

BOOKS

# **In State Repression and Its Justification, India and Israel Have Much in Common**

Friday 3 November 2023, by [VANAIAK Achin](#) (Date first published: 15 May 2023).

**Azad Essa's 'Hostile Homelands: The New Alliance Between India and Israel' has courage and integrity. It traces the beginning of India-Israel ties, unmasking successive governments, and carries a warning for the future.**

*Today, May 15, is observed as Nakba Day, to remember the Nakba - the destruction of Palestinian society and homeland in 1948, and the displacement that followed since the establishment of Israel.*

There is a remarkable dearth of books about the Indo-Israel political relationship past and present. The few that have been written may differ in how enthusiastically they welcome the growing relationship both on realist grounds of India's more 'hard-headed' pursuit of its national interests and because as two West-oriented democracies facing hostile neighbours they have much in common that needs further nourishing.

This book is different in two key respects. In tracing the evolution of India's ties with Israel it unmasks the actual attitude and behaviour of Congress-led governments as distinct from their public posturing of solidarity with the Palestinian cause, while breaking newer ground in elucidating the ideological kinship and policy affinities between Zionism and Hindutva.

Second, there is a particular focus on the massive military presence in J&K (especially of the Valley) and how the mechanics of Israeli control in the Occupied Territories (OT) have provided similar lessons for India.

That the author is a progressive South African of Indian origin and a former journalist of *Al Jazeera* also explains why he wrote this particular book. Those against SA apartheid have always seen more clearly the inherently anti-Palestinian apartheid character of Israel as a Zionist settler-colonial entity. Moreover, Essa used to cover Kashmir for the Doha-based international media network which apparently under pressure from New Delhi asked him to take it somewhat easy. Now a senior reporter for the *Middle East Eye*, that experience, he reveals, was a spur to his taking Kashmir up again.

This book has five chapters and 40 pages of end notes where key developments in the burgeoning relationship are scrupulously referenced to original sources making the book an authoritative treasure trove of information.

Chapter one starts by looking at what Gandhi and Nehru said and felt about the Zionist quest relating it to their concerns before independence about securing Muslim loyalty against the appeal of the Muslim League; and after 1947 about assuaging the then wider, seemingly more powerful, Arab bloc as against the small newly emerging Israel. Gandhi had close influential Zionist friends foremost among whom, but not mentioned in the book, was Herman Kallenbach his SA 'soul mate'.

In 1946 Gandhi was persuaded to declare that “the Jews have a prior claim” to that of the Arabs. As for Nehru, though India did vote against the unjust UN partition plan for Israel’s formation, he recognised in 1950 an Israel that had been territorially formed through ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. A small ‘immigration’ office of Israel was subsequently set up in Mumbai. But Nehru did suggest inviting Israel to the Bandung Conference of 1955 while in 1962, after the skirmish with China, Nehru opened back-channels with Israel to secure some arms and then in 1963 again requested this along with intelligence cooperation. After Nehru these back-channels continued and further arms purchases took place during the 1965 and 1971 wars with Pakistan.

In 1975, India publicly supported a UN Resolution equating Zionism with racism but by 1991 would vote for the annulment of this very same Resolution. In the early 1980s, Indira Gandhi would seek and get support from the RSS and the Sangh for her opposition to the Khalistan agitation.

After her assassination, Rajiv Gandhi would follow suit adopting a ‘pragmatic, non-ideological and managerialist’ approach domestically (the [opening of the locks of Babri Masjid](#) and the [Shah Bano issue](#)) and towards Zionism externally. In October 1985 a few days after [Israel had bombarded the PLO headquarters in Tunis killing 60 people](#) - which act India condemned - RG would not hesitate to meet Shimon Peres on the sidelines of a UNGA meet.

This book reminds us that Subramanian Swamy, the rightwing economist, a Hindu nationalist and a votary for full diplomatic relations with Israel, was then part of RG’s inner advisory circle. The idea of moving fast towards normalizing relations with Israel in the name of modernization and breaking away from older shibboleths of ‘non-alignment’ which in any case had always been more rhetoric than anything else for guiding Indian foreign policy, had taken root.

