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Two Views

The India-Israel Alliance

Burgeoning Alliance Reinforces Intolerance

By Zahir Janmohamed

In a Dec. 22, 2002 *Times of India* poll, 400 students from India's most prestigious colleges were asked to select the ideal leader for India. Independence leader and spiritual icon Mahatama Gandhi led with 23 percent, followed by current Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee with 20 percent. Coming in a close third, with 17 percent, was Adolf Hitler.

According to one respondent, 18-year-old Phalguni Das of the National College in Bombay, Hitler "may not have been the best of human beings, but he possessed high leadership qualities. He had the unique ability to make people follow him forcibly, and nearly conquered the world."

Given the nature of government-issued textbooks in India, however, these results should not come as a surprise. In a Standard 9 textbook for the western state of Gujarat, Hitler is described as a man who gave "race pride" to his people. There is no mention of his ghastly treatment of Jews. In the book's chapter on "Problems of the Country," moreover, the first subsection, on "Minorities," calls Muslims, Jews, and Christians "foreigners in India."

One would imagine, then, that Jews, with their history of persecution, would distance themselves from the Indian government, given its vilification of minorities.

Instead, however, the first-ever joint Capitol Hill forum between the U.S. Indian Political Action Committee (USINPAC), the American Jewish Committee, and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) was held July 16 in the nation's capital. The event featured nearly a dozen Congress members from across the U.S., diplomats from the Indian and Israeli embassies, and political activists from both communities speaking about the "symbiotic," "intrinsic," and "unique" nature of Jewish-Indian relations.

Congressman Joe Wilson (R-SC), co-chair of the Congressional India Caucus, said it was "appropriate to make this bond." Numerous speakers used the words "Muslim" and "terrorist" interchangeably. The problem for the two nations, said Congressman Gary Ackerman (D-NY), was that Israel was "surrounded by 120 million Muslims" while "India has 120 million (within)." These comments, however, contradict Indian intelligence officer B. Raman, who earlier boasted that not a single Muslim from India has been linked to al-Qaeda, Hamas, or any of the other terrorist organizations that threaten the U.S.

One speaker, Rep. Brad Sherman (D-CA), opened his speech on the importance of respecting India as an ally by telling an offensive Patel joke featuring stereotypes of Patels running motels.

While the event purported to speak for all Indians, none of the speakers mentioned issues of concern to many Indians: AIDS, mal-nutrition, employment, basic human rights, or education.

Congressman Tom Lantos (D-CA) seemed to summarize the overriding issue of the evening (and perhaps of the alliance): "We are drawn together by mindless, vicious, fanatic, Islamic terrorism."

Certainly, establishing relations and engaging in dialogue between communities is important. Not only is the burgeoning alliance with India detrimental for Israel's interests, however, but it also is insensitive toward Jews.

Over the past few years, India's ruling BJP party has aggressively pushed its agenda of "Hindutva." This extremist ideology, a distortion of the tolerant ethos of Hinduism, seeks to create a Hindu state in India in which minorities (including Jews) are forced to live as second-class citizens because they are adherents of a religion founded outside of India.

Unfortunately, in seeking to form an alliance with India and its diasporic community, many Jewish organizations have reached out only to unrepresentative, radicalized groups like USINPAC that are willing to ignore Hindutva's challenge to Indian democracy. The vast majority of Indians—be they Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Muslims, or Parsees—are secular and progressive, and reject such myopic and intolerant visions of India.

When India's Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani recently visited the U.S., the American Jewish Committee hosted a June 10 dinner in his honor. Israeli Embassy spokesman Mark Regev said his country maintained close ties with Advani because "he is a man of great power."

At the May 8 annual meeting of the American Jewish Committee, India's National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra boasted of an "historical affinity" between India and the Jews, saying India is one of the only countries with no history of anti-Semitism.

That Advani has violated international human rights laws and eroded Indian democracy is apparent. Noted Smita Narula, senior researcher at Human Rights Watch, "Advani basically represents a group of organizations that have the ultimate aim of turning India into a Hindu state. To achieve those ends they have encouraged extreme violence. It's been harmful not only to Muslims and Christians, but for the population as a whole and for the country's secular, democratic fiber."

What is less obvious, however, is Advani's track record of endorsing anti-Semitic Indian organizations and leaders. In a July 5, 2002 *Financial Times* interview, the Indian prime minister admitted, "If you see any virtue in me, I have imbibed it from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—its discipline, patriotism and commitment to integrity of public life. It is absurd to ask me to de-link from the RSS."

This group, however, which Mahatama Gandhi labeled "totalitarian" and "fascist," serves as a recruiting and training ground for proponents of hard-line Hindu nationalism. Two of the organization's pioneering ideologues, Veer Savarkar and M.S. Golwarkar, had choice words about Jews. Speaking of the Nazis, Golwarkar said, "To keep up the purity of the nation and its culture, Germany shocked the world by the purging of its Semitic race, the Jews. National pride at its highest has been manifested there. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures having differences going to the root to be assimilated."

In 1938, Savarkar endorsed the persecution of Jews in Germany, noting, "Germany has every right to resort to Nazism and Italy to Fascism, and events have justified that those isms and forms of governments were imperative and beneficial to them under the conditions that obtained there."

According to the BBC, Savarkar also was "suspected of being involved in Gandhi's assassination." One would imagine that, given global awareness and concern over anti-Semitism, Indian leaders like Advani would distance themselves from ideologues like Gowalkar and Savarkar.

In fact, however, just the opposite has occurred. In February 2003, Savarkar's portrait was unveiled in the central hall of New Delhi's parliament, amid shouts of "Long live Savarkar." Defending the incident, Advani noted, "It was a burden on us that we could not install the portrait of Savarkar for all these years, but it is good that we could accomplish it during our tenure."

In the upcoming weeks, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will become the first Israeli leader to visit India. If the American Jewish community wishes to establish ties with India, it might consider first pressuring the BJP government to abandon its anti-Semitism and vilification of minorities. Aligning with hard-line leaders like Advani only reinforces the intolerance that Jews and Indians should be fighting.

Zahir Janmohamed is currently writing a book about the rise of religious violence in South Asia.

A Friendship Forged in Steel and Weaponry

By Delinda C. Hanley

Israel has always tried to have a friendly non-Arab ally in the neighborhood. This special buddy enjoys shopping sprees in Israel's vast weapons market, fun-filled joint training exercises, and nary a hint of criticism from Washington, DC, which funds most of the weapons programs Israel peddles. In return for spending big bucks in Israel, the Jewish State's special friend benefits from Israel's considerable influence on Capitol Hill.

In the past this has worked out quite nicely. Israel worked hand-in-glove with the shah in Iran. In the late 1970s, in fact, Iran and Israel discussed a plan to adapt for Iranian use surface-to-surface missiles that could be fitted with nuclear warheads, according to documents discovered in Tehran after the Islamic revolution.

Unfortunately for Israel, when the shah left Iran for good on Jan. 16, 1979, the Iranian connection—as well as *carte blanche* from Washington for any nuclear ambitions—was lost.

Israel next formed a special friendship with Turkey. By 1996 the two countries had developed a strong military, political and economic partnership. Turkish and Israeli sailors and pilots trained together, and Ankara purchased hi-tech Israeli weapons. In 1997 and 1998 the Israeli Air Industries Company started work on a deal to provide Ankara with early warning Phalcon systems and Popeye air-to-surface missiles, and to upgrade Turkey's U.S.-made M60 tanks. Turkey annually spends U.S. \$6.9 billion (4.1 percent of its GDP) on defense. Last year bilateral trade between Turkey and Israel topped \$1 billion. As an added bonus, Jerusalem received water from Turkey, which controls the sources of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, and an agreeable partner in a hostile neighborhood.

This relationship may also be losing its glow, however, as democracy advances in Turkey, and Islamist parties gain influence. The Turk on the streets does not approve of attacking Muslim countries or bullying Palestinians. When the democratically elected Turkish parliament turned down Washington's request to use Turkish air bases to launch an attack on Iraq, Israel realized that the good times were coming to an end and it was time to find a new friend.

Now it is India's turn. Diplomatic ties between Israel and India have been on the increase since 1992. Last year almost one-half of Israel's \$4.2 billion in total military sales went to its new favored customer, India. And now, with Washington's final approval of Israel's sale to India of a \$1 billion Phalcon airborne early-warning radar system, and its likely support for the more-expensive sale of Israel's Arrow anti-missile system, Israel again has found true love. The state-run Israel Aircraft Industries contract for three plane-mounted Phalcon systems, for a total of \$1.2 billion to \$1.3 billion, should be ready to sign in time for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's planned Sept. 9 visit to New Delhi. Lucrative Indian arms and trade deals with Israel are expected to top \$2 billion in 2004.

The U.S. blocked a similar Israeli Phalcon sale to China three years ago. Given India's recurring hostilities with Pakistan, and the omnipresent threat of nuclear warfare on the subcontinent, it really should have done the the same. Since at least 75 percent of the joint-Israeli-American Arrow missile program was funded by the U.S. Department of Defense, the latter could have just said no.

It's easy, of course, to see why Israel is cozying up to India. The match is a financial and military bonanza for Israel. This year India has allotted 650 billion rupees (\$17 billion) for military spending, and is expected to spend \$100 billion over the next decade.

The two nations have other things in common besides an appetite for military gadgetry. India's ruling BJP Party is as Islamophobic as Israel's Likud. Some Indians would dearly like to model their treatment of Muslims and other religious minorities on Israel's treatment of Palestinian Muslims and Christians.

Like Turkey and Iran before, India has sought and received Israeli assistance in influencing Congress. Israel has happily shared its lobbying know-how with India, pulling the right strings to help isolate longtime U.S. ally Pakistan. As a result, Islamabad was on the outs with the U.S. until after the 9/11 attacks, when President George W. Bush realized he needed the assistance of Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf in his war on terrorism.

Here at home, the Indian American community is working hard to ensure its voice is heard. According to its executive director, Sanjay Puri, the U.S. Indian Political Action Committee (USINPAC), which opened its Chantilly, Virginia offices in 2002, now has a staff of 20 volunteers. Determined to gain political recognition for the country's two million Indian Americans, USINPAC is seeking half a million dollars in financial contributions

from the community in order to achieve "consolidated leverage" in the 2004 election cycle.

Those contributions are working. At a recent Capitol Hill gathering hosted by USINPAC, AIPAC, and the American Jewish Committee, Congressman David Ackerman (D-NY) applauded the "great marriage" and declared that the major problem for both India and Israel is that, "Israel is surrounded by 120 million Muslims [while] India has 120 million Muslims [within its borders]."

Indian Americans have much to offer Jewish Americans in return for the latter's lobbying expertise. For two years straight, in 1998 and 1999, *Fortune* magazine named the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) the second most powerful lobbying group in Washington, DC, after the American Association of Retired Persons. Now AIPAC has slipped, falling to fourth place after the National Rifle Association and the National Federation of Independent Business tied for second. AIPAC boasts an annual budget of \$16 million, 150 paid employees, and five or six registered lobbyists who make a personal visit at least once a year to every one of the 535 members of Congress.

AIPAC claims to represent 5.2 million American Jews—based on the just-released Jewish population study of 2000—although many or even most U.S. Jews do not share AIPAC's hard-line policies. AIPAC badly needs some new constituents, especially since the American Jewish population is decreasing.

In contrast, there are now more than 6 million Muslim Americans and 2 million Christian Arab Americans, and *their* numbers are growing. Their political action groups, moreover, are gaining strength and expertise. In the 2000 elections, Muslim Americans became a powerful voting bloc that could not have escaped the notice of AIPAC.

Indian Americans could be a real boon to Israel's supporters in the U.S. With the addition of 1.6 million South Asian Hindus as allies, the odds could look slightly brighter for Israel-firsters—so long as Indian-American groups can buy into the idea that both communities face a common enemy: Muslims. Can India, a secular democracy, with the world's second largest Muslim population, actually rally to Israel's battle cry against "radical Islam"?

Wooing Indian public opinion, however, both on the subcontinent and in the U.S., may be a little more difficult than Israeli and Indian leaders may wish. India, after all, like Turkey and Iran—and almost every other nation in the world—has been consistently supportive of Palestinian statehood.

The pro-Israel and pro-Indian tilts in U.S. foreign policy are a direct result of smart politics by well-heeled, tightly organized and highly disciplined American religious or ethnic minorities. There is no reason that, with a little effort, money and organization, another powerful group, Muslim Americans, including Pakistani Americans, can join forces with Arab Americans to combat civil rights abuses and demand a truly even-handed, balanced U.S. foreign policy. If these communities continue to build bridges with the African-American and Latino communities, American voters may persuade their representatives to return to core U.S. values of liberty and justice for all—Palestinians, Iraqis, Kashmiris and Americans alike.

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