

**The Rise of Hindu Nationalism:
A Catalyst for India's Strategic Pivot towards Israel**

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Abstract

Hindu nationalism has permanently altered the state of Indian politics, a nation once hailed as the world's most populous democracy. The alarming erosion of India's democratic institutions, under the guidance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and India's longest-serving prime minister, Narendra Modi, holds far-reaching implications for the future of Indian society. The nation's egalitarian mission is likely of a bygone era. India's descent into authoritarianism mirrors similar political developments in the State of Israel, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's religiously fundamentalist and ultranationalist coalition. As the two countries enter a new era in their once-obscure partnership, their history of collaboration deserves further exploration. Though India incorporates the world's largest Muslim minority population, existing research has not sufficiently confronted whether India's illiberal domestic policies, framed within the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, conform to the global trend against Islamic extremism or are explicitly Islamophobic in nature. Nor has existing research adequately addressed India's official stances post-October 7th, as the consequences of the 2023 Israel-Hamas war have reverberated throughout the multiethnic state. This paper will argue that the sudden development of India's support for Israel is a manifestation of the rise in anti-Islamic Hindu nationalism that has consumed Indian politics and which continues to push the country in a Westward direction.

Keywords: Hindu nationalism, Indian politics, Narendra Modi, India-Israel relations, authoritarianism, Bharatiya Janata Party, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Benjamin Netanyahu

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In the wake of the alleged assassination plots orchestrated by Indian agents against Sikh separatist leaders on foreign soil, the erosion of India's democratic institutions has now spotlighted its extremist government as an international concern. India is the birthplace for numerous religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism, and a nation that has historically incorporated non-indigenous world religions, such as Islam and Christianity. The mission of its secular constitution reflects this. Today, however, India is failing drastically in its unique potential for multiculturalism under the direction of its ruling Hindu party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Having overtaken China as the world's most populous nation, India's leaders have driven the country in an authoritarian direction, a global trend particularly present in South Asia given dramatic democratic backsliding in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Now popularly dubbed a "Rising India," some policy experts propose that India's long-due emergence is a welcome development to combat China's vice grip over the region, as India is arguably tipping the scales in its favor (Grossman, 2023). This ties into the notion of a "reverse domino theory" within the neighboring Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in which, according to foreign affairs journalist Ben Barber, "Today's dominoes are not allies of Beijing or Moscow; nor do they practice central state economic planning. They are crony-capitalist, one-party states" (Barber, 2018, para. 3). Next door, the Indian subcontinent continues to veer towards this model under the guidance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The V-Dem Institute now characterizes India as an electoral autocracy rather than a democracy within its 2023 Democracy Report, due

in large part to a long-standing institution that continues to proliferate: Hindu nationalism, or “Hindutva” (Boese & Lindberg, 2022).

While originally coined by Chandarath Basu decades prior as an apolitical cultural view, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar—the future leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, the ideology’s nascent political party—repurposed the term “Hindutva” in 1923 while imprisoned as a revolutionary against British rule in India (Heredia, 2009). Abandoning his Muslim-inclusive position of Indian nationalism, “His *Hindutva* was articulated as a political ideology of ethno-religious nationalism to include culture and race,” as Savarkar ultimately aspired to “Hinduise all politics and militarise all Hindudom” (Heredia, 2009, p. 66).

The focus of this research paper is a comprehensive analysis of Hindu nationalism in India and its effect on India’s Israel policy, analyzed both before and after the appointment of Narendra Modi as prime minister. Formerly condemnatory of Israeli statehood, India has undergone a full reversal in both governmental and popular support for its close ally. While bilateral security and economic ties predate the ascension of the BJP, India is alienating itself from all of South Asia, the majority of the Middle East, and the greater Global South with its endorsement of Israel. India’s relationship with Israel has been brought under further scrutiny during the ongoing 2023 Israel-Hamas war. There is a need for current academic literature that specifically addresses Hindu nationalism’s influence on India’s Israel policy during Modi’s premiership. This is especially relevant in the wake of the October 7th Hamas attacks and subsequent Israeli retaliation which have had demonstrable consequences on India’s domestic politics and foreign policy. Existing literature has yet to address whether this policy shift fits into a broader global trend against Islamic extremism, outright Islamophobia, or if India is simply a regional outlier, possessing a Western-aligned humanitarian sentiment favoring Israel.

