

KASHMIR OBSERVER

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KO VIEW

SCO hope

Will Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan visit India to attend Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting? The question has become a subject of some media speculation in India considering the relations between the two nations have slumped to their new low following New Delhi's abrogation of Article 370 on August 5 which granted Kashmir its autonomous place under Constitution. So, it looks unlikely that Khan will come. But Pakistan foreign minister has kept some suspense alive by saying they will wait for the invite to come first. If anything, it shows that Islamabad has kept the options open and there's a likelihood that Khan could even decide to come. How and under what circumstances is not clear yet.

India is unlikely to make any concession that can give Khan an excuse to visit. It has faced very little global pressure over its move to withdraw Kashmir's autonomy. Though United Nations Security Council has met twice over Kashmir since, no statement has been issued against India's August 5 move. True, New Delhi has faced some backlash over the extended siege and communication blackout in Kashmir, but that is that. In fact, this criticism too has been largely muted. India, however, did face a stringent scrutiny of its revocation of Article 370 in international media. But that makes little difference unless the major powers also share a similar opinion and it informs their policy action too. So, Pakistan can expect little Kashmir-related action from India that can pave the way for Khan to travel to New Delhi.

However, in recent past, like the foreign governments, Islamabad has also sought lifting of siege and communication blockade in Kashmir as a kind of Confidence Building Measure. And with New Delhi finally taking some steps in this direction, will Pakistan treat it as a step towards normalcy and see it as a sufficient reason to attend SCO summit? Again it's too early to tell. As if now, Pakistan wants the world and New Delhi to know it's non-committal. Things, however, will become clear in near future. And it appears that no matter what New Delhi does or does not do with regard to Kashmir, it will hardly be sufficient for Khan to contemplate a visit.

There is thus little hope that India, Pakistan relations will improve in near future. That is unless something dramatic takes place that ushers in a marked change policies of the two countries. Modi and Khan owe it to the people of their respective countries to help change the dynamic of India, Pakistan relations. And time for it is now.
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OTHER OPINION

The quest to sell Air India

The government has yet again announced an attempt to privatise Air India. This is a good idea; it always was; a government has no business running an airline. Worse, running a loss-making airline that is loaded with debt (around Rs 60,000 crore) definitely falls in the category of a moral hazard. Can the State then, in all conscience, allow a private airline to go bust?

The deal, this time, is sweeter — which isn't surprising because there were no takers last time. In summary, the government will sell its entire stake, not just 76% like it planned to last time, and also all of its budget airline subsidiary, Air India Express, and 50% of a ground handling unit; transfer about Rs 23,000 crore of debt (a full Rs 10,000 crore lower than what it wanted to transfer last time); allow sale-and-lease back of aircraft; and require bidders to have a net worth of only Rs 3,500 crore (down from Rs 5,000 crore). Most of these are welcome changes. No one wants to be in a joint venture with the government in a business like aviation (and definitely not in Air India with all its unions). It is unfair to expect buyers to take on too much debt from the airline. Allowing sale-and-lease back opens up a financing option that most airlines use for capital. And a lower net worth threshold will expand the universe of potential buyers. Sure, buyers may not want to buy part of the ground handling subsidiary, but what's on offer this time is all of a proper airline. Better still, Indian airlines that are bidding will not have to meet the net worth criterion. Foreign airlines can bid as long as their bids are in keeping with India's rules governing foreign investment in airlines (though that was the case the last time too).

Will this get investors to bite? That depends on what the buyer is looking for, and its ability to fund and manage a turnover. Air India, along with Air India Express, has 146 aircraft, of which it owns 82, but its fleet isn't contemporary. It has slots, although it has given away many on key routes to foreign airlines. It has a brand, but one that needs to be refurbished. It is also unclear whether the buyer will have the freedom to prune the number of employees, although the airline now has only 14,000-15,000 employees. The sweeter deal signals the government's intent. But it now needs a buyer with the intent to close.
Hindustan Times

Trump's 'Peace Plan': The Farce, The Fraud And The Fury

US arrogance towards the Palestinians will backfire, bigly.

MARWAN BISHARA | ALJAZEERA

The Trump administration has finally lifted the curtains on the final act of its Middle East diplomacy by revealing the long-awaited, ahem, "peace plan" in a surrealistic White House celebration.

I will admit from the outset that I cannot write about it with a straight face, considering the absurdity of the last three years of Trump policies towards Israel and Palestine.

To call it a "peace plan" is to do injustice to the infamous "peace process" and its many failed "peace plans". It is so much worse, that a better term for it would be an "assault on peace".

Everything about the plan is farcical.

Its pompous name, the "Deal of the Century"; its unfit author, Jared Kushner, a fanatic Zionist supporter of illegal Israeli settlements on Palestinian land; its premise, "when humiliation does not work, more humiliation will"; its bizarre framing as a lovefest between the American and Israeli right; and its absurd substance, which punishes the victims and rewards the aggressors.

