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Report – Webinar

**Centre for Middle East & Africa (CMEA) in collaboration with
Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS),
University of Peshawar**

“Evolving Situation in the Middle East: Implications for the Region”

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The Centre for Middle East & Africa (CMEA) in collaboration with Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), University of Peshawar organized a webinar titled “Evolving Situation in the Middle East: Implications for the Region” on September 2, 2020.

The distinguished panel of speakers included: Dr. Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi, Director IPCS; Ambassador Javed Hafeez, Former Pakistani diplomat; Dr. Farah Jan, Lecturer, University of Pennsylvania and Dr. Syed Qandil Abbas, Associate Professor, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad.

In her introductory remarks, Ms. Amina Khan, Director CMEA said that there exist a plethora of issues in the Middle East, all of which are extremely significant and highly relevant to both the regional and global political milieu. There is the oil crisis, conflicts in Syria and Yemen, massive refugee exodus, the longstanding Saudi-Iran rivalry, the role and relevance of OIC in uniting the Muslim world, the possibility of a nuclear arms race in the ME, forging of new alliances as well as the most recent and unique challenge of the coronavirus pandemic; all of these issues contribute to the evolving situation in the Middle East. Fault lines within the Middle East are several and remain constantly evolving which makes it an ideal region for inquiry, research and debate. While issues revolving around growing economic disparity, displaced populations, land disputes, sectarian conflicts and ethnic rivalries warrants serious pondering and discussion – by far the issue of Palestine and plight of the Palestinians stands out as a unique example of occupation and apathy.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict dating back seven decades has often been used as a litmus test of unity among the Arab and non-Arab Muslim states of the region and beyond. Thus, it came as a blow to most countries within the Muslim world when the UAE and Israel signed a peace agreement last month formalizing their bilateral relationship. However at the same time, this development has also garnered a divided reaction from within the Arab world, with some states considering to follow the UAE in officially recognizing Israel while others have rebuked the move as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause.

In these trying times, this development has once again highlighted that the ME remains in a continuous state of political insecurity which is both internal and external in nature. This

particular move in the backdrop of the overall regional situation, raises a number of important questions such as

- Will the Arab states continue to seek the security umbrella of global players such as the United States?
- Will other Muslim countries follow the UAE in making peace with Israel?
- Will Israel continue to annex Palestinian territories despite agreeing to suspend this action in its accord with the UAE?
- How will the upcoming US elections feature into the Middle Eastern regional situation?
- What role should the OIC play in light of these recent developments?

In his welcome remarks, Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry said that in the first two decades of the present century no region has been affected more than the Middle East. He named four dynamics which included: the aftermath of 9/11 when Iraq was invaded, the so-called Arab Spring which soon transformed into a regime change agenda and country after country got destabilized particularly Syria and Libya, the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia particularly manifested in the Yemen civil war have also added to the woes of the region and now the Palestinian crisis has taken a new dimension as there is a rethink in some of the Arab countries about Israel. All this has obvious implications for Pakistan and the region. The Middle East region has suffered from terrorism and extremism and while it has made modest successes, terrorism has not yet been fully conquered due to political instability. Terrorists like Al-Qaeda and others are still trying to find more space and economies suffer while the region is politically unstable even more so in the wake of Covid19 where the world economy as a whole has shrunk. Thirdly, the unity of the Muslim World has been marred by intra-regional conflicts. Lastly, the plight of the Kashmiris, Palestinians and other people under foreign occupation has gained only a few sympathizers which should reflect heavily on the collective consciousness of the region.

Ms. Fatima Raza, Research Associate, CMEA, ISSI, gave a presentation on the occasion where she talked about the recent UAE Israel peace deal, the factors that contributed towards it, the world reaction and Pakistan's stance on the issue. She said on August 13th this year, Israel and

the United Arab Emirates (UAE) signed a peace agreement called the ‘Abraham Accord’ which was brokered by the US administration. US President Donald Trump announced that this pact for ‘normalization’ of ties between the two countries will ensure bilateral cooperation through investment, tourism, direct flights, security, telecommunications, technology, energy, healthcare, culture, the environment. This makes UAE, the first Gulf state and the third Arab country to develop ‘normal’ diplomatic relations with Israel. While the UAE officials propped up the ‘suspension’ of further annexation of Palestinian territories by Israel. However, PM Netanyahu said a few days after the agreement the annexation of territories is not completely off the table.

There seem to be several reasons for this agreement however, this is merely a formalisation of existing ties as the two had already been establishing linkages in secret. Back in 2018, Israeli Minister for Culture & Sports visited Abu Dhabi at a sports event in the first state visit to the Emirates. Technology transfers and security ties have existed for quite some time. UAE seeks security cover of the United States and a powerful regional state like Israel due to its apprehension towards Iran's ambitions. Many say that the deal is more about limiting Iran’s regional foothold than it is about the cause of Palestine but it can be perceived as fulfilling both purposes simultaneously.

