GLOBAL HINDUTVA AND THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE

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Abstract: A lot of attention has been paid within academic and journalistic literature to how India’s relationship with Israel has improved under the rule of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Looking beyond this, the objective of this article is to assess the position of Palestine and its liberation struggle within the Global Hindu Nationalist imaginary. The study’s main argument, therefore, is that the broader Palestinian liberation struggle, in its pluralism, its global scope, and its interconnectivity with various struggles over the course of its history, implicitly represents a refutation of the core ideological mechanisms that underpin the Hindu Nationalist Project, including but not limited to its othering of Muslims and other non-Hindu groups as well as its more recent embrace of neoliberal capitalism. More explicitly, the articles argues that the way Hindu Nationalists construct Indian Muslim and Palestinian subjectivities as being analogous and connected through tropes of them as invaders and terrorists – in line with broader imperialist constructions of Muslim subjectivities – is a key feature of Global Hindutva’s globality. To make this argument, this article first examines the literature on the historical relationship between Hindu Nationalism and Zionist settler colonialism. After this, the article analyses the overlap between Indian state and Hindutva positions on the Palestine Question before exploring practical tensions between the Hindutva outlook and the Palestinian liberation struggle. The final section of the article explores how Global Hindutva’s historic and strategic alignment against the Palestinian liberation struggle manifests in both Indian foreign and domestic policy and in Hindu Nationalist mobilisations across the world.

Keywords: Palestine-India relations, Israel-India relations, Hindu Nationalism, Global history, Zionism.
Global Hindutva and the Palestinian Cause

The attendees of the Edison, New Jersey Municipal Council meeting on the 24 August 2022 found themselves subjected to a four-hour long meeting where prominent Muslim members of the city’s Indian community raised the issue of the inclusion of a bulldozer as part of the Indian Business Association’s (IBA) involvement in the India Day Parade earlier in the month. The inclusion of the bulldozer was initially defended by the representatives of the IBA, who called it a “symbol of ‘law and order’ in India” while arguing “that the Indian Muslim complaints were baseless and disrespectful to the Indian government as well as to Hinduism” (Essa 2022a). Muslim complainants at the council, meanwhile, meeting referred to the bulldozer as a “symbol of hate”, comparing it to the offensiveness of displaying a Ku Klux Klan hood before members of the African American community and the Swastika before those of the Jewish community (Edison TV 2022).

Yogi Adityanath, the Hindu Nationalist Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh whose picture adorned the bulldozer alongside that of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, “has pejoratively earned the nickname ‘Bulldozer Baba’ over his extensive use of excavators” in demolishing the homes of Muslims in his state under the guise of “law and order” (Essa 2022a).

This curious event that took place in 2022 in the far-off city of Edison in the United States, where prominent members of the city’s Indian community not only defended but supported and applauded the bulldozing of Muslim homes in India and the deployment of the politics of permissions and permits in order to justify it, bears a striking resemblance to how global mobilisations are carried out to defend the destruction of Palestinian homes through similar means, both politically and literally – through a politics of permissions and the use of bulldozers. This is more striking in light of the Israeli state’s most recent attempts to dispossess Palestinians like the Salhiye family, whose home in Jerusalem’s Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood was bulldozed in January 2022 on the grounds that the home’s residents did not possess the title to it (Merryman-Lotze 2022).

Much has been written by scholars and activists on India and Israel’s improving diplomatic and business relations in the last three decades. Sumantra Bose, for example, in a 2019 article titled “Why India’s Hindu nationalists worship Israel’s nation-state model” argues that the warm, and verging on saccharine, relationship between Modi and the former Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu was “rooted in the profound admiration of generations of Hindu nationalists for Zionism and its product, Israel, whose model of nation-state they seek to emulate in India”. Somdeep Sen (2020) similarly asserts that the “Hindu nationalist love affair with Israel has now become a matter of public policy”, arguing that both states’ leaders “position themselves as bastions of progress and democracy while
surrounded by hostile Muslim nations”. Amrit Wilson (2022) terms this partnership as an “Unholy Alliance” in an analysis based around the resonance that the two ideologies share in terms of their construction of racial supremacism and myths as well as their embrace of neoliberalism.

I seek to explore the ways in which Hindu Nationalists regard Palestine and investigate how the Palestinian cause is therefore impacted by Global Hindutva, which I argue is an oft-overlooked node in what Maath Musleh calls the “global network” of settler colonialism (in Estes and Musleh 2019). To do this, I first look at the position of Palestine in early Hindu Nationalist literature, primarily within texts by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and Madhavrao Sadashiv Golwalkar, and I follow this by drawing out points of further comparison between Hindu Nationalist and Zionist praxis. Upon doing this, I examine the overlaps between Hindutva and Indian policy towards Palestine. Subsequently, I outline practical tensions between the Palestinian cause and Hindu Nationalist outlooks. The final section of this article then looks at the direct impacts Hindu Nationalist mobilisations have on the cause of Palestinian liberation. In sum, this analysis makes it clear that Hindu Nationalists’ summary construction of the respective subjects of the Indian Muslim and the Palestinian, whether Muslim or not, as the invaders of their own respective lands, based on the foundation of a remarkably flimsy European concept of nationhood dressed in Hindu terms, creates one of the most passable avenues through which Hindutva gains its global dimension – not to mention its historic relationship with imperialisms, comparably analogous to Zionism’s historic relationship with British and later American imperialism, characterised in significant parts by Islamophobia and anti-Palestinianism.

