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BRICS Without East Jerusalem

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The 43-page Xiamen Declaration issued at the end of the ninth BRICS summit in early September marks an interesting shift concerning Israel. In paragraph 42, it makes the usual references to “relevant” UN resolutions, the Madrid Principles, the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, and “previous agreements” and calls for “a just, lasting and comprehensive solution” to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Declaration calls for the creation of “an independent, viable, territorially contiguous Palestinian State living side by side in peace and security with Israel” – but contains no reference whatsoever to East Jerusalem.

The BRICS organization, which is comprised of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, represents over 40% of the global population, and its collective economy accounts for over one-fifth of global GDP. Two of the countries are permanent members of the UN Security Council and the other three are aspiring to be. BRICS is thus a major world power bloc.

Initially, the BRICS countries were concerned solely with developmental issues and did not address the Middle East at all, let alone the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Things began to change when South Africa joined as a full member at the Sanya Summit in April 2011. Stating that they “are deeply concerned with the turbulence in the Middle East,” the leaders hoped for “peace, stability, prosperity and progress.” Popular protests in the Arab world were more ominous than the Israeli-Palestinian stalemate.

The Palestine question reared its head in March 2012 when the BRICS leaders met in New Delhi for their fourth summit. They urged both sides “to take constructive measures, rebuild mutual trust and create right conditions for restarting negotiations, while avoiding unilateral steps.”

This moderate tone changed dramatically in March 2013 when South Africa hosted the summit. The Durban Declaration made explicit reference for the first time to East Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state. In addition to the usual, it called among other things for a two-state solution including the creation of “a contiguous and economically viable Palestinian state, existing side by side in peace with Israel, within internationally recognized borders, based on those existing on 4 June 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital.”

Since its return to the international arena, post-apartheid South Africa has been at the forefront of the international campaign against Israel and has pushed or facilitated a variety of anti-Israeli statements, actions, and resolutions. Just days before the September 11 attacks, Durban hosted the UN conference against racism that singled out Israel for vilification. Thus, as BRICS host, Pretoria was able to flag its position on East Jerusalem, and the other BRICS leaders signed up. (A reference to East Jerusalem also appeared in early 2010 when South Africa was part of the three-member IBSA group, with Brazil and India the other two members.)

Members of the BRICS countries have indeed been more sympathetic towards the Palestinians than Israel. China and India did not normalize relations with Israel until January 1992, and the erstwhile USSR did not have diplomatic relations with Israel between June 1967 and October 1991. Only Brazil has had formal ties with it since the late 1940s. Hence, others joined Pretoria’s chorus on East Jerusalem.

The political status of Jerusalem has been controversial ever since the UN partition plan of 1947, which suggested it be an international city. The global community does not recognize West Jerusalem, which has been part of Israel since May 1948, as the country’s capital. Most countries, including the US, have their embassies in Tel Aviv.

At the same time, the city remains the de facto capital of Israel and is home to all the symbols of the state and its sovereignty such as the prime minister’s residence, the Knesset (the parliament), and the Supreme Court. The presentation of credentials by foreign ambassadors accredited to Israel, including Arab-Muslim ambassadors such as those from Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey, takes place in Jerusalem, not Tel Aviv.

Moreover, there are no UN resolutions or plans declaring the city the capital of the Palestinian state. The Oslo and other bilateral agreements merely indicate that the final political status of the city will have to be resolved through negotiations and accommodation.

The core of the Jerusalem issue lies in the Old City, which houses sites holy to all three Abrahamic faiths. The city is not a Berlin, to be divided or partitioned, but can only be shared through accommodation and compromise. Outside intervention in favor of one party, in this case the Palestinians, only makes the problem more intractable.

The Israeli government has to take its share of responsibility for the East Jerusalem controversy. For example, until the UNESCO resolution of April 2016, which questioned Jewish links to Jerusalem, the Netanyahu government was indifferent to international shifts. Even countries that were friendly towards the Jewish state voted with the Arab-Islamic countries. Israel's post-resolution anger could not hide its diplomatic sloppiness.

Meanwhile, over the past decade, East Jerusalem became integral to India's engagements with the Middle East and figured in major policy statements and bilateral declarations. The reference to Jerusalem was maintained even after the change of government in India when the rightwing Hindu nationalist BJP-government replaced the Congress Party, which has been sympathetic towards the Palestinians since the early 1920s.

Ever since his first BRICS summit in Fortaleza in July 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has included East Jerusalem. As late as April of this year, East Jerusalem figured in the statement of Middle East envoys of BRICS countries hosted by India. The same formulation could be seen in Delhi's engagements with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and others.

But a major shift occurred in May of this year, shortly before Modi's July visit to Israel. With Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas standing by his side, Modi called for "a sovereign, independent, united and viable Palestine, co-existing peacefully with Israel." For the first time in nearly a decade, there was no reference to East Jerusalem.

Will this new trend continue? The answer lies in the vagaries of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and in Israeli diplomatic finesse.

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