Chapter two starts with the story of J&K’s accession to India and then traces the evolution of the bilateral military-security relationship from 1990 to the present. The standard Indian tale is that Pathan soldiers, backed by the newly installed Pakistan government, invaded J&K causing Maharaja Hari Singh to accede to India on October 26, 1947 which then sent in troops to counter the northern assault. The UN mediated a ceasefire in January 1949 and called for mutual troop withdrawal followed by a plebiscite, neither of which took place. The true story is briefly touched upon here but is given fuller explication elsewhere in C. Snedden, [Understanding Kashmir and Kashmiris \(Speaking Tiger, 2017\)](#).

Between August and October 1947 there was an armed insurrection to overthrow Dogra rule in Poonch, inter-religious violence in another part of the province and the rise of an internal ‘Azad Kashmir’ movement. If the entry of Pathans was one response to all this, the other was the Hari Singh’s desperate call to New Delhi for help. This was given on condition that there must first be a formal accession. Sheikh Abdullah’s first preference was independence but in the given circumstances he accepted maximum autonomy within India. This desire would resurface after disappointment with the erosion of the autonomy promised and would lead to his spells of imprisonment till he was eventually freed as a much tamed figure. For Essa, and not just him, the plight of both Palestinians and Kashmiris is the denial of their respective right to self-determination.

India established full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992 and two years later engagement on defence and security issues was formalised. Before, during and beyond the 1999 Kargil war, this relationship, involving all kinds of military-related purchases and deepening collaboration between DRDO, RAW, etc. and their Israeli counterparts, was duly covered. Of particular note is how after the November 2008 Islamist attack on Mumbai, Israel helped India set up a surveillance infrastructure under a designated Central Monitoring System to give it the capacity to move from targeted to mass surveillance. [[Pegasus we know about](#)].

*Mumbai: File picture of an Anti Terrorist Squad officer pictured on guard outside the Taj Hotel.  
Credit: PTI*

Between 2003 and 2013 India became Israel's top arms customer. Under Modi, the de-hyphenation of India's ties with Israel and the Palestinian Authority is almost complete with mutual Prime Ministerial visits; regularisation of training programmes for security and police personnel in 'crowd control, counter-terrorism and border management'; a quantitative leap in arms purchases where India also serves as a conduit for sales to countries that will not do such business directly with Israel; many more abstentions and rejections of UN resolutions criticising Israel. Lip service at a much feebler level and civilian funds for the Palestinians continues.

But something new took place domestically. According to its own military jargon, Israel periodically "mows the lawn" i.e., assaults Gaza on the slightest provocation. In July 2014 allegedly in retaliation to Hamas rockets that killed 67 soldiers and 6 civilians, Israel launched Operation Protective Edge - a ground and air invasion over 50 days which flattened the Strip, (and not counting injuries inflicted), killed 2,251 Palestinians including 1,462 civilians.

When, days later, the opposition in the Lok Sabha tried to pass a resolution condemning Israel's disproportionate response, Modi blocked it. The Abraham Accords of 2020 delighted New Delhi and on July 14, 2022, an India-Israel-UAE-US group was officially established for joint economic purposes. Hours later Haifa port (Israel's most important) was sold to Adani Ports to operate jointly with the Israeli company Gador.

Chapters three and four are respectively about the Hindutva-Zionism kinship and on how pro-BJP/RSS/VHP diasporic groups in the US seek to emulate and align with the Zionist lobby there. Indian readers will be largely familiar with what is provided here about the evolution of Hindutva, the influence of Savarkar and European fascism, and the emergence of the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS/Sangh Parivar. Within Zionism there were more diverse currents - a far-right revisionist current, a more socialist-inclined labour Zionism, a secular political current and a cultural-religious one. But agreement that the territory mandated to Palestine must be theirs meant ethnic cleansing to create a majority Jewish state became a further unifying imperative.



*Palestine flag. Credit: Wikimedia Commons*

It is not the emphasis on religion but the politicisation of religion that is common to the Hindutva and Zionist projects as also the racially exclusivist character of the two nationalisms. Both ideological narratives talk simultaneously of the virtues of an aggressive militarism and propagate the myth that the ethnic community it represents has suffered perpetual victimhood from dangers, home and abroad.