Additionally, literature on the topic often approaches the India-Israel partnership as a natural outgrowth of the two countries' security relationship and does not extend to address internal motivations within exercising domestic political control. Ultimately, India's rapid shift towards Israel is a reflection of India's departure from secular ideals, and a direct result of the domestic hegemony of Hindu extremists and their nationalist, anti-Islamic sentiments. Furthermore, it also indicates an increasingly Western-aligned future in India's grand strategy.

An Overview of India-Israel Relations Pre-Modi

Hindu nationalism as a political ideology first materialized in the 19th century, but gained full traction within the early 20th century, synchronous with decolonization amid India's independence movement. Indian nationalists sought an identity independent of both British and Islamic Mughal imperial rule. The Mughals controlled the subcontinent for centuries until the British Raj fully deposed them in 1858, eventually releasing the colony in 1947, separating the territory into two independent states: India and Pakistan (Shairgojri, 2022). The partition of India unfolded as one of the most tragic and destructive crises in human history, and its consequences are still felt in the region's political climate today. Even among scholars, the positive notion of the formation of two post-colonial states has popularly eclipsed the ensuing extraordinary violence and refugee crisis, which resulted in the estimated deaths of one to two million people, and the displacement of roughly ten to twenty million more (Judge & Pandey, 2002). This inextricably contributed to precedence beyond basic communalism, but irreconcilable, fierce, religiously nationalist ideologies that have permeated the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of India, in which the latter has ultimately realized its Persian name of Hindustan (Judge & Pandey, 2002). For both Pakistani Hindus and Indian Muslims, their minority statuses within their respective nations confine them to inferiority.

Indian nationalism and Hindu nationalism, though at first developing in tandem, ultimately became incompatible under one umbrella. The latter camp had a vision of the Indian national identity as intrinsically Hindu, infamously culminating in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, the perpetrator a Hindu nationalist and member of both the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary force modeled after European fascism—Italian and German in particular (Rehman et al., 2021). Modi is currently a member of this organization and was once an RSS “pracharak,” which are individuals who serve as committed missionaries and full-time workers of the RSS (Saikia, 2020). Stemming from the RSS is an umbrella network of Hindutva-adherent nationalist groups, known as the Sangh Parivar, whose functions include “mass mobilization, political organization, recruitment of students, women, and workers, and paramilitary training” (Brass, 2015, p. 8).

The existence of Hindu nationalism was partly responsible for India’s original anti-Israel policy. The political movement’s impotence allowed for this, and conversely, its future ascension is what produced the bilateral relations between India and Israel presently, as will be discussed later. The formidable force of Hindu nationalism—which Indian leadership aggressively opposed during the state’s formative years—coupled with the harrowing reality of the post-colonial partition of India, provides the historical context for the nation’s critical position of Israel. It was a rational stance: India became autonomous just nine months before the establishment of the state of Israel, and with the harsh nature of partition fresh in its mind, it opposed what it viewed to be a settler-state, a product of a British mandate, that, “as India saw it, the Zionist movement had made an alliance with British imperialism to attain its goals” (Prashad, 2010, para. 5). Additionally, Mahatma Gandhi was against the Zionist project, famously stating in 1938, “Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France

to the French” (Kumaraswamy, 2018, p. 146). Thereby, India rejected the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine in 1947. Furthermore, Gandhi was assassinated only months before Israel’s establishment, and the consensus of India under the guidance of its first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru—an advocate for democratic socialism and secularism—was staunchly opposed to the formation of non-secular states. Despite this, a modicum of neutrality emerged as India recognized Israeli statehood in 1950 after the Arab-Israeli War’s 1949 Armistice Agreements.

The pro-Arab and anti-Zionist sentiment surprisingly did not carry over to antisemitism. Instead, a confusing paradox arose, as a small yet thriving Indian-Jewish community was already firmly established and well-treated in India, numbering around 50,000 (Kashi, 2022; Kumaraswamy, 2010). In his capacity as a leader in the Indian political scene, Nehru also provided refuge for Jews in their exodus from Afghanistan and Iraq during the Second World War, prior to the formation of Israel (Kumaraswamy, 2010). Despite this, as Israeli-Indian relations expert P. R. Kumaraswamy highlights, “If the public postures are an indication, India remained more hostile to Israel than toward its political, territorial, and military adversaries” (Kumaraswamy, 2010, p. 4). While numerous military confrontations over multiple decades occurred, including full-fledged war, India never ceased diplomatic relations with China or Pakistan. There was, however, a documented practice of under-the-table relations with Israel among Indian administrations, though it certainly never translated to public support. It was within said regional conflicts that the India-Israel bilateral security partnership arose: as Nehru attempted to toe the line between the Arab world and Israel, Israeli military assistance was utilized as early as the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965 (Rajagopal, 2018).

The strategic India-Israel military partnership serves as the historical basis for normalized relations between both nations. After breaking from the Soviet sphere of influence post-Cold War, India began to lose its anti-Western stance in need of a military ally. This relationship has only flourished, especially in recent years as, “According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) arms database, India is the destination for 41 percent of Israel’s arms sales, which averaged \$1 billion between 2012 and 2016” (Burton, 2018, para. 10). The Third World Project, a collection of neutral countries during the Cold War spearheaded by India, largely subsided by the 1980s, reflecting a new economic shift towards the Western Bloc, opening the door for economic, military, and agricultural relations with Israel (Prashad, 2010). Additionally, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was underway during the drafting of the Oslo I Accord, which ushered in the hopeful spirit marking the 1990s amid the aspiration for peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors. As a result of these developments, India officially established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992. Despite this, India still acknowledged Palestinian statehood as the first non-Arab country to recognize both the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1974 and the State of Palestine in 1988 (Blarel, 2023).

The 1990s in India was a period of economic prosperity soured by a tumultuous political and social climate. The decade marked both the ascension of Hindutva alongside the BJP and a rise in Islamic extremism. Riots between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs have been endemic in India for centuries, with many scholars crediting the 1992-93 Bombay riots and the 1993 Bombay Bombings for leading to the BJP’s first majority in the Lok Sabha (India’s lower house of its Parliament) in 1996 (Malji, 2018). The radicalization of Hindus through the galvanization of Hindu identity laid the foundation for the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, to fully Hinduize the nation and officially side with Israel when appointed as prime minister in 2014.

While originally fearing the fallout from India's Muslim citizens and the greater South Asian and Middle Eastern community, Modi made it clear that Hinduism's domestic hegemony would provide the impetus for an unapologetic pro-Israel policy. This is evinced by Modi's refusal to condemn his and the BJP's abetment of the 2002 Gujarat riots during the 2013 election, which many characterize as a pogrom that killed 2000 people, mainly Muslims. Continuing India's difficult balancing act, both Iran's president, Mohammad Khatami, and Israel's prime minister, Ariel Sharon, visited India in 2003, the first such visit by an Israeli head-of-state to the country (Kumaraswamy, 2013). Shortly after in 2005, "Modi was the first official to ever be denied entry under the International Religious Freedom Act, which prevents US entry of a foreign government official responsible for violations of religious freedom" (Malji, 2018, para. 12). Indicative of the decline of Indian democratic institutions and the acceptance of religious persecution, international condemnation proved no barrier to Modi's candidacy within the BJP. The BJP ultimately won a monumental and stunning victory in Parliament in 2014 on a platform of Hindu nationalism. It should be noted that in multiple instances during his election campaign, Modi did use less extreme rhetoric, discourse reminiscent of a secular India. As the world has come to realize, Modi undoubtedly misrepresented his intentions to Hinduize India.

The Nature of Bilateral India-Israel Relations Under Modi

Despite the convergence of Hindu nationalism and the mainstream integration of Islamophobia, the Indian government still refrained from alienating its Muslim population via its Israel policy until Modi took office. According to C. Raja Mohan, "Cynics in Israel would point out that Delhi was treating Tel Aviv like a mistress... The Modi government is having none of that" (Cohen & Rabinovitch, 2019, para. 11). This is a gross understatement when compared to the rhetoric of Modi's predecessor, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. As late as 2011, Singh

still officially sided with the Palestinian cause, endorsing “the Palestinian people's struggle for a sovereign, independent, viable and united state of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital, living within secured and recognizable borders side by side and at peace with Israel” (Kumaraswamy, 2013, para. 6). During Modi’s tenure, everything has changed.

During his first term, measures taken to ensure Hindu hegemony included filling the Indian Council of Historical Research—the body responsible for administering all historical scholarship in India—with members of the RSS. Under this leadership, the council pushed to accept Hindu holy texts as fact and designed school curriculum to mandate the teaching of the Bhagavad Gita in the state of Haryana. (Gahlot, 2015). In a starker example of the Modi administration’s extremism, the Prime Minister appointed Yogi Adityanata to serve as the chief minister of India’s most populous state, Uttar Pradesh. A monk and founder of the extremist militant organization Hindu Yuva Vahini, Adityanata has publicly called for the murder of Muslims, voiced opposition to Hindu-Muslim intermarriage, and participated in forced Ghar Wapsi, or mass conversions to Hinduism (Malji, 2018). Furthermore, the United States Department of State’s *2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: India* includes an account of the alleged gang-rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl in an attempt “to drive her nomadic Muslim community out of the area,” noting some of the perpetrators as local police officers (U.S. Department of State, 2018, para. 1). Even with these cases considered, Hindu nationalism has only intensified during Modi’s following term.

Modi finalized the India-Israel diplomatic relationship as the first Indian prime minister to visit in 2017, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu following suit, visiting New Delhi in 2018. Both right-wing administrations have made their allegiance to each other clear, in what India views as a mutually beneficial partnership between religious nationalists (Blarel,

2023). Nevertheless, Modi has continued to posture support for the Palestinians, such as in visiting Ramallah in 2018, a Palestinian city in the West Bank, and condemning Israeli settlements in Palestinian territory (Blarel, 2023). In one such development, Modi voiced hope for “a sovereign, independent, united, and viable Palestine, coexisting peacefully with Israel” while visiting Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas—a clear abandonment of Singh’s earlier position to reserve East Jerusalem as the future Palestinian capital (Kumaraswamy, 2017, para. 25).

Some scholars attribute the strength of the India-Israel relationship chiefly to mutually beneficial counterterrorism and military objectives. The claim has historical merit and has been maintained by several Indian officials. For example, even during a non-BJP coalition government in 2008, the fear of Iranian nuclear proliferation motivated India to jointly launch an Israeli radar spy satellite to monitor the Iranian revisionists (Riedel, 2008). Other experts, such as P. R. Kumaraswamy, cite economic motives as the basis for India and Israel’s close ties. According to Kumaraswamy, “India’s economic progress and trade development,” rather than “an ideological convergence between two rightwing governments,” is responsible for driving the relationship (Kumaraswamy, 2017, para. 33). However, both of these approaches are categorically incorrect, as Modi’s actions post-October 7th reveal. The current administration’s support for Israel has been eclipsed by its dichotomy of refusing to recognize Hamas as a terrorist organization while persecuting Muslims through constitutional infringements, such as banning pro-Palestinian protests and religious sermons, particularly cracking down in Kashmir (Hussain & Saaliq, 2023). This follows the precedence of state-imposed internet blackouts and public assembly bans across India in response to the Citizen Amendment Act of 2019, which granted migrants of non-Muslim religions from neighboring countries citizenship—leaving

Muslims in jeopardy (Ellis-Petersen, 2019). Except for Lakshadweep, a minor island chain off the southwest coast of India, Jammu and Kashmir (which lost its semi-autonomous status in 2019) is the only Muslim-majority region in India. Control over Jammu and Kashmir has been disputed between India, Pakistan, and China since the Partition of India in 1947 (Kramer, 2011). In the region, India's Israel policy and counterterrorism objectives have been exploited as political tools in the fulfillment of India's expansion, as India's Supreme Court has recently upheld the revocation of the region's autonomy in December 2023. Notably, Kashmir's former Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti derided the rulings as a "death sentence not just for Jammu and Kashmir but also for the idea of India" ("India's Supreme Court," 2023, para. 12). Netanyahu's actions, too, are sourced directly from the authoritarian playbook, such as his ongoing attempt at a judicial overhaul of the Supreme Court, and his original intention in early 2023 of providing Israel's Minister of National Security, Ben-Gvir (who has labeled Jewish terrorist Baruch Goldstein a "martyr" in the past), with direct control of a proposed national guard focused on "Arab unrest," that many at the time detracted as a personal militia (Williams, 2023).

A concurrent factor is India's record of votes within the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Predictably, New Delhi's abstention on a failed 2018 resolution to condemn Hamas' conduct in Gaza—which then United States UN Ambassador Nikki Haley noted would be the first to do so, in comparison to "more than 500 General Assembly resolutions condemning Israel"—was another instance of Modi's opportunist stance on counterterrorism, as the gesture of a non-binding UNGA resolution staked too much political capital ("India abstains from," 2023, para. 7). Therefore, India's change of heart in abstaining from a Jordanian-proposed UNGA resolution in October 2023, which supported a humanitarian truce in the Israel-Hamas war, indicates a major shift in India's grand strategy ("India refuses to," 2023). As the sole South

Asian dissenter, India's Israel policy now reflects a tangible expansion of its "Look West" policy, gambling its ties with Arab nations in favor of its second-greatest arms supplier, Israel, and in turn, America. India has carved itself an advantageous position in the world order, ultimately playing both sides against the middle. In October 2023, India performed simultaneous military operations, conducting a ground forces exercise with the United States in Alaska and participating in counterterrorism training exercises led by Russia and Myanmar in Vladivostok. India has furthered diplomatic alliances such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (comprised of the United States, India, Australia, and Japan), the economic forum I2U2 (Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and India), and, under Modi's Arab world rapprochement, has strived to achieve energy security and made conciliatory diplomatic efforts with regards to India's partnership with Israel (Blarel, 2022; Rajagopalan, 2023). India's UNGA abstention marks the start of a new era in its Israel policy, indicating tandem goals of establishing Hindu hegemony and shifting West strategically.