In the three decades of the American-led "peace process", successive administrations at least pretended to engage, consult or listen to the Palestinian side, even when doing Israel's bidding.

But since occupying the White House, the Trump administration has, on Netanyahu's advice, unashamedly acted to permanently deprive the Palestinians of their participation in the negotiations - and deprive them of their land, liberty and dignity.

And today, the Trump administration, in complicity with the Netanyahu government, is taking the root causes of the protracted conflict in Palestine, repackaging them and presenting them as a permanent solution.

Theatre of the absurd

The devil is not in the detail; it's in the headlines of Trump's initiative.

So, to resolve the problem of the illegal Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian lands, Trump wants them legalised and recognised as part of Israel.

To resolve the problem of Israel's illegal annexation of occupied Jerusalem, Trump wants it recognised as the capital of Israel and Israel alone.

To deal with the question of Palestinian refugees and their inalienable right of return and compensation, Trump wants to prevent their return.

To solve the problem of violent, repressive and inhumane Israeli control over the Palestinians, Trump wants to see that extended indefinitely. Even after the Palestinians meet all the new conditions imposed on them, they would still be at the mercy of Israel's security forces.

The Trump plan tramples over United Nations Security Council resolution 242, which requires Israel to return to its 1967 borders (or to their approximate, according to past US initiatives), and redraws the borders to suit Israel's settlements and facilitate its control.

Instead of ending Israel's apartheid system in Palestine, Trump wants to see it continue under a different name, at least until his promise for a provisional Palestinian "state" is fulfilled, one which will have no sovereignty or independence.

Basically, Trump envisions half a Palestinian state on half of the West Bank, but only after the Palestinians combat terrorism and recognise Israel as a Jewish state extending over some 90 percent of historic Palestine.

Trump's embrace of apartheid in the holy land, as a pragmatic even indispensable prerequisite for "peace" and stability adds insult to Palestinian injury.

And lest we forget, the Trump administration



has already closed down the office of the Palestine Liberation Organization in Washington, suspended aid to the Palestinian Authority, transferred the US embassy in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and repealed US recognition of the refugee issue by suspending all funding to UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

The fraud behind the farce

Future generations will probably remember nothing of significance from Trump's 80-page plan, but they will recall the soap opera behind the "Deal of the Century": how an inexperienced but ambitious man-boy named Jared manipulated his father-in-law, the powerful president, to support the fraudulent Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to stay in power, and help Israel maintain all it gained illegally through war and violence.

If Jared cannot solve the Middle East conundrum, Trump remarked last month, no one can. He actually said that! A slap in the face to countless able American diplomats.

At any rate, no one really believes Trump is acting deliberately, fairly or altruistically. No one. I suppose not even the president himself.

Nor does any reasonable person believe that the talented Mr Netanyahu is anything but a fraud - certainly not Israel's own attorney general, who indicted him on fraud charges just weeks before the US House of Representatives impeached Mr Trump over the abuse of power.

What a great couple they make! What a match! Netanyahu has obviously a lot to gain, but what is in it for Trump?

The president is clearly after the vote of evangelical Christians, especially after some have denounced him recently; and of course, he is after the support of rich radical Zionists like Sheldon Adelson.

And Trump is seemingly buying into the ego trip - or trap - laid out for him by radical evangelicals and Zionists who have designated him a Jewish Messiah, destined to save not only the Jewish people, but the world.

Being a messiah certainly beats being a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. It has a nicer ring to it.

So it is opportunism, populism and cynicism all wrapped in one deal, as Trump sacrifices whatever is left of US credibility on the international scene to get himself a second term - and Netanyahu a fourth.

Indeed, as one prominent former US diplomat remarked, never has an American president conceded to a foreign leader so much, so quickly, for so little, until the self-declared "great dealmaker" appeared on the scene.

And so the farce continues: the blatant lies, the obvious complicity, the offensive deceit - and the disastrous consequences.

It is so outrageous that even leading American Zionist officials and diplomats, who long stood behind unconditional support for Israel, feel eerie and anxious about Trump's "disastrous" plan.

It is as tragic as it is laughable. But it will also prove dangerously disruptive for the region and America's standing in it.

Arrogance before the downfall

The Trump administration is banking on the more vulnerable or the more cynical Arab regimes to support and finance its plan despite its unbearable shortcomings.

That is why the plan is modelled, at least structurally, on the Bush administration's 2003 road map for peace that was conceived after the US invasion and occupation of Iraq to ensure Israeli supremacy and Arab support.

Like Trump and Netanyahu, President George W Bush, in complicity with Israeli then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, also envisioned a Palestinian pseudo-state in the form of self-governing autonomy, somewhere down at the end of a long road of Palestinian concessions and humiliation.