Defining Global Hindutva

The chief ideologue of Hindutva, V.D. Savarkar, in his text Essentials of Hindutva explains that the fundamental difference between the terms Hindutva and Hinduism is that while the latter, by way of its “-ism”, “generally meant a theory or a code more or less based on spiritual or religious dogma or creed”, Hindutva rather “embraces all the departments of thought and activity of the whole Being of our Hindu race” (Savarkar 1923: 3). Savarkar, a “hardboiled atheist” (Nandy 2014: 95), continues by asserting that, for him, “Hinduism is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva”. In the same line, he proposes “Hinduness” as a “better [...] near parallel” for Hindutva. This view is echoed by contemporary Hindu Nationalists, such as the senior BJP lawmaker Subramanian Swamy, who in a televised interview stated that “Hindutva means ‘Hinduness’ and that includes cultural, behaviour etiquette, and whole lot of things [...] Hindutva is the quality of being a Hindu whereas Hinduism is actually theology” (Swamy 2019a).
Ashis Nandy compares the role of Hinduism in Savarkar’s definition of a Hindu Nationalist to the role of God in Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin’s definition of a secular Zionist; namely that he “who believes that there is no God but insists that He has given the land of Israel to the Jews nonetheless” (Nandy 2014: 95). While Savarkar himself may not have believed in sacred geographies, despite unabashedly claiming the right of Hindus to “the whole of India” on its ground (Nandy 2014: 95), Nandy cites Aditya Nigam’s differentiation between his Hindu Nationalism and that of M.S. Golwalkar. The latter, which Nigam described as “more dangerous” as a result of his religious belief and practice, reshaped “the culture of Indian politics and, at the end, Hinduism in a way that Savarkar could never do” (in Nandy 2014: 110). This reshaping, Nandy suggests, differentiates Hindutva as a distinct form of Indian fascism from a practice of “classical’ European fascism in India”.

To further address the distinctness of Hindutva as fascism, Kannan Srinivasan, uses the term “subaltern fascism” to describe the Hindu Mahasabha’s project of “building fascism in India even whilst accepting subordination to the British Empire”, adding that “this cadet role anticipates India’s role in world affairs today” (Srinivasan 2013a). Additionally, it is important to note that Hindutva as an ideological trend is not extraneous to the historical foundations of the supposedly secular Indian state. Perry Anderson explains that the success of the BJP in the twenty-first century “was due not just to the faltering of the first wave of officeholders, but to their ability to articulate openly what had always been latent in the national movement, but neither candidly acknowledged, nor consistently repudiated [and that] they could claim, with a certain justice, to be legitimate heirs of the original cause” (2012: 146-147).

One could ask that if Hindu Nationalism is a distinctly Indian form of fascism, then how can Hindutva be called Global? The answer is built on four factors. First, that it is drawn from very European ideas of nation-building and that it was historically connected to fascist trends outside of India. Savarkar and Golwalkar’s views were developed in the context of the supposed nationalist common sense of their time. Nandy notes that “probably more than any other Indian leader of his time, [Savarkar] was in awe of Europe’s achievements in the area of nation-building and state-formation” (Golwalkar 2014: 91). To develop this, he then goes on to point out that “the basic categories of Savarkar’s political ideology – nation, national state, nationality and nationalism – always remained aggressively European”. The Italian historian Marzia Casolari’s work (2000) builds on Amrit Wilson’s (2020) assertion that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was “modelled on Mussolini’s Black Shirts and inspired by the Nazis” by exploring the “existence of direct contacts between the representatives of the main Hindu organisations and fascist Italy”, which she argues facilitated the Hindu Nationalist adoption of “fascist ideas in a conscious and deliberate way” (218). Casolari (224) goes on to
cite a 1938 communication from Savarkar where he supported the German occupation of Czechoslovakia on behalf of “Hindu Sanghatanists” as evidence of how Germany’s “aggressive racial policy” also influenced Savarkar’s thinking and subsequently, according to her, the thinking of Hindu Nationalists today. For her, these links between early Hindu Nationalists and European fascists “demonstrate that Hindu nationalism had much more than an abstract interest in the ideology and practice of fascism”, rather they regarded fascism as “an example of conservative revolution” (Casolari 2000: 219).

The second factor is that Hindu Nationalism is a project that mobilises diasporic Indian groups and seeks their interventions in the politics of foreign countries “to project India as a peaceful and highly successful democracy” (Wilson 2022). Wilson (2022) points out that “to this end [Hindu Nationalists] have penetrated political parties in the west as well as the corporate world”. Her 2020 analysis regarding the early origins of Hindutva’s global scope begins in Nairobi in 1947 where the RSS set up “set up one of its earliest, and in hindsight, most fruitful overseas outposts in the heart of the Hindu immigrant community” there. This RSS² branch, according to her:

launched Shakhas (‘activity centres’ where children and adults are taught the RSS version of Indian culture and history and provided physical training to be fighters for Hindutva) and organised Satsanghs (gathering where revered leaders of the RSS held discussions and religious songs were sung) and successfully drew in the Gujarati community, who were mainly from a rural background and eager like many immigrants to set in stone the deeply conservative traditions they had brought with them (Wilson 2020).

When East African Asian migration towards the United Kingdom intensified in the 1960s, the HSS were able to set up Shakhas “in cities like Leicester, Birmingham, Bradford and in Harrow and Brent in London where the refugees had settled”. Nandy (2014: 94) argued that these diasporic groups in the “First World”, organised by the HSS, had “begun to think of themselves as part of a Hindu ummah”, partially as a result of seeing “Hinduism as a religion that an ordinary, socially and geographically mobile householder – as opposed to a world-renouncer – could carry within him or her as a portable device”. Subramanian Swamy (2019a) further asserts that Hindutva was spread throughout the world and “internationalised” with the popularisation of “Hindu” practices such as “yoga, meditation, [and] even prayers”. By way of an example of this, Wilson recounts a personal experience of meeting a woman in 2004 who had “once been a militant participant in workers’ struggles” in the UK but has, since gaining social mobility in the 1970s, adopted the discursive patterns of the RSS in reference to Muslim and Black men, who
she called “‘beast-like’ and ‘oversexed’ and a danger to Hindu women” while lamenting that “Hindu men have been too meek in the past” as a defence of rapes of Muslim women during the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogroms.

