians were placed in an embarrassing and helpless situation and Foreign Minister A. C. S. Hameed, as foreign minister, was compelled to defend the move or quit. This was one of the reasons why the frustrated Muslims, especially those in the east, turned to Sri Lanka Muslim Congress for a forum to express their views, though the party later ended in a disaster.

To promote these nascent ties, Israeli President Chaim Herzog paid an official visit to Sri Lanka in 1986.

It was proved time and again that Israelis have no special feelings for Sri Lanka which they consider "as an undeveloped and uncivilised country with monkeylike people who are not long out of the trees and should not expect much" as disclosed in the book "By Way of Deception; The Making and Unmaking of a Mossad Officer" by Victor Ostrovsky and Claire Hoy. Insulting Sri Lankans further, on page 128 the author of this book stated as follows;

"Next I was assigned to the high ranking officers who were looking for radar equipment. I was told to take them to the manufacturer in Ashdod named Alta that could do the work. But when he saw their specifications, the Alta representative said, "They're just going through the motions. They are not going to buy our radar"

“Why? I said.

“These specs were not written for these monkeys (referring to Sri Lankans) the man said.”

They were written by a British radar manufacturer called Deca, so these guys already know what they’re going to buy. Give them a banana and send them home. You’re wasting your time.

“Okay, but how about a brochure or something to make them happy?”

The conversation was going on in Hebrew while we all sat together eating cookies and drinking coffee and tea. The Alta rep said he didn’t mind giving them a lecture to make it look as if they weren’t brushed off,” but if we are going to do that, let’s have some fun.”

With that he went into another office for a set of big transparencies of a large vacuum-cleaner system that is used to clean harbours after oil spills. He had a series of colourful schematic drawings. Everything was written in Hebrew, but he lectured in English on this “high capability radar equipment”.

I found it difficult not to laugh. He laid it on so thick, claiming this radar could locate a guy swimming in the water and practically tell his shoe size, his name and address and his blood type. When he’d finished, the Sri Lankans thanked him and said they were surprised at this technological advancement, but that it wouldn’t fit their ships. We knew about their ships. We built them’.

Ostrovosky’s book came out with startling revelations of Sri Lanka’s secret relations with Israel and in view of their seriousness President Ranasinghe Premadasa appointed a presidential commission of inquiry to look into the humiliating information. Among those who gave evidence was the eminent journalist Mervyn de Silva. He stated as follows:

“Considering the post independence record of Sri Lanka, one of the most singular achievements of the Sri Lankan political leadership has been the more or less bi-partisan approach it has adopted on problems of vital national interest in the sphere of foreign policy. However the question of diplomatic relations with Israel has been an exception to this rule and that the post 1978 periods marks a change with the past in the realm of foreign policy”.

“He said that he was of the opinion that the opening of the Israeli Interest Section in Colombo was an unwise step in the face of formal protests and warnings by the leader of the Opposition and the ruling party’s Muslim members led by Dr M.C.M.Kaleel.

There was widening discontent since that time in the Muslim community which had remained up to that time the least politicised of Sri Lanka's three main communities. It was wrong to have assumed that Israel's national interests coincided with Sri Lanka's national interests, and more particularly with Sinhalese interests, and that it was wrong again to have assumed that the Israelis would be satisfied with the unique but humble status of an "interest section", that they would serve our interests faithfully and then politely leave when we ask them to go away.

Mervyn de Silva went on to say that the elementary fact of Israel's foreign policy is that the national interest of Israel is the ultimate test and that the Israelis pursue this with cold blooded calculation, and that it was Israel's "Dream of Asia" and its desire to establish a diplomatic base in India to fill the vacuum between Israel and Burma, which constituted their main objective.

To serve that purpose, Israel accepted the American idea to become an interests section within the US Embassy. The irony is that the U.S. did not want to give us direct help in order not to antagonise India, while India found yet another reason to be hostile to Sri Lanka and its foreign policy".

Finally President Ranasinghe Premadasa closed down the Israeli Interest Section in Colombo on 20 April 1990.

However, secret talks between Israel and Sri Lanka began in 1996 when the then Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar was hospitalized in New Delhi for a kidney transplant and the Israeli ambassador in New Delhi, accompanied by the then Indian Ambassador in Colombo Sivashankar Menon who was earlier the Indian ambassador in Israel before coming to Sri Lanka and currently Foreign secretary in India, visited Mr. Kadirgamar in the hospital.

According to informed sources the Israeli ambassador had visited Mr. Kadirgamar frequently in the hospital and these secret contacts led to the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries in June 2000.

Thus even when there were no formal ties, there was still activity in the military sphere with military delegations visiting Israel and purchasing arms. These ties continue to date and early this year W.M. Seneviratne from the Foreign Service was appointed as the Island's Ambassador to Israel.

The often raised question is what is the guarantee that the Israelis will not use the nationalists and extremists to whip up hostility against Muslims?

This is the reason why the Muslims fear the Israeli presence may harm the existing ties within the communities and further complicate the ethnic conflict. Already there were widespread speculations that Israel played a crucial role in aggravating the split

between the Tamils and Muslims who lived in peace and harmony in the East.