Israel welcomes support from any Indian government, the stronger the better no matter its ideological make-up. Israel is a Jewish state but India is not yet a Hindu one. Admiration and emulation flows from Hindutva to Zionist Israel, the learner to the teacher. This is particularly the case for the growing BJP/Sangh lobby vis-a-vis the Israel and Zionist lobby (the two are not the same

but do substantially overlap) in the US.

The book provides details of how these Hindutva diasporic groups emerged and grew as well as their developing links with counterparts within the Israel lobby. Of the 4.2 million people of Indian origin in the US, 2.6 million are US citizens and most are socio-economically well placed. Essa refers to the findings of two recent Carnegie studies that found young (18-29yrs) Indian Americans more sceptical of Modi (43%) as compared to the over 50s (25%). Those born in India were more supportive of Modi (53%) than the US born (44%). Engineers (66%) were more supportive of Modi than non-engineers (48%). But overall just 39% of Indian Americans polled were concerned with developments in India. There are a number of anti-Hindutva groups in the US but clearly they have some way to go to popularise their case within the diaspora.

In the last chapter the author readily admits that though the occupations of Kashmir and Palestine are different - the second is by a settler-colonial state - there are two main areas of similarity.

The first is in the manner in which repression and political control is carried out. Indeed, in terms of the ratio of armed personnel to civilians, Kashmir is the world's most militarised zone.

*Representative image. Security forces in Kashmir. Photo: PTI/Files*

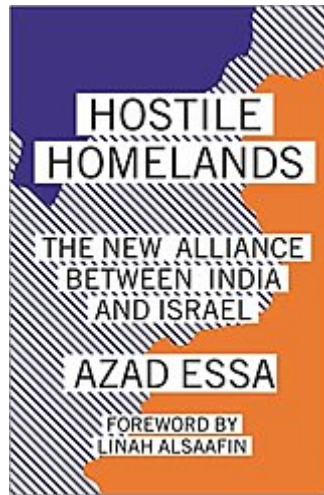
The second is in the discourse of justification: protection of the nation and the ethnic inheritors of its civilisational legacy versus the 'terrible' practitioners of terrorism, internal and external. More importantly, especially after Modi's reading down of Article 370 and 35A, there are striking parallels in government behaviour. Israel is grabbing more land in the OT and Arab East Jerusalem by manipulated legalism and military might. India is doing the same in Kashmir taking vast tracts for 'security and development' purposes. Non-Kashmiris and private companies can now invest and purchase land thereby threatening local livelihoods.

In the OT settler expansion is taking place. Under the guise of returning Pandits as settlers in 'protected enclaves' not as neighbours, the lessons provided by Israeli practices are being taken on board. The Indian Consul-General S. Chakravorty in New York in November 2019 indicated as much. In pursuing demographic change India has more reason for optimism than Israel. New residency permits will increase the influx of Hindus into J&K and their right to state and municipal government jobs while the gerrymandering that has taken place to increase Hindu-majority constituencies will favour the BJP once J&K statehood and assembly elections are restored.

What gives hope is that popular resistance to their injustices will continue in both Palestine and Kashmir. But a personal note of caution. The Palestinian cause enjoys widespread international sympathy and solidarity that is missing when it comes to Kashmir. However, because of the changes wrought by the Modi government, Pakistan, an unavoidable regional factor in the Kashmir imbroglio, has been turned into a something of a permanent enemy. The possibility of military escalation to dangerous heights between two nuclear powers is absent in the Middle East.

This review has been more of an exposition than a critique because this reviewer shares the political and moral assumptions of the author and applauds the courage and integrity of this text. A double source of pleasure for this reviewer will be not just the angry reactions of Hindutva-ites to this book but also the all too likely irritation and dismissiveness of the more *realpolitik*-minded 'foreign policy experts' which will say much more about them than about this work.

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*'Hostile Homelands: The New Alliance Between India and Israel,' Azad Essa, Pluto Press, 2023.*

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**P.S.**

• The Wire. 15/MAY/2023:

<https://thewire.in/books/india-israel-palestine-kashmir-azad-ressa>

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