

# Imran Khan's Kashmir obsession

Projecting himself as a champion of Islamic causes, Pak PM's every foreign policy action is invariably linked to liberating Kashmir



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Many of us in India have an impression of Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan, as being a suave and sophisticated, Oxford educated, and modern minded. He was greatly admired as an outstanding cricketer hero. Imran Khan, however, has many facets.

His marital journeys have been colourful. His first marriage, lasting nine years, was to a British Jewish millionaire heiress, Jemima Goldsmith. His second marriage in 2015, which lasted eight months, was to a Pakistani television journalist Reham Khan. He is now deeply influenced by his third wife, Bushra Bibi, a Sufi mystic. Imran decided to marry Bushra after she predicted that he would become Prime Minister.

Despite his range of spouses, Imran has remained a radical Islamist, telling Pakistani journalists, even in his cricket playing days in the 1980s, that he treated matches with India, not as a sport, but as a *jihad*, waged for the cause of Kashmiri Muslims.

Imran's life, after he retired from first class cricket, was greatly influenced by a fellow Islamist and former ISI Chief, Hamid Gul, who was a great proponent of "liberating" Kashmiris from Indian rule.

Gul believed that he could win the support of Muslims in India, by making the Kashmir issue, a *jihad*, for the believers. Thus, for those who have known of Imran Khan's personality since his cricketer days, his obsession with Kashmir is

nothing surprising, given his rather naive belief that he could fire the mind of the global "Islamic Ummah" against India, to "liberate" Kashmir. It is this obsession, that transcending civilisational (Arab-Turkish- Persian) differences, and sectarian, (Shia- Sunni) antagonisms, Muslims across the world can be united to fulfil his weird ambitions on Kashmir, that has led Imran Khan down the slippery slope, to diplomatic disaster.

Imran has believed that as a virtual Messiah, he could get Islamic countries united against India, under a single banner of backing Pakistani claims on Jammu and Kashmir. Buoyed by what believed were successful meetings with US President Donald Trump, he decided to initially try his luck with Islamic countries like Turkey, Iran and Malaysia, then led by the 93-year-old Mahathir, whose own tenure in office was destined to be short-lived. Imran joined Mahathir and Turkey's Erdogan in seeking to establish a new Islamic grouping, which would inevitably undermine the influence of the 57-member, Saudi dominated Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC).

An enraged Saudi Crown Prince, Salman, told Imran to back off, which he obediently did, in the expectation that the OIC would then back his Kashmir aspirations.

To Imran's disappointment, Prince Salman did not oblige him. Imran, a babe in the woods on global developments, forgot or overlooked diplomatic and geopolitical

realities. He failed to note that after quiet diplomacy by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), two of the most influential countries in the oil rich Gulf Arab States, had already started a process of building bridges with India.

This process commenced with an unprecedented invitation by the



**Militant position** Imran Khan ran a virulent propaganda blitz against India for its recognition of Israel AP

UAE to India to participate in a meeting of the Foreign Ministers of 57 Arab/Muslim countries in Abu Dhabi, in 2019.

Angered and shaken by this honour to India, Pakistan boycotted the OIC meeting. Economic ties between India and the Gulf Arab States were expanding rapidly, with growing Indian oil purchases from Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

India signed a major agreement in 2017 with the UAE, involving the development of its proposed underground, emergency oil storage reserve of 36.87 million barrels of crude oil, in Mangaluru. The UAE's Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) will store about six million barrels of oil in Mangaluru. Saudi Arabia has, in turn, agreed to invest \$60 billion in a large oil refinery in Maharashtra.

## Israel bashing

Imran Khan has long projected himself as a champion of Islamic causes, both within Pakistan and in Islamic forums, by taking a particularly strident and militant position on the ostracisation of Israel, and support for the Palestinian cause. He ran a virulent propaganda blitz against India for its recognition of

Israel, while projecting India as backing Jews against Muslims. His arguments have cut no ice, given India's commitment to a "Two State Solution," involving the creation of a sovereign Palestinian State. He was also ignorant of the educational assistance for young Palestinians in India.

What he also did not realise was that with American encouragement, a number of Arab countries were not only quietly dealing with Israel, but also laying the ground actual diplomatic relations with the Jewish state.

In any case, two crucial Arab states bordering Israel, Egypt and Jordan, had made their peace and have diplomatic ties with Israel for decades now. It was, therefore, no surprise when the UAE and Bahrain announced that they were according recognition to Israel.

The agreement by the UAE and Bahrain with Israel for diplomatic relations with Israel was duly signed in the White House, in the presence of President Trump, whose son-in-law, Jarryd Kushner, had worked behind the scenes, to normalise relations and end hostilities, between Israel and its Arab neighbours. It is expected that

other Arab states like Oman and Kuwait, dependent on American security cover through its fifth fleet, based in Bahrain, will in course of time, follow suit in course of time

Quite clearly Iran and Turkey, which have long-time rivalries with their Arab neighbours, will try to undermine their Arab neighbours, who have sought to normalise relations with Israel, by raising Islamic sentiments against those in the Arab world, who have made or seek to make peace with Israel.

Imran Khan echoed Turkey and Iran, rivals of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, by his virulent condemnation of Israel, immediately after the UAE and Bahrain recognised and established diplomatic relations with Israel. He remarked: "If Pakistan accepted Israel and ignored the oppression of the Palestinians, we will have to give up Kashmir as well, then". He added that this was not something Pakistan could do. Every action and foreign policy decision that Imran Khan takes or talks about is linked, not to the merits of the case, but to his obsession with India.

*The writer is a former High Commissioner to Pakistan*

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