Trump’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic at home and maximum pressure campaign to bend Iran have fallen flat which has put his re-election to the oval office in serious danger. The deal also comes as a boon to Prime Minister Netanyahu who is dealing with corruption charges and a shaky coalition at home. The country has seen three inconclusive elections this year. This deal may have been forged in hope of resolving the longstanding Palestinian conflict and bringing peace to this region but there are still concerning reports emanating from the Gaza strip and the West Bank which are hard to ignore. Predictably, the move has garnered severe backlash from several Muslim countries particularly Iran and Turkey. This development also accentuates the internal fissures of the Muslim world where Gulf and Arab states. An official statement from the Pakistan Foreign ministry read that: “Pakistan has an abiding commitment to the full realization of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, including the right to self determination. Pakistan’s approach will be guided by our evaluation of how Palestinians’ rights and aspirations are upheld and how regional peace, security and stability are preserved.”

Dr. Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi said that even if out of 57 muslim countries 56 join the club and they recognize Israel, the latter would still be looking towards Pakistan because Pakistan's position in Israel's policy parameters is very significant. Pakistan's nuclear capability is one of its prime strengths. UAE at the moment has developed economic ties and they are moving quite fast towards Israel. However this is a kind of appeasement policy that we can equate with what had happened in 1939 regarding the great powers appeasement policy towards Hitler. Palestinian issue has more of an ideological factor and it is more of a human rights situation in which we need to support the Palestinians for their motherland. The same situation is also prevalent in Kashmir as with Palestine. Both issues have been blackened out from the international scene because people are more concerned with elevating their economic ties. So is the case with UAE's approach towards Tel Aviv. If other countries follow UAE's footsteps it would further isolate the Palestinians. We need to give an impression to the Israelis that all the Muslim world is behind Palestine. Currently, the Israelis have the opposite impression. Pakistan is considered as one of the leaders of the Muslim World and that Pakistan's strong statement about not recognizing Israel has discouraged many Arab states from following in UAE's footsteps.

Dr. Farah Jan focused on the Pakistan-Saudi relationship, where she talked about the economic factors of this alliance which she said had given birth and might also eventually be the cause of strain in the future as well. She said that shifting alliances in the Middle East are taking place and these new alliance structures are concerning, particularly with what is going on in case of Turkey and Greece in the Mediterranean today. These shifts in alliances will have implications for Pakistan and the region at large as well. Pakistan- Saudi ties have been described by former Saudi intelligence Chief, Prince Turki bin Faisal when he noted that the alliance between the two countries is probably one of the closest relationships in the world between any two countries without a formal official treaty which is true to a certain extent. The relationship between the two countries is structured on three key pillars: number one religion; number two, the economic aspect of it and number three the defense and military ties. However the religious homogeneity factor on its own is not sufficient in explaining the persistence and endurance of this relationship and the economic and security aspects have always been critical for this alliance. If we look at the history of this relationship it was the migrant labor force or the migrant labor needs of Saudi Arabia that initiated this alliance and it was the Kingdom's defense and security requirements

that further cemented this partnership over the last few decades. Thus based on this account the alliance is transactional in nature and will remain that at least for the foreseeable future.

Data that was released recently by the State Bank of Pakistan indicated that the inflow of remittances from overseas workers has remained high despite the ongoing Covid19 crisis. Pakistan received about 5.4 billion dollars in remittances from Saudi Arabia and about 4.7 billion in remittances from the UAE. Keeping these figures in mind these two states are quite crucial for Pakistan despite whatever is happening in the region. However it should be kept in mind that with the shifts that are taking place in the Middle Eastern economies specifically with regards to the downward trend that we see with Covid19 affecting these economies along with the global oil crisis now the workers in the Gulf countries particularly in Saudi Arabia are under the risk of losing their jobs. The question which arises is how will this affect the alliance, if path labor is no longer required in Saudi Arabia. We have also seen since 2017, the Kingdom has been going through major social economic and political transformations. These domestic social changes are coupled with economic reforms and shifts from an oil-based economy to a production and manufacturing based sector. The aim behind these measures is simply to reduce unemployment in the Kingdom and the focus again is more on Saudi labor than foreign labor so if trends like this continue the need for Pakistani labor is going to diminish. Traditional alliances that we have seen during the Cold War and even Post-Cold War have shifted away from Saudi Arabia based on ideological and political differences and Qatar is the best example of this. Turkey and Iran both have been quick to grab Saudi allies and regional interests of Saudi Arabia. The Muslim World today is divided into a multi-polar world. The fact responsible for this multi-polar Muslim world lies mainly in the resurgence of Turkey as a stronger power. Ankara is now a significant power player with the ambition of taking over pre-established order and is pushing for fundamental transformation of the geopolitics of the Muslim world the question is which side will Pakistan align with particularly if Pakistani labor force is no longer needed and will be replaced with local labor forces in the Gulf states.