It was under these circumstances Sri Lanka's Foreign Secretary Dr Palitha Kohona visited Israel with a formal greeting from President Mahinda Rajapaksa to Israeli President Shimon Peres, known for his Qana massacre of more than one hundred innocent civilians at the United Nations compound.

During his four day visit Dr. Kohona also visited 'Yad Vashem' the holocaust memorial. But it was sad that Dr Kohona didn't find time to visit villages such as Deir Yassin a stone's throw from the holocaust memorial or Kafr Qassim where Nobel Peace laureate Menachem Begin massacred over 250 Palestinian men, women, children and the aged. It must be remembered that the British government had considered Begin a terrorist and had even offered a reward for his arrest. Jewish terrorists, had even ripped open a pregnant Palestinian woman's stomach and shot at the foetus.

Then came the first high profile visit of Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, accompanied by a team which included his secretary Mahinda Bandusena who was the Island's former ambassador to Israel, in March 2008 where he, perhaps to please the Israelis, accused Palestinians in Syria and Lebanon of training Tamil youths. He also said that the Tamil youths learnt the art of suicide bombing from some Palestinian groups, an accusation yet to be proved.

Ever since Palestinians were thrown into refugee camps more than seven decades ago numerous Palestinian groups were struggling to return to their lands. One among them was the late legendary Palestinian freedom fighter George Habash's Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, PFLP, which is reported to have trained some Tamil youths of Marxist ideology. Therefore it was incorrect to accuse all Palestinians in Syria and Lebanon to have trained Tamil Tigers.

But what was conspicuously absent in Mr. Wickremanayake's speech was the role played by Israel in training both Tamil youths and the Sri Lankan government forces. In this regard once again I like to quote from the book *By Way of Deception – The Making and Unmaking of a Mossad Officer*” page 67 and 68;

“The Israelis also trained elite forces, for both sides-(Tamil militants and the government forces) without either side knowing about the other and helped Sri Lanka cheat the World Bank and other investors out of millions of dollars to pay for all the arms they were buying from them”

In pages 129 and 130 the same book stated;

“Yosy was also looking after a group being trained by the Israelis. But they weren't supposed to meet my people. They were Tamils, bitter enemies of my Sinhalese group”

The Tamils were training at the commando naval base. learning penetration techniques, mining landings, communications and how to sabotage ships similar to the Devora. There were about 28 men in each group, so it was decided that Yosy should take the Tamils to Haifa that night while I took the Sinhalese to Tel Aviv, thus avoiding any chance encounters.

The real problem started about two weeks into the courses, when both the Tamils and Sinhalese-unknown to each other, of course were training at Kfar Sirkin. It is a fairly large base, but even so, on one occasion the two groups passed within a few yards of each other while they were out jogging.

After their basic training routine at Kfar Sirkin, the Sinhalese were taken to the naval base to be taught essentially how to deal with all the techniques the Israelis had just taught Tamils.

It was pretty hectic. We had to dream up punishments or night training exercises just to keep them busy, so that both groups wouldn't be in Tel Aviv at the same time. The actions of this one man (Amy) could have jeopardized the political situation in Israel if these groups had met.

According to local reports Prime Minister Wickremanayake had also noted that Sri Lanka and Israel share a lot of commonalities and both nations have been at the receiving end of terror attacks.

It is difficult to understand how there could be commonalities between Sri Lanka, with a recorded history of more than 2500 years and a civilization based on religious traditions and an agricultural society which produced some of the finest tank building engineering skills, with sixty year old Israel established in the lands robbed by means of violence and terrorism from Palestinians.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert told Mr. Wickremanayake during his meeting that it was forbidden to give in to terrorism. The question is how could the Zionist Jews, god fathers of terrorism, speak about fighting terrorism. Palestinians who lost their homes, their lands, their families, their human rights, ignored by the United Nations and betrayed and abandoned by the Arab dictators, have been struggling to regain all what they lost. Can we call them terrorists?

Ever since the West planted Israel in the heart of Muslim world Israel remains the only source of political instability and misery in the region. Since its establishment Israel, served as the outpost of the Western colonial powers. In 1955 Israel joined Britain and France to invade Egypt.

In June 1967 Israel attacked Egypt, Syria and Jordan and captured Sinai, Gaza strip, West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. Jewish lobbies which rule

the US played a crucial role in the US invasion of Iraq.

Israel failed to abide by United Nations resolutions and so far no measure was taken for its failure to implement UN resolution, because no UN secretary general wanted to lose his job.

Israel maintains a tight grip over the Palestinian territories where building Jewish-only settlements with American money continues in full swing. Their killing spree continues unabated using American supplied F 16 fighter jets, Apache helicopter gun ships, tanks, armoured bulldozers and ground troops.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert slaughtered 120 Palestinians, including a two day old baby, within a week, since 27 February 2008.

What we failed to understand is that despite the comings and goings of Israel the Island's devastating ethnic war, created by the short sighted policies of political parties which only looked at the next general elections and not the next generations, continue to ravage the country.

Once again their failure to solve the ethnic issues brought in, not only Israel, but all sorts of regional and international players to the Island turning the nation into a devastating and bloody playground for big powers certainly not for the benefit of the country.