The third factor that characterises Global Hindutva is that its mechanisms and objectives often have tacit – and sometimes not-so-tacit – buy-in from global actors, including multinational companies and sovereign states. There is a consistent thread that began during Savarkar’s lifetime and continues to the present day whereby the dominant global powers have relied to some degree on Islamophobic discourse or policies to promote their interest. In this vein, Savarkar was able to secure privileges, including his release from prison in the Andaman Islands and the payment of a pension, upon being “persuaded that the enemy was not the British but the Muslims” (Srinivasan 2013b: 99). The British regime then stood by as the Hindu Mahasabha, under the presidency of Savarkar:

when it set out a programme to arm Hindus against Muslims by recruiting them to the Indian army, promoting military education, influencing the administration of the princely states including their armies, gaining access to weaponry from their state forces to harass Muslims, obtaining arms licenses from sympathetic Congress ministers, attempting to set up a munitions factory at Gwalior in the expectation of support of the Darbars and the Birla industrial group, and exploring contacts with European fascist

– all while suppressing “anti-Nazi propaganda by left and liberal organisations” (Srinivasan 2013: 99-100).

Today, this position of a global power that invokes Islamophobia to promote its interest is taken up by the United States, who benefit from a warm relationship with Modi’s India. Furthermore, this warm relationship with the United States and the desire to restrict the agency of many Muslim and Islamically-inspired actors globally has created fertile ground for the building of strong relationships with other global actors, like Israel and the Arab Gulf states, who in turn bolster the politics of the BJP in India. Modi himself plays a vital role in this constellation of power and consent. His big-business-friendly – and Muslim-unfriendly – politics as Chief Minister of Gujarat and later as Prime Minister of India, as well as his alliances with industrialists like Gautam Adani, who Wilson (2020) notes is also “notorious for his environmental crimes in Australia”, attract the interest and subsequent buy-in of multinational companies into the Hindu Nationalist project. Wilson mentions the example of the 2014 World Hindu Congress, which counted “Jaguar, Dunlop, Jindal and many other multinational companies” among its sponsors, where a pamphlet was distributed that listed leftists and Muslims as the “enemies of Hindu society”.

www.plutojournals.com/reorient
The fourth and final factor that underpins Global Hindutva is that it is regarded, both from within and without, as bearing a civilisational aspect. From within, Irfan Ahmad explains the “constitutive conjunction” that connects notions of the Indian nation-state and civilisation with Hinduism at its “core” (Ahmad 2022a). This is enabled, according to him, by the works of scholars such as G.S. Ghurye, “considered as the father of Indian sociology”, as well as scholars of “Indology as a branch of Orientalism as well as anthropology”. Here, he names the American anthropologist Milton Singer as an example of the view from without, whose descriptions of “Indian civilisation” or what he refers to as “the Great Indian Tradition” are rooted in Hindu religious texts and scripture (Singer 1972: 56) – despite the subcontinent’s historical diversity. Ahmad also notes that “the border of India as a Hindu civilization was/is not limited to what contemporaneously is taken as India”, citing the works of scholars such as R.C. Majumdar, whose post-independence writings discussed the “expansion of ‘Hindu colonies’ and ‘Hindu colonization’ at work ‘all over Asia’, particularly in South-East Asia”. Ahmad links this to the “idea of a ‘Greater India’”, which bears a striking congruence with today’s Hindu Nationalist vision of Akhand Bharat.

**Early Hindu Nationalist Views on Palestine**

The parallels between how Hindu Nationalists view the connection between the land of India and Palestine start at the very definition of the word “Hindu” posed by Savarkar (1923). The below passage contains his definition, which he rooted in what he saw as the strongest foundation for national existence:

> Ye, who by race, by blood, by culture, by nationality possess almost all the essentials of Hindutva and had been forcibly snatched out of our ancestral home by the hand of violence – ye, have only to render wholehearted love to our common Mother and recognize her not only as Fatherland (Pitribhu) but even as a Holyland (punyabhu); and ye would be most welcome to the Hindu fold (43).

For Savarkar, the most ideal conditions [...] under which a nation can attain perfect solidarity and cohesion would, other things being equal, be found in the case of those people who inhabit the land they adore, the land of whose forefathers is also the land of their Gods and Angels, of Seers and Prophets; the scenes of whose history are also the scenes of their mythology (52).

He described only two other peoples who are “blessed with these ideal conditions that are at the same time incentive to national solidarity, cohesion and greatness”; the
first among them being the people of Arabia and the second the people of Palestine only “if ever the Jews can succeed in founding their state there”, thereby excluding Indigenous Palestinians – Muslim or not – from this equation. Indeed, Savarkar re-emphasised this position 24 years later, when the UN General Assembly voted in favour of Resolution 181, stating that:

> After centuries of sufferings, sacrifices and struggle the Jews will soon recover their national Home in Palestine which has undoubtedly been their Fatherland and Holyland. Well may they compare this event to that glorious day in their history when Moses led them out of The Egyptian bondage and wilderness? and the promised land flowing with milk and honey came well within sight (Savarkar 1947: 135).

From Savarkar’s writings emerged a trend among adherents of Hindutva of viewing the contents of Zionist nationalism as an analogue for their own historical imaginary of Hindu Nationalism. This view is echoed in the writings of M.S. Golwalkar, the second Sarsanghchalak³ of the RSS, who wrote that “the Jews” were an example “of ancient nations being deprived of nationality as a consequence of their losing their motherland” (Golwalkar 1939: 61). In fact, Golwalkar linked the story of Jewish exodus from Palestine to India by claiming that:

> a number of Jews, finding it difficult to live in those conditions maintaining their old religion and culture, left then-country Palestine, and came to Hindusthan – the purest stock of the children of Israel – and to this day they are inhabiting the country of the Hindus (the BeneIsraels of Bombay Presidency)” (61–62)

thereby imagining an ancient alliance between the Hindu and Jewish nations. He accordingly regarded the Zionist settlement of Palestine, and therefore the erasure and dispossession of the Indigenous Palestinian population, as a necessary step in reviving “the practically dead Hebrew National life”. This act of erasure and dispossession was a parallel for what he regarded as necessary for India. Notably, the view that analogises Zionist and Hindu Nationalist historiographies of Palestine and India is still prominent in both places. The Indian political scientist Sunil Choudhary invokes this view in his 2018 book comparing the party systems in India and Israel by opining that “sharing a long and common history and culture, both Israel and India have been nations from primitive times” (34).

Both Golwalkar and Savarkar placed an important emphasis on land and territoriality as being fundamental to the process of nation-building. Savarkar highlighted the importance of the “Zionists’ dreams” in Palestine to Hindu Nationalists because it would “gladden” Hindu Nationalists to see Zionists no longer have to
divide their love “the land of their birth and the land of their Prophets” (Savarkar 1923: 51). Golwalkar devised a concept of the nation that was built into a “a compound of five distinct factors fused into one indissoluble whole the famous five ‘Unities’ – Geographical (country), Racial (Race), Religious (Religion), cultural (Culture) and linguistic (language)” (Golwalkar 1939: 60). This was part of his development of the “ideal of Hindu Rashtra, in which the nation is venerated as an object of worship” (Simeon 2013: 194). He significantly uses what he calls “the reconstruction of the Hebrew Nation in Palestine” as the main example of “an affirmation of the fact that Country, Race, Religion, Culture and Language must exist unavoidably together to form a full Nation idea” (79). He continues to suggest that:

it is evident that the war and its resultant adjustments have not affected the old conception and that as of yore, the world, the western world especially, still holds firm to the statement that for the Nation idea to manifest itself and live, it must be comprised of the five constituent “Unities,” Geographical, Racial, Religious, Cultural and Linguistic, and of all these five, without exception (79–80),

thereby implicitly demonstrating the link between the “western” common sense of nation-building and the adoption of some of the logics of settler colonialism, whereby land is designated for possession by a “settler-esque” class upon its dispossessing from a “native” homo sacer.

Significantly, while Palestine does also represent an important “punyabhu” for Muslims, to borrow Savarkar’s phrasing, Muslim claims to Palestine were (and remain) completely side-lined by Hindu Nationalists. This was because Hindu Nationalist support for the Zionist project was not only rooted in how it may be analogised with the project of Hindutva, but also because the realisation of the Zionist project played an important role in the anti-Muslim world politics of Hindutva. Kannan Srinivasan quotes a letter written shortly after the establishment of Israel by the General Secretary of the All India Hindu Mahasabha in response to an Israeli lobbyist in Bombay where he states that “we look upon Israel as the citadel against the menace of Muslim aggressiveness and Hindu Mahasabha stands for creating an indissoluble tie between Israel and India” (Srinivasan 2013b: 125). Decades before the writing of this letter, Lala Lajpat Rai, who was active within the Mahasabha in the mid-1920s, had written the following about Zionist settlement in Palestine:

In Palestine the Muslims are an overwhelming majority over the Jews [...] Christian Europe is creating a strong and well-protected Ulster in Palestine, which leaves almost no hope of the Muslims ever regaining their lost partition of supremacy.
Everywhere one sees well-built and well-equipped colonies of Jews springing up with their own highly efficient educational and philanthropic institutions and with their equally efficient industrial concerns. They are fast buying lands of Muslims and Christians. Money is pouring in from America and Europe. The only “disconcerting” feature is that it is only the poorer class of the Jews and the oppressed members of the race that are emigrating to Palestine for permanent settlement (Rai 1924: 202)

This notion of creating an Ulster or a citadel against Muslims was also present in the writings of Savarkar, who stated that “the international policy of Hindudom at any rate must always aim to break up the power of the Moslem Blocks from Africa to the Malayan Peninsula” and that “the creation of a strong and independent Jewish state must serve to checkmate the aggressive tendencies of Moslem fanaticism in general” (Savarkar 1947: 136). He later emphasised this aspect of the Hindu Nationalist view of Israel by arguing for the importance of India recognising Israel because “if tomorrow there breaks out a war between Pakistan and Bharat almost all Muslims will be arrayed on the side of Pakistan in opposition to us and their enemy Israel will be our only friend” (1956 in Keer 1966: 499).

Far from being an entirely baseless assumption, the famous Muslim writer and filmmaker Khwaja Ahmad Abbas warned in 1939 that anti-Jewish sentiment among Muslims in India, “which was hitherto not very prominent”, was the result of “Nazi agents” in India exploiting the “strong sympathies” that “the Muslims of India naturally have […] for the Arabs” in Palestine (in Srinivasan 2013b: 125) to bring this fear to life among Hindu Nationalists and later Indian policy-makers. A more recent example of this fear directing Indian policy towards Palestine and Israel could be seen in how “the motif of ‘Muslim appeasement’” was invoked “as a force retarding India’s quest for its rightful place in the world […] when Jaswant Singh, then External Affairs Minister, visited Israel in July 2000 [where] talks focused on moving the military and strategic relationship several notches higher” (Muralidharan 2014: 79). Sukumar Muralidharan notes that “on his triumphal return, Jaswant Singh put down India’s unreasonable hostility to Israel to the domestic politics of cultivating the Muslim vote”. Between the views of Savarkar and Singh, Hindu Nationalists are consistent in pointing to India’s purported historic support for the Palestinian cause as being a primary example of their imagined Muslim coloniality over Hindu aspirations.

**Points of Comparison between Hindutva and Zionism**

To understand the nodal points of entry that enable Hindu Nationalist mobilisations to impact the Palestinian cause, it is also vital to outline some of the resonances between the ideologies and political practices of Hindutva and Zionism, since it
is the principle overarching ideology and process that drives the displacement and dispossession of the Palestinian people. The most obvious of these resonances is the focus both ideologies place on enabling the creation and maintenance of demographic majorities. Sumit Sarkar, for example, points out how Hindu Nationalist protests against Indian law recognising polygamy among Muslims is not rooted in any concern for the rights of Muslim women, rather it is “constantly linked up to assertions that Muslims consequently breed faster: ‘hum panch hamare pachis’, as the Delhi VHP leader (currently BJP MP) B. L. Sharma elegantly described it in an interview he gave to a group of us in April 1991” (Sharma 2013: 144). Sarkar is also quick to highlight that it is not only in birth where the demographic growth of Islam in India is regarded as dangerous, but also in death because “a dead Muslims always grabs a bit of land by burial, unlike the self-effacing cremated Hindu”.

Similarly, as Elia Zureik asserts, “Israel’s policies toward the Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line remain tied to demographic considerations” (Zureik 2003: 621). To demonstrate how “of the various reasons (such as security, absorptive capacity, religion and the endangering of its culture) Israel gives for flouting international conventions and opposing the return of Palestinian refugees to their homes, none is as important as demography”, he quotes the former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak who, during the Camp David Summit in 2000, underlined “demography” as “an ‘existential’ question” for Israel. Far from this focus on demography being a pragmatic or strategic choice prompted by circumstances, Zureik affirms that “opposition to the return of Palestinian refugees, and indeed to the continued substantial Palestinian presence in the ancestral homeland, is linked to the ‘Jewishness’ of the state”, thereby marking it as an essential aspect of Zionism.

A second resonance between Hindutva and Zionism is their respective relationships with militarism. Above how prominently notions of masculinity feature in the works of Savarkar, Casolari outlines the history of the Hindu Mahasabha’s “creation of a national militia” as the second World War broke out in 1939 (Casolari 2000: 226). B.S. Moonje, the noted mentor of K.B. Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS, was placed in charge of setting up this militia. Moonje, as Casolari shows, was one of the main early points of contact between Hindu Nationalists and the fascist regime in Italy, having travelled there in 1931 to meet with Benito Mussolini in order to learn how “to transfer fascist models to Hindu society and to organise it militarily, according to fascist patterns” (218). According to Moonje, the objective of the militia was “the defence of India both from external and internal aggression” (in Casolari 2000: 226) with Casolari remarking “Who could be the internal aggressors if not the Muslims?” in response. Indeed, Dilip Simeon underlines “the de-facto preparation for civil war and the continued activity of militias and vigilante groups” as an attempt by Hindu Nationalists, whose RSS is
“largest private army” in India, to “spread [war] inwards, into the entrails of the polity” (Simeon 2013: 203).

There exists some debate among Zionists regarding where the roots of Israeli militarism lie. Baruch Kimmerling in a 1993 article titled “Patterns of Militarism in Israel” sketches out some of the differing historiographic positions. He summarises the work of the Israeli sociologist Uri Ben-Eliezer as locating these roots in “the Jewish political community (the Yishuv) which developed in colonial or Mandatory Palestine [where] the conclusion that only force resolved the Jewish-Arab conflict was conclusively adopted”, noting that “this conclusion has remained operative ever since” (198). Ben-Eliezer in the introduction to his book The Making of Israeli Militarism states that post-1948 war Israeli “social organization produced a situation in which differences between military and civilian were blurred, while the army and all things military became the linchpin of the national consciousness and the focal point of public life” (Ben-Eliezer 1998: 15). In this sense, like how the RSS has prepared India for civil war, as Simeon asserted, the Israeli state, too, kept its citizens “in a constant state of preparedness, mental and material, for war” (Ben-Eliezer 1998: 15).

A third resonance between Hindutva and Zionism is the role the British Empire played in the emergence of both as ideological movements. Of course, it is useful to note here that they both began gaining popular currency around a similar time, with Sukumar Muralidharan even suggesting that the “shades of opinion within Hindu revivalism corresponded, though not always exactly, to a similar differentiation within Zionism” (Muralidharan 2014: 83). In the case of Hindutva, it is significant to recall that V.D. Savarkar was appointed, after his imprisonment in the Andaman Islands, “never again played any significant or insignificant part in the anti-imperialist struggle”, rather “he openly began to look upon the British Empire as a boon and an opportunity to cleanse India of the Muslims” (Nandy 2014: 99). In the case of Zionism, where British support was already promised through the issuing of the Balfour Declaration of 1917, leaders did not initially seek “a struggle against the Crown” (Ben-Eliezer 1998: 1). Although the Zionist relationship with Britain later soured, it is undeniable that it was through the complicity of the British that much of the Jewish migration to Palestine was able to take place in the 1920s and 1930s. What is more striking about this trend, however, is how both Zionism and Hindutva aligned themselves, and continue to align themselves (as will be discussed later in this article), with broader structures and processes of power in order to achieve their objectives.

The development of both ideologies was also characterised by the insistence that states may only be inhabited by a community or nation in the singular and not the plural. Ashis Nandy, for instance, traces Savarkar’s anti-Muslim position not to “ideas of ritual purity and impurity or caste hierarchy”, since he was, of course,
not a believing man, but instead “from his prognosis of communities that could
or could not be integrated – assimilated or dissolved – within the framework of a
modern Indian state” (Nandy 2014: 103). Nandy links this to how “the standard
conventions of a nation-state within the Westphalian model constituted his reli-
gion” and how “he brought to it the fervour of a fundamentalist”. This view is also
adopted by the more religiously-observant Golwalkar, who similarly argued that
“Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for Races and cultures,
having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole”,
calling it a vindication for his belief in the five unities that a nation must bear
(Golwalker 1939: 88). The founder of modern Zionism, Theodor Herzl, articu-
lated a not-too-dissimilar imperative in 1895 when he wrote that “We shall try to
spirit the penniless [Arab] population across the border by procuring employment
for it in the transit countries, while denying it any employment in our country”
(in Zureik 2003: 619). More aggressively, however, David Ben Gurion declared
before the Peel Commission “that the Jews were the only truly national group
in Palestine” (in Ben-Eliezer 1998: 5), thereby making the point that “they did
not acknowledge the existence of a Palestinian entity deserving of a state” (Ben-
Eliezer 1998: 5).