Ambassador Javed Hafeez outlined how the Middle East due to its strategic location and resources has been at the hub of interaction and rivalries. The concept paper says that the Middle East due to its location and due to a rich energy of resources has become the hub of international interaction. The Middle East has also been dubbed as an area which has been in turmoil for a

long time particularly since the rebellions started in 2011. What started out as a competition for influence between two powers that is Saudi Arabia and Iran in the region now includes Turkey which was there in Syria. One thought that peace in Yemen could be the key to the overall peace in the region. But now that does not seem likely. During the current financial year the financial situation in the Arab countries has been quite tight. Poverty in the region may actually be four times greater than what was assumed earlier. In the year 2011 when the rebellions started in the context of Arab Spring the percentage of absolutely poor people was 2.7 and it increased to 5 in 2015 within a span of four to five years. The current financial year has been particularly bad because of the low oil prices because of the coronavirus and continued wars. In Saudi Arabia the VAT has now been increased to 15 percent amidst a huge budget deficit this year.

The Arab league and GCC are almost dysfunctional. The thinking of Arab leaders and the Arab people is quite divergent particularly when it comes to Palestine and relationship with Israel. The impact of all this on the region, particularly from the Pakistani point of view or influence now since Turkey has also joined the problem, has become more complicated because the financial situation in the Middle East has resulted in Indians, Pakistanis and other vulnerable foreigners ejected from the Gulf region. These include even highly paid professionals. Another very serious impact of this is that most of the Syrian refugees have not been able to send their children to school since 2011 so there is a whole generation of illiterate children growing up in Syria. As the US is thinking about reducing its presence in the Middle East, a vacuum has been created by India and Israel in the Middle East from the security point of view. Reconstruction in Yemen and Syria would take a long time and it will also be a drain on the GCC member states budgets. Even though a recovery may start, the pre-2010 state of prosperity for these countries is highly unlikely.

Dr Syed Qandil Abbas elaborated upon the geographical and historical significance of the Middle Eastern region, being the birthplace of three transcendent religions. He said that the evolving situation in the Middle East can be understood in different contexts and backgrounds. Enormous deposits of oil have made the Middle East more important than ever. Similarly the creation of Israel has made this region volatile and explosive. Moreover, the 1979 Islamic Revolution made Iran the center of gravity for this region. Based on these backgrounds and the recent agreement between Israel and UAE, a new layer of complexity has been added to the

ongoing conflicts in the region especially if we consider conflict in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, Lebanon and Palestine which have been made more critical in the context of the Israel-UAE agreement. One of the major objectives of Israel is to bring out the Zionist regime from political isolation of more than seven decades. Moreover Israel is in search of stronger regional allies that bolster its position against Iran. Through this deal, Israel can indirectly influence other regions as well including South Asia, particularly if an India, UAE and Israel triangle emerges. This will pose serious challenges for Pakistan keeping in view that Pakistan is already facing complexities of presence of Israel in the neighborhood especially in occupied Kashmir. Although the Abraham agreement has been met with both praise and criticism by different countries and public opinions but pursuance of the objectives of this deal will be very critical and crucial.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman Board of Governors ISSI, concluded the webinar. He said that we have today discussed a very topical issue and it is clear from what we have heard that we are talking of a region which has been in the throes of instability, wars, ethnic as well as religious tensions. In the deal between UAE and Israel brokered by the US- the main actor the Palestinians are not present. It is like hamlet play without the Prince of Denmark so it cannot be called a peace deal. Secondly, to describe it as Abraham accord is also a bit jarring to politicize religion. The country which has gained the most is Israel because it got an ingress in the Islamic flank of countries, without giving up anything. According to my assessment there has not much gain for UAE except prospects of more trade tourism and transfer of technology. Meanwhile, bombing of Gaza continues. If you go by the past experience, similar deals by Egypt and Jordan also did not produce any positive results and have naturally been rightly rejected by the Palestinians. It is also an issue which involves the sanctity of the United Nations resolutions. Pakistan has rightly rejected this deal and upholding the sanctity of the UN Resolution both in case of Palestine and Kashmir is a prerequisite for any settlement that could be called a genuine peace team instead of rhetoric and half-baked agreements.

Q & A

During the Q&A session, questions asked were pointed towards how both Saudi Arabia, UAE and other states are trying to envisage a situation where their dependence on oil can be replaced by a broad-based economic economy and they are already moving in that direction. If that is the

case in terms of the process, we see UAE has to a greater extent reduced its dependence on oil and has gone further and far ahead with respect towards a broad-based economy. What would be the impact of the UAE- Israel agreement on UAE's relationship with Pakistan.

The answers included how particularly focusing on the economic and technological aspect of the relationship a few factors need to be considered. One of them is the US election in November. If the US administration changes, then a shift could be seen. If Trump is not re-elected and the Biden administration comes into power there will probably be a shift in UAE and other Gulf positions towards Pakistan.