

## **Religious nationalism and foreign policy: India and Israel compared**

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### Comparing India and Israel

The emergence of India and Israel as independent states in 1947-48 highlighted the power of religious identity to shape political outcomes. While India was partitioned as a result of the demand for a separate Pakistan for the subcontinent's Muslims, Israel came into being as the fulfilment of the Zionist vision of Palestine as a homeland for Jews throughout the world. Yet the post-independence leadership of both countries sought to create states informed by secular rather than religious political principles. This paper examines the role of religion in foreign policy in India and Israel with particular reference to the recent salience of Hindu nationalism and religious Zionism. It explores the influence of religion in shaping the foreign policy environment and the perceptions of Indian and Israeli policymakers, focusing in particular on the relationship between secular state interest and nationalism predicated on religious identity. The argument is that for both countries it is imperative to transcend religious nationalism if they are to secure their international position.

Few observers concerned themselves with the significance of 'Hindu' nationalism for Indian foreign policy until the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to lead the national government, followed almost immediately by the nuclear tests of May 1998. Now it is widely accepted as a significant factor in considering India's foreign policy (e.g. Haynes 2007: 367,374), being seen as reinforcing longstanding hostility towards Pakistan and inspiring a more aggressive Indian attitude (Jones 2004: 27,29).

In the case of Israel too, despite the central role of religious identity in bringing the Jewish state into being in 1948, religion was rarely mentioned in discussing the foreign policy of that state. However, by the early 1990s the success of Jewish fundamentalism in shaping the public discourse in Israel was admitted (Silberstein 1993: 21-2). In fact, some even saw religion as having replaced secular right- and left-wing expressions of Zionism as 'the source of political legitimation for the state' (Ehrlich 2003: 93).

The similarities in the political trajectory followed by India and Israel have not escaped attention. Ilan Pappé has commented on how 'Both parties [the neo-Zionists and the BJP] wish to demolish a part of a few hundred years old in the name of a distant past a few thousand years old' (Pappé 2003: 55). (When the right-wing Likud Prime Minister Ariel Sharon became the first Israeli premier to visit India in September 2003, as a guest of the BJP-led government, critics denounced the apparent emerging convergence in Indian and Israeli foreign policy, one describing it as an

entente ‘between Hindutva and Sharonism in the shadow of US imperialism’ (Prashad 2003: 10).)

The paper begins by looking at the connection between religion, nationalism and the creation of the modern state in India and Israel before discussing the role, if any, that religion played in shaping the foreign policy of both states under their first prime ministers, Jawaharlal Nehru and David Ben-Gurion. It then turns to the growth of religious nationalism as a political force in both countries from the late 1960s on and its influence on government in the last twenty or thirty years. The paper considers how far the development of a certain convergence in the foreign and defence policies of India and Israel can be ascribed to the role of religious nationalism before ending by emphasising the dangers and limitations of the ideologies encapsulated by the terms *Hindutva* (Hindu-ness) and *Eretz Israel* (Land of Israel) in informing foreign policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Religion, nationalism and statehood

While Israel, like Pakistan, is ineffably marked by its creation on the basis of religious identity, few nation states can disclaim the influence of religion on their nationhood (Neuberger 1999: 77). For nationalism requires a human community and signifiers of identity and religion were often invaluable in providing both (Dieckhoff 2003: 128). In the case of Israel, Akiva Orr makes the telling point that ‘There is no secular definition of Jewishness.’ (Orr 1994: 50). Even the socialist Zionist collectivism of the early 20th century European Jewish settlers in Palestine may be seen as merely a secular variation of the *kehilla*, the Jewish congregation that served as the bedrock of traditional Jewish society (Dieckhoff 2003: 10). Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine, rationalised the relationship between secular Zionism and religion thus,

The spirit of Israel is so closely linked to the spirit of God that a Jewish nationalist, no matter how secularist his intention may be, is, despite himself, imbued with the divine spirit even against his own will. (Quoted in Goldberg 1996: 155)

In India the modern idea of Hinduism as a distinct religion developed in parallel with that of nationalism through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Hindu social reform movements that arose in British India from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century helped form the intellectual climate in which a nascent western-educated, predominantly upper caste and urban middle class began to inculcate notions of national political identity and self-government. (Derek Penslar has drawn a parallel between this and how the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century European Jewish enlightenment (*Haskalah*) contributed to the emergence of secular ideologies such as Zionism (Penslar 2007: 100-02).)