Ghassan Hage outlines “the place and function of extremism in the political
field” as one of his features of what he calls “the settler colonial ethos” (Hage
2016: 40) and this brings us to the final parallel that I will discuss here between
Zionist politics and those of Hindu Nationalists; namely, the contestation of holy
sites, most significantly (but not exclusively) embodied by the positions of the Al
Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and the now-demolished Babri Masjid in Ayodhya.
For the Indian political commentator A.G. Noorani, there “there was no other way
that the RSS political front could have won power” without the campaigning of
the BJP on Ayodhya, as former Deputy Prime Minister and co-founder of the BJP
L.K. Advani “has acknowledged time and again” (Advani 2002: ix). In Jerusalem,
extremist leaders such as Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu demand that “the government
should tell Muslims occupying the site that they have been keeping it for us up
to now and that they can now leave for Syria” (in Sharma 2022). Pranay Sharma
points out how this echoes calls “from sections in India asking Muslims to go to
Pakistan” (Sharma 2022).

**Overlaps Between Indian State Policy and Hindutva Attitudes Towards
Palestine**

Prabir Purkayastha writes that, for India, “the Israel-Palestine issue is not about
a battle in a distant land where some people have been colonised and disenfran-
chised” (Purkayastha 2014: 58). Instead, he argues that “for us in India, it is an
integral part of how we view the Indian nation and its foreign policy” and that “it
is about the content of Indian nationalism, and the attempt to redefine it in narrow sectarian terms”. In this sense, Purkayastha concludes that Indian attempts to “to separate its Israel policy from the Palestinian one”, as it has attempted to do at multiple points, “necessarily builds a contradiction into it” (69). In looking at India’s West Asia policy, from its earliest days to the present, it is useful to recall Achin Vanaik’s point that India’s view of Palestine had always been a result of “realpolitik considerations” rather than principle (Vanaik 2014: 104). Accordingly, Nicolas Blarel traces Indian “non-engagement with Israel” to an objective of “neutralizing Pakistani efforts in seeking assistance from Muslim and Arab countries against India, notably in their territorial dispute over Kashmir”, thereby limiting “India’s diplomatic leverage in the region” (Blarel 2014: 11). Additionally, Blarel centres India’s desire to access sealanes in West Asia, particularly the “the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, and the Strait of Babel Mandeb”, in devising policy towards Israel (13). With this in mind, it is easy to read the caution of Indian leaders vis-à-vis Israel in the 1940s and 1950s as an attempt to “avoid antagonizing Egypt which controlled the access to the Suez Canal”.

While India appeared to back the Palestinian cause in its early days of independence, it is often overlooked that Jawaharlal Nehru, normally the target of Hindu Nationalist scorn himself, had viewed Israel and Palestine in ways that often overlapped with the Hindutva outlook. Vanaik notes that Nehru “always had a certain admiration for Israel, given, among other things, the Holocaust” and, “out of deference to Arab concerns”, had “allowed the subsequent setting up of consulates” in each other’s states (Vanaik 2014: 103). In 1954, he also refused to allow India to recognise “that the creation of Israel was a violation of international law” (in Vanaik 2014: 103). Furthermore, Nehru’s India was one of two states, alongside Burma, who pushed for Israel’s inclusion at the Bandung Conference of 1955. Although this was eventually scuppered by Egypt, Pakistan, and other states, Nahed Samour notes that the discussion of Palestine at Bandung “as a central topic, especially by Egypt, India, and China”, paid little regard to the agency of Palestinians, who “were excluded and effectively ignored, even when later occasionally nominally represented” (Samour 2017: 601-602). Nehru also “argued that the conference should take no specific stance on the Arab-Israeli conflict” (Samour 2017: 609). This was, in part, informed by Nehru’s own disregard for Muslim lives in the context of his own political scheming as well as his pro-Hindu communalism (Ahmad 2022b).

Indian policy in more recent decades bears much more visible overlaps with the Hindutva outlook on Palestine. Purkayastha points out that “perceiving Palestine as a cause for Muslims does have many votaries”, and this was expressed “during the India US Nuclear Deal debate 2005 onward, [where] many who supported the deal privately expressed indignation: Muslims, they said, cannot hold India’s foreign
policy to ransom” (Purkayastha 2014: 58). In this sense, Hindu Nationalists within the Indian policy sphere, like Brajesh Mishra, India’s first National Security Advisor, demand for Palestinians under Israeli rule (whether civic or military) what they expect from Muslims in India – that they follow one of two courses, both prescribed by their Guruji Golwalkar: “either to merge themselves in the national race and adopt its culture, or to live at its mercy so long as the national race may allow them to do so and to quit the country at the sweet will of the national race” (1939: 104). This view is also espoused by other BJP senior figures, like Subramanian Swamy, who invoked Samuel Huntington’s clash of civilisations thesis – convincingly dismantled by the Palestinian scholar Edward Said (2001) – to argue that “Zion and the Hindutva state is today under attack from Islamic extremists, and therefore there is a commonality in our viewing of international events” (Swamy 2019b).

Palestine vs. Hindutva

What is clear so far in this analysis is that Palestine, and the Palestinian cause, sticks out as an anathema to many of the axioms and objectives that Hindu Nationalists have adopted, both historically and contemporarily, and both while in control and out of control of state power in India. While there are many reasons for this, this Hindu Nationalist disdain for the Palestinian cause loosely boils down to a resistance to accept four of its most significant facets. It is relevant here to state that not all the actors who are involved in the Palestinian cause view it in all of these ways, but what is significant is that such trends within Palestinian liberationist thinking do exist and are prominent in activism and resistance within different circles and places.

The first, and most obvious of these facets is that Palestine is viewed by many as an Islamic or Muslim struggle. Shira Robinson, in reference to Israel’s exclusion from participation from involvement at the Bandung Conference states that Israel was concerned by the fact that “the leaders of the new Asian states, inhabited by the largest Muslim communities in the world, would seek common cause with the Arab world in its support for Palestinian self-determination” (Robinson 2013: 157). Rashid Khalidi also cites the secretary of state for India commenting, as the clouds of World War Two began to form above the world, that “the Palestine problem is not merely an Arabian problem, but is fast becoming a Pan-Islamic problem”, warning “serious trouble” could break out in India should Britain still be seen to be enabling Zionist colonialism (Khalidi 2020: 3). The attitudes of Indian Muslims towards Palestine, of course, were difficult for the British to overlook during that historical moment due to the necessity of involving Muslim soldiers in the upcoming war. Noor-Aimen Khan, going even further back in the timeline, alludes to the significance of the Palestinian anti-colonial struggle to the Islamic Congresses of the 1920s and 1930s who were concerned about both “the problem
of colonialism” and “the identity of Islam” (Khan 2011: 105). Today Palestine remains significant for many Islamically-inspired political movements around the world.