India did, however, vote in favor of a new UNGA resolution on December 13, 2023, which called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza and the release of hostages. This development demonstrates a threshold of international pressure governing India's relationship with Israel, albeit negligible, as only eight countries besides the United States and Israel voted against the resolution ("UN General Assembly," 2023). Additionally, within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the United States has yet to waver in its support of Israel, but President Joe Biden may also cave to mounting pressure as his administration has begun to backpedal in its unyielding support for Israel's military operation in the Gaza Strip.

A further consideration is the India-Israel relationship's effects on India's foreign policy towards a nuclear Pakistan and a revisionist, nearly-nuclear Iran. Beyond the scope of Israel,

former U.S. President Donald Trump had already taken an aggressive approach to Pakistan in 2018 while politically aligning himself with Hindu nationalists in India. Trump cut hundreds of millions of dollars in Pakistani military aid in response to Pakistan's practice of sheltering Islamic terrorists, ultimately pivoting from "decades of US military and economic support for Pakistan" (Malji, 2018, para. 20). In October 2023, within the UNSC, Pakistan's representative referenced Kashmir multiple times, which was naturally met with a condemnatory Indian rebuttal and a denunciation of Lashkar-e-Taiba (a state-sponsored, Pakistan-based terrorist organization) from U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in the same breath as Hamas ("India says it," 2023). Times Magazine recently published the headline "The U.S. Is Losing a Strategic, Nuclear-Armed Ally to China" in May 2022. In reality, the United States has simply traded Pakistan for a stronger ally in India. In an attempt to further involve India in the ongoing 2023 Israel-Hamas war, Iran's president, Ebrahim Raisi, called Modi in November and requested India's support of a ceasefire and the end of the blockade of Gaza, citing India's "history of fights against Western colonialism and its position as one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement" ("Iranian president speaks," 2023, para. 2). Modi, however, reaffirmed his commitment to Israel and his counterterrorism stance just one month later, following a call with Netanyahu ("India stands firmly," 2023). As Iran's regime continues to oppose the West and bolster terrorist proxies such as Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and most importantly, Hamas, India-Iran relations will likely deteriorate if India is unable to continue feigning non-alignment.

Conclusion

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ethnonationalism has dealt a potential death blow to India's foundation as a secular democracy. The nation's drastic political shift to the right, under

the flag of Hindu nationalism, coincides with a clear strategic shift to the West. Having only established diplomatic ties with Israel in 1992, Indian society has undergone a stunning reversal of foreign policy and public opinion, which had previously condemned Zionism, viewing it as a colonial and ethnocentric project. Despite improvements in India-Israel ties in the past 30 years, the relationship between the two countries is anything but new. Modi has inherited a decades-old bilateral partnership and brought it from the sidelines, capitalizing on it to further India's trajectory as a global power, militarily and economically. Modi has also used the bilateral partnership as a pretext for Islamophobia and domestic civil rights violations—such as in Kashmir—to protect Hindu hegemony. In this pursuit, Modi manipulates counterterrorism objectives perversely to fulfill his goals of suppressing Muslims in India.

India's evolving position on Israel is a monumental development for the liberal international order in a variety of ways. India's new extension of its "Look Westward" policy via the Middle East bodes poorly for the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) bloc's objective of reorganizing the global power structure through de-dollarization. Conversely, the international complacency displayed towards an evolving alliance between India and Israel's increasingly authoritarian governments—which are leading their countries along the trajectory towards pseudo-democracy—reflects near-sighted geopolitical goals that will only exacerbate the global trend of democratic backsliding. Heading into national elections in 2024, the BJP has a strong chance of maintaining its vice grip on Indian politics for the foreseeable future, under the leadership of India's longest-serving prime minister. The window for Indian society to salvage its democratic status may well have passed, as Hindu nationalists have managed to overcome the historical obstacle of the caste system and leverage Hindus as a unified polity. Modi has exploited long-standing, evolving ties with Israel to further consolidate the power of the BJP. The

complex relationship between governmental authority, ethnonationalism, and the abuse of international crises constitute powerful implications for democracy and regional security, mandating further examination as India continues to rise on the global stage.

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