

## **Emulating Israel: The Indian Middle Class and the Jewish State**

Vinay Lal

While much of the world was fiercely critical of Israel's bombing of Lebanon and its "disproportionate" use of force in retaliation for Hezbollah's abduction of two Israeli soldiers, many middle class Indians were calling for the Indian government to emulate Israel. The journalist Praful Bidwai, in a recent article on the highly coordinated July Mumbai train blasts, wrote that "in response to a recent television discussion, more than 90 percent of viewers of an English-language private channel favoured the use of military force by India against Pakistan in emulation of Israel's methods." There is a widespread perception in India that, more than any other societies, India and Israel have long endured the menace of terrorism and are consequently joined together in a common (and holy) cause. Whatever the merits of this view, there is the further perception that Israel furnishes India with the model of a state that exhibits zero tolerance for terrorism and will not permit the slightest degradation of its sovereignty. Many in the Indian middle class have long believed that India, by contrast, is a "soft state", incapable of flexing its muscles, easily intimidated by brash Pakistani talk and yet much more willing to talk the talk than walk the walk. Though the same Indians are aware that Palestinian suicide bombers have repeatedly infiltrated Israeli cities, and that Israel's much admired and feared security forces could not prevent the assassination of then-Prime Minister Rabin, they persist in holding to the view that Israel's security forces are a model to every country surrounded by hostile neighbors. The image of Israel and India as exemplary and besieged democracies having to confront "Islamic terrorists" is never very far from the mind of Indian élites, even when the argument is not pressed forth explicitly. On their view, if India dealt with Pakistan with the same ferocious determination with which Israel has consistently confronted the threat of Hezbollah and Hamas, India would no longer be the target of brutal terrorist attacks.

In the aftermath of the Mumbai train blasts, many Indian élites were disappointed by what they viewed as Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's tepid response to the suggestion that Pakistan be held accountable for its generous hospitality to terrorists. Indeed, the Indian Government released a statement within hours of the blasts that the talks between the Foreign Secretaries of India and Pakistan would take place as scheduled, and it wasn't until a few days later that the Indian Government announced the cancellation of the talks. The hawks in India's political and defense circles were soon urging India to "take out" terrorist camps in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (or Azad [Free] Kashmir, as the Pakistanis call it) and to go in "hot pursuit" of jihadi networks in Pakistan. As the veteran journalist Ahmad Rashid has written in *Kashmir Affairs* (July-August 2006), "Indian public and political opinion appears unanimous in ridiculing Pakistan. Some vindictive voices talk of taking even tougher positions by striking militant camps inside Pakistan." Not only do the hawks and their middle class supporters champion Israel as a state which India would do well to emulate, they feel emboldened, as an editorial in the same magazine puts it, "by the world inaction over the onslaught in the Middle East." Certainly, the hawks have vociferously argued, if India has the same green light from the United States to punish terrorists operating from Azad Kashmir and Pakistan as Israel had to wipe out Hezbollah, the terrorists could no longer stage attacks on Indian soil with impunity.

The perception that Israel should serve as a model to India doubtless first gained ground during the 1990s when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) governed India at the head of a coalition. "India's BJP is displaying", wrote the journalist Randeep Ramesh in the *Guardian* (14 February 2002), "an alarming affinity with Ariel Sharon's doctrine of military might." Ramesh suggested that the BJP had borrowed the formulation of a national security state under constant threat from Sharon and that "Likud's doctrine of military might" resonated with "Indian hawks". In 2000, L. K. Advani, the most senior Minister in the BJP government and the party's principal and most articulate hawk, visited Israel and the two governments publicly pledged themselves to stand together to offer resistance to terrorism. Sharon became the first Prime Minister of Israel to pay a state visit to India in September 2003, and at least some Indians were mortified by the fact that he was permitted to lay a wreath at the national memorial to Mohandas Gandhi. "Together with the international community and as victims of terrorism," says a joint statement released by Sharon and then-Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, "Israel and India are partners in the battle against this scourge."

The ascendant arc on which Israel-India relations appear to be is all the more remarkable considering that India, which had recognized Israel in 1948, only commenced diplomatic relations with the Jewish state in 1992. The most commonly held view is that with a large Muslim population, today exceeded only by that of Indonesia, India did not wish to antagonize Arab states; moreover, as Israel had a particularly cozy relationship with the United States, any close identification with Israel would have signaled to the world India's abandonment of non-alignment, a cardinal element of Nehru's foreign policy. In various world fora, India appeared as the foremost spokesperson of the rights of oppressed people, championing the rights of the Palestinians and offering encouragement to the opponents of apartheid South Africa, a state with which Israel enjoyed close relations. However, with the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Soviet Union, the disappearance of non-alignment, and the demise of what is described as Nehruvian secularism, a number of Indian politicians, journalists, policy planners, and other public figures begin to call for a reexamination of India's foreign policy towards Israel and the Arab world, and some wondered aloud whether India's support of the Arab world had at all been reciprocated.

Thus, with the emergence of the supposed 'New World Order', India moved rapidly to put its relations with Israel on a much friendlier footing. The two countries signed a security pact in 1994, and Israel was in the minority in its refusal to condemn India for its nuclear tests in 1998. Indeed, the Israeli government let it be known, once Pakistan had followed India, that the "Islamic bomb" posed a threat to both democracies. Israel's support for India at this critical juncture was not lost on its political élites. At the controversial World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in Durban in 2001, India stood opposed to attempts, widely endorsed by the Arab world, international NGOs, and significant sections of the international human rights community, to equate Zionism with racism. One might argue, of course, that the Congress-led Indian government is much less favorably disposed towards Israel than the Hindu nationalists, an impression emphatically sought to be conveyed by the

then-newly appointed Foreign Minister K. Natwar Singh, who in a speech on 31 May 2004 affirmed that India had centuries old ties with the Islamic world, and that India's relations "with Israel will not be at the expense of sacrificing the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people." But the most striking fact is that the rhetorical display of solidarity with the Palestinian people, echoed in the Indian Parliament's vote last month to condemn Israel's military operations in Lebanon, bears no relation to the continued enhancement of India's security and defense pacts with Israel. India is today Israel's largest arms buyer, and Israel is India's second largest arms supplier after Russia. Israeli avionics have been integrated into Indian platforms, and India's advanced light helicopter, Dhruv, is produced by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) in cooperation with Israel Aircraft Industries.

As one ponders the future of India-Israel relations, the obvious question is not merely whether Israel is the kind of nation-state that the Indian state and its élites should seek to emulate, a question which is easily answered if one considers Israel's long history of oppression of Palestinian people, its apartheid-like policies, and repeated violations of Security Council resolutions which the United States has no intention of enforcing. Israel's xenophobic conduct towards Arabs has its counterparts in the routine oppression of Dalits in India, the appalling condition of virtually all minorities in Pakistan, and myriad other forms of outright racism and discrimination to be encountered in most nations-state. By far the more pertinent consideration is whether India's friendly relations with Israel on the one hand, and growing ties with the United States on the other hand, augur the formation of new trilateral links. Indian Americans have long been great admirers of the powerful lobby which in the US advances Israel's interests, spearheaded by the American Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC), the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, and other organizations, and leaders of the Indian American community remain convinced that they are uniquely positioned to learn from the Israel lobby as well as represent India's interests in Washington and state capitols. Just as significantly, on a state visit to India in 2004, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Israel, Silvan Shalom, suggested that "an axis in the abstract sense exists between the United States, Israel and India." This axis, however, is not altogether abstract: however unwilling politicians may be to admit it, the axis is also fuelled by the sentiment shared by all three nations that "Islamic fanatics" must be shelled into submission and decisively defeated.

One of the more unsavory aspects of India's present emulation of Israel is that it cannot be reconciled with the extraordinarily rich civilizational ties that India forged with Jewish people. Though the very early history of the Jewish people in India remains somewhat uncertain, their presence in India for over a millennium, greatly diminished since the creation of Israel in 1948, remains well-documented. All historians of Jewish history in India are in complete agreement that India remains singular in the worldwide Jewish experience. Nathan Katz, author of the recent scholarly study, *Who are the Jews of India?* (2000), is unequivocal in his assessment: "Jews navigated the eddies and shoals of Indian culture very well. They never experienced anti-Semitism or discrimination." As Katz goes on to suggest, the Jewish experience in India is something of a model for the world: "Indians Jews lived as all Jews should have been allowed to live: free, proud,

observant, creative and prosperous, self-realized, full contributors to the host country.” India’s civilizational ties with Jewish people, far from constituting (as some people have supposed) any historical evidence for why India should now forge strong links with Israel, suggest something quite to the contrary, namely the moral and political necessity of retaining the distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. One of the supreme tragedies of both American and Israeli politics is that this even this elementary distinction is no longer observed much less recognized.