The Palestinian struggle is also a pluralistic struggle that, in many cases, does not ascribe to the Zionist or Hindu Nationalist views of the exclusivity and supremacism of states. Rather, invoking concepts such as indigeneity alongside the more commonplace notion of anticolonial nationalism, affords the Palestinian cause a significant degree of pluralism and inclusivity that draws together “all Palestinians, wherever they may be” into the struggle against their erasure and dispossession (Amara and Hawari 2019). In relation to this, the Palestinian scholar Nadim Rouhana theorises, in the context of the expansion of “local and global movements challenging Israel’s legitimacy as an exclusively Jewish state”, a form of Palestinian nationalism he calls Homeland Nationalism that is “centered on politically reclaiming the homeland, as distinct from other minority nationalisms and legal and political claims of indigenous peoples elsewhere” (Rouhana 2015: 2). He characterises Palestinian nationalism in the wake of 1948 as being “dominated by a focus on regaining the lost homeland” and posits a link between the homeland nationalism of Palestinian citizens of Israel as being “a part the general Palestinian homeland nationalism that continued uninterrupted since the early 20th century” (5). This facet of the Palestinian cause implicitly rejects the hardline Westphalian ideals fanatically embraced by Hindutva ideologues.

The third facet of the Palestinian cause that exists as a point of tension with Hinutva’s global outlook is that it is a global cause. Palestine, according to John Collins, is “an excellent example of what Arjun Appadurai calls a ‘process geography’” in that it is a place where global processes are shaped (Collins 2011: 4). Going further back in history, it is also true that Palestine and India were thought of, not only by the British Empire, but also by anticolonial intellectuals such as Wadi Bustani as being “important linkages in a larger colonial frame which stretched across Asia and Africa” (Elhalaby 2021: 5). Coming back to the present, Collins points out that the discourse of terrorism, which informs much of the contemporary Hindutva perspectives on Palestine, is also the result of how “settler states responded [to the Palestinian use of spectacular political violence] by waging increasingly aggressive and repressive campaigns against these groups both inside and outside their own borders while leading the construction and circulation of a new discourse of anti-terrorism” (17). The product of the Palestinian cause’s position vis-à-vis these “borderless wars and generalised obsession with security” has led to Palestine becoming “both the site of a struggle to decolonise itself and a key node in the globally networked struggle to decolonise a world whose current structures of inequality and injustice have been shaped by the global politics of settler colonialism” (Collins 2011: 17-18).
Given the reliance of Global Hindutva on the role of corporate capital at home and abroad, the final facet of the Palestinian cause that must be mentioned is that the Palestinian cause entails an anti-capitalist struggle. According to Nahla Abdo, the emergence of a capitalist economy in Palestine during the early twentieth century played a role in dispossessing Indigenous Palestinians of their lands “and, through Zionist racist-nationalistic policies they were prevented from having access to their land even as wage labourers” (Abdo 1991: 82). This trend of the economy playing a role in the displacement of Palestinians continues today under the Israeli state’s embrace of neoliberalism, as demonstrated by scholars such as Nadia Abu El-Haj, who points out that the “the retrenchment of Labor Zionism in favour both of reduced labour protections and social services, and of capital with an increasingly global reach, and the importation of cheap Thai and Filipino labour to replace Palestinian workers” have all contributed to the dispossession and erasure of Palestinians (Abu El-Haj 2010: 39). Referencing the work of Gadi Algazi, she argues that this is because the settler movement has moved “away from a primary reliance on the ‘messianic fervour of hard-line settlers’”, rather “government policies have successfully broadened ‘the power base of the colonization movement, forging a powerful alliance of state, political and capitalist interests, well-off home-buyers and those suffering real hardship: large families looking for cheap housing or new immigrants dependent on government subsidies and seeking social acceptance’” – thereby making neoliberal capital subservient to Israeli settler colonialism (39). With this in mind, it is no wonder then that capitalism is also a target of resistance for the Palestinian cause, inviting further contempt from Hindu Nationalists.

**Hindu Nationalist Mobilisations Against Palestine**

While the process of India soliciting Israeli military technology and expertise began under Nehru’s premiership during the 1962 Sino-Indian War, where Nehru “created a precedent in obtaining military assistance from Israel without requiring any diplomatic exchange, or even publicly acknowledging the existence of such security assistance” (Blarel in Pate 2020: 8), the Indian military relationship with Israel really began to flourish first after full normalisation was achieved in 1992 and second when the BJP rose to power in Indian politics, which “removed some hesitations about Israel [since] to the BJP, with its nationalist, Hindu outlook, the Jewish state was not so much a diplomatic burden as a potential ally against Pakistan and radical Islam” (Inbar 2004: 90). Significantly though, Vanaik suggests that it is realistic that the Indian military establishment has long contained “a significant proportion of officers and soldiers have long been sympathetic to Hindutva” (Vanaik 2018: 37). Purkayastha points out that Israeli defence contractors and commission agents have become so deeply entrenched within the Indian defence establishment that
India to the point of being “detrimental to India’s long-term interests” (Purkayastha 2014: 68). For him, this dependence on Israel “means tying India’s foreign policy to Israel’s narrow interests, not only in West Asia but also globally” thus demonstrating how Hindu Nationalism has played a role in continuing to realise Israel’s settler colonial ambitions – especially since much of the technology and expertise in question is developed through “battle-testing” on Palestinians.

Another Hindu Nationalist mobilisation against the Palestinian cause, involves the Indian alignment with the Global War on Terror. Rupal Oza discussed in 2007 how the BJP in India and the Israeli Likud party “began to cohere around strategies to combat the ‘same extremist enemy’” as a means of positioning “themselves alongside the United States in its ‘war on terror’” (p.9). Tanvi Pate, using archival material from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs argues that:

the framing of Israel as a democracy fighting terrorism in the Middle East enables the [Indian] policymakers to draw similarities between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ as both India and Israel are described to be ‘young nations with an ancient history’ that have attained statehood after many tribulations; ‘democracy’ underpins their political systems and both are inspired by same ‘human values and ideals’

– thus echoing the arguments of early Hindu Nationalists (Pate 2020: 17). Furthermore, she argues that one of the Modi government’s flagship campaigns, Make in India, through which Israeli technology is now being manufactured in India (see Frantzman 2020 for example), also “underscored ‘strong commitment’ to combat terrorism in all forms” (24). In a jointly-authored blog post in the Times of India, Modi and Netanyahu make this position clear by stating that they both “both recognise the threat terrorism poses to our countries and to global peace and stability” (Modi and Netanyahu 2017). In this field, Hindutva then becomes an active agent in configuring the Palestinian cause as a “scourge” to be fought (Modi and Netanyahu 2017).

As mentioned earlier in this article, Global Hindutva seeks to take advantage of opportunities posed by larger structures of power to achieve its objectives. One such structure is that of world capitalism, which elements of the Palestinian cause is also involved in action resistance against. The Hindutva effort to profit from extant trends within wider politics and economics can be seen in how the BJP redefined the term “swadeshi” during the 1990s.5 A recent example of how this has been used to damage the Palestinian cause may be seen in the Indian purchase of Israel’s Haifa Port, which Sai Englert asserts bore a “political character […] writ large” as seen in that “the bid that ASPEZ and the Gadot Group put forward was a full 55 percent higher than that of its closest competitor and followed diplomatic pressure from the United States to sideline a Chinese offer” (Englert 2022). The man at the centre of the purchase was Gautam Adani, a staunch supporter of Modi
and one of the richest men in India. James Crabtree in his book *Billionaire Raj* outlines how Modi and Adani’s symbiotic relationship profited them both at the expense of first the Muslims of Gujarat and later those of India (Crabtree 2018: 55-56). This purchase took place in the context of the creation of a new “West Asia Quad”, consisting of the United States, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and India, set up as “a new informal bloc to expand trade and political cooperation in the Middle East and Asia” (Essa 2022b). The further entrenchment of these structures of neoliberal trade bear a significant impact on the status of Palestinians both inside and outside of Historic Palestine.

While this section has largely focused on Hindu Nationalist mobilisations through the institutions of the Indian state, the final mobilisation that I will outline occurs almost completely in diaspora communities. There exists an effort by Hindu Nationalists and supporters of Israeli settler colonialism globally to construct an alliance that seeks to construct a concept of Hinduphobia that is analogous with antisemitism, and then to weaponise its use to silence anti-Hindutva activism in the way the accusation of antisemitism has done the same to pro-Palestine activism. Amrit Wilson (2019) discusses this in terms of British politics, where pro-Hindutva MPs enlisted the support of the Campaign Against Anti-Semitism (CAA) to “help eradicate the ‘duty’ on the government to make Caste an aspect of race in the Equality Act of 2010” on the basis of their role in passing the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s (IHRA) definition of antisemitism in the Labour Party. According to Wilson, “the IHRA definition is worded in such a way that people who want to criticise the behaviour of Israel against the Palestinians would be classed as anti-Semitic” and Conservative MP Bob Blackman and Lord Jitesh Gadhia “were seeking something similar to prevent criticism of the BJP government in Britain”. This alliance is backed up by the Hindu Council UK, who criticised Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party for its position on India’s revocation of Article 370 in Kashmir and for “polarising Hindu and Muslim relations”, stating that “Jeremy Corbyn always speaks against Islamophobia, whereas any anti-Semitic and anti-Hindu positions remain unchallenged” (in Honeycombe-Foster 2019). A similar phenomenon is emerging in the United States, where organisations such as the American Jewish Committee see parallels between the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) Movement and what it calls the “anti-Hindu movement” that is, in reality, an anti-BJP movement (Loewenberg 2021).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is evident from this reading of the history of the rise and mobilisations of Global Hindutva that there are very real and practical connections between the struggles of its victims in India and the struggle of Palestinians and their supporters.
around the globe. Hindu Nationalists adhere to a worldview that feels threatened by the very norms that the Palestinian struggle takes for granted, since notions such as pluralism, anti-capitalism, and an Islamic inspiration within the political field undermine the veracity of the most foundational axioms accepted by Hindu Nationalists. The Palestinian struggle, in turn, is a target of action for Hindu Nationalists, who not only see in Israel a political configuration that is to be emulated in India, but also a partner within the same project in a global context.

It is useful to note that this study represents a foundation from which further work exploring Global Hindutva’s tie-ups in West Asia must be carried out. The article’s main argument regarding how Hindu Nationalists construct Indian Muslim and Palestinian subjectivities as being analogous and connected through tropes of them being invaders and terrorists – in line with broader imperialist constructions of Muslim subjectivities – demonstrates the significance of Global Hindutva to the global network sustaining Israeli settler colonialism. This also inevitably links it to other actors and other constellations of power whose impacts extend far beyond the borders of South Asia and Hindutva’s imagined Akhand Bharat. Furthermore, this article demonstrates the importance of adopting a multidimensional approach to examining both regional and global political economies and economies of politics, taking into account the experiences and struggles of a variety of multi-identitied (and often overlapping) communities, such as Muslims (in their various respective geographies as well as globally), Palestinians, Dalits, and other Indigenous peoples, as well as the contexts and norms within which those struggles exist.

Notes

1 The primary Hindu Nationalist paramilitary volunteer organisation, founded by K.B. Hedgewar in 1925.
2 Later changed to HSS, for Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, which is how the RSS organisations outside of India are known.
3 The head of the RSS.
4 “We five, ours twenty-five”.
5 For more on this, see Gopalakrishnan (2006).

Bibliography