It was the sort of bait necessary for Arab and European leaders to justify their support - or at least non-rejection of the plan to their people. And it was the sort of trick that allowed Sharon to claim moderation and concession despite opposition from his fanatic settlers.

Bush hoped Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat would be gone before the final implementation of the final phases and replaced with the "moderate" Mahmoud Abbas.

Today, Trump hopes to see the 84-year-old Abbas, now considered an obstructionist, also gone and replaced by someone more amenable to US dictates.

Meanwhile, Trump has been deluded into thinking that if the US cannot write off the Palestinians altogether, at least it could pay them off with Arab money.

Kushner's Bahrain summit last year was designed to pave the way for that kind of Gulf investment in his "Deal of the Century".

Billions in of dollars may buy the Trump administration some time and some leverage, but that will be short-lived, as such bribery proved in the past.

Sooner or later, the Trump plan will find its way to the same place where the Bush plan ended, the dustbin of history.

Subservient Arab dictators will eventually fall but the people will endure, and they will not be so forgiving to American and Israeli arrogance. Their pent-up fury will come out sooner rather than later.

So, before president Trump gets too comfortable in his new appointment as messiah, he should familiarise himself with basic biblical wisdom: arrogance leads to downfall.

The Demonisation of Journalists Must End

LEON WILLEMS

Five years ago this month, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi stormed the Paris offices of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and, in a nightmare lasting just minutes, killed 12 people. In the days that followed, millions marched in France and elsewhere to express solidarity with the murdered journalists.

For Europeans, the Charlie Hebdo killings represented the first mass attack on journalists close to home. #JeSuisCharlie ("I am Charlie") became one of the most popular Twitter hashtags ever. Press freedom was trending.

Since then, however, the fight to defend journalistic freedom has flagged, and public mobilization has proved to be fleeting - including in the case of Charlie Hebdo. In January 2019, the magazine's staff complained in an editorial that people no longer wanted to hear about the shootings. "Perhaps you should move on!" they were reportedly told.

This apparent indifference has a lot to do with what many believe Charlie Hebdo represents: the freedom to express yourself in a way that might provoke others. And this freedom has come under even more pressure in the last five years.

Such a trend is evident in the responses directed at journalists who shine a light on unpopular or inconvenient facts and opinions. They are exposed to a daily barrage of attacks on their integrity, including by im-

portant political leaders. In the United States, President Donald Trump has repeatedly referred to journalists who are critical of him as the "enemy of the people." And at a press conference two years ago, Czech President Miloš Zeman brandished a replica of an AK-47 inscribed with the words "for journalists." By indulging in such behavior, these and other leaders normalize attacks against members of the press.

And members of the press are very much under attack. According to Reporters Without Borders, 49 journalists worldwide were murdered in 2019 because of their work. (The annual average for the last five years is even higher, at 81.) In addition, the number of journalists who were arbitrarily detained rose to 389 last year. Threats on social media, against female journalists in particular, are an everyday occurrence, and journalists are routinely beaten up, teargassed, or robbed of their equipment.

Violence against journalists is an assault on an essential pillar of democracy. And as long as these attacks continue, it is not "time to move on" at all.

On the contrary, it's time for European Union leaders to wake up and better protect journalists at risk. Efforts like the PersVeilig initiative in the Netherlands, in which police, public prosecutors, the journalists' union, and editors collaborate to counter violence against journalists, should be implemented across Europe. Politicians who verbally attack journalists must be held accountable, and media organizations should do more to show solidarity with colleagues at rival outlets.

More generally, there is an urgent need for greater awareness and a stronger public defense of journalism's value for society. And there have been successful examples of this in recent years. The murders of journalists Ján Kuciak in Slovakia and Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta sparked mass protests that forced these two countries' prime ministers to resign. In addition, the investigation by United Nations Special Rapporteur Agnès Callamard into the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a columnist for The Washington Post, raised public awareness of the criminal behavior of the Saudi Arabian leadership.

These cases needed - and re-

ceived - long-term attention. But who has heard of Norma Sarabia from Mexico, or Eduardo Dizon from the Philippines, who also paid the ultimate price for practicing their profession? Nigerian journalist Jones Abiri went to prison for the second time last year on trumped-up charges, while a Nicaraguan photographer recently told us that he has stopped working as a journalist for the time being, because it meant risking his life every day. Who is standing up for these lesser-known figures?

The justice system should give higher priority to prosecuting attacks against journalists, yet a series of relevant resolutions adopted by the UN General Assembly and Security Council has yielded limited results. A better way to end judicial inaction would be to establish an internationally mandated investigation committee, which also would clear the way to resolving the hundreds of cold cases of journalists killed for doing their job.

Dozens of journalists are murdered every year, and in nine out of ten cases, the perpetrators walk free. As long as such impunity exists, it pays to kill journalists.

Five years ago, we were all Charlie. Today, let us also be the hundreds of other journalists who have been killed since then.

Leon Willems is Director of Free Press Unlimited.