With the rise of Mahatma Gandhi to the leadership of Congress in the years immediately after the First World War, the connection between religion and Indian nationalism found its most striking embodiment. The transformation of Congress into much more of a mass movement over the next decades was marked by his use of the language and symbolism of religion to imbue it with a popular character. While this was not exclusively Hindu, it came to be widely perceived as predominantly so, especially by Muslims. Yet for many Congressmen, most notably Jawaharlal Nehru, it

was an article of faith that India should not be defined by religious identity, that a distinction had to be maintained between the broad civilisational legacy that they laid claim to and any narrowly defined Hindu religious identity (Nehru 1961: 74-6) – “if India was anything at all, it was *not* a ‘Hindu Pakistan’” (Guha 2007: 751). Yet the dilemma after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 was that as long as Pakistan existed it would sustain Hindu ‘fundamentalists’ in India (Guha 2007: 752).

In the event, the constitution that India endowed itself when it became a republic in 1950, while seeking to uphold the idea of a common, secular citizenship, created devices that affirmed religious and caste identities. It included provisions reserving seats in legislatures and shares in public jobs and educational institutions for low caste people, empowering the state to open all Hindu religious institutions to all classes of Hindus, protecting the right of minorities to establish and administer their own educational institutions, and even a non-justiciable directive principle urging the prohibition of the slaughter of cows, anathema to Brahminical Hindus. The ambiguity of Indian secularism reflected the contradictions besetting post-independence India: between the secular form of the modern state and a religious society, the demands of a putative nation state and the realities of a diverse federal polity (Chiriyankandath 2000: 21).

Despite the distinct identity of the Jewish people being the *raison d’être* for the state of Israel, what the nature of that state should be proved an irresolvable problem. Was it to be a Jewish State or a State of - or for – the Jews (Klein 2005: 242)? If the former, religious Jews expected the state to be one governed by religious law, the Torah and the Talmud. If the latter, what mattered was Jewishness as an ethnic badge rather than a religious identity. The Constituent Assembly elected in 1949 was unable to agree on drafting a constitution, resolving instead that the parliament (Knesset) should pass a series of Basic Laws that would substitute, eleven being passed between 1958 and 1994.

This represented the outcome of a historic compromise between the secular socialist Zionist leadership of the fledgling state and the ultra-orthodox anti-Zionist or non-Zionist *Haredi* Jews, the majority of whom refused to recognise the credentials of the Zionist state. The compromise was based on a June 1947 letter addressed by David Ben-Gurion to the leadership of Agudat Israel, an umbrella organisation of the ultra-Orthodox. The kernel of this included recognition of the Jewish Sabbath, maintaining *kashrut* (Jewish dietary laws) in public institutions, state funding of religious public schools, and the acceptance of Orthodox rabbinical authority over marriage and divorce (Dowty 1998: 166). It reflected the fact that Judaism was both a religion of law (*halakhah*) and a national religion (Ravitzky 2005: 137). The consequence has been a state marked by Jewish symbols (e.g. the Shield of David carried on the national flag and the *menorah* that is the national emblem), institutions (the unique statutory authority of the Sephardic and Ashkenazi Chief Rabbinate), language (Hebrew), holidays (Jewish Holy Days) and, of course, the 1950 Law of Return granting all Jews the right to Israeli citizenship (Dowty 1998: 187). As one writer pithily put it, there may be freedom of religion in Israel but no freedom *from* religion (Neuberger 1999: 78).

Jawaharlal Nehru reportedly told Andre Malraux that one of the greatest difficulties he faced was ‘creating a secular state in a religious country’ (Malraux 1968: 145) and

the formula devised in post-independence India, carrying on the anti-colonial Indian National Congress aspiration to be a kind of ‘political Noah’s Ark’ of all species of Indians (Guha 2007: 751), was one of enshrining the notion of ‘unity in diversity’. While there was no denying the religiosity of the mass of India’s population at independence, Israeli political leaders were also, as already noted, aware of the potential for a deeply divisive *Kulturkampf* (the word was actually used by one former prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir) over the relationship between state and religion (Shamir 1994: 160). Even though surveys in the 1990s found a fifth or quarter of Israeli Jews secular and non-observant, between a fifth and a third were found to be religiously observant, and the largest group - around half - were classed as somewhat observant or ‘traditional’ (Shahak 1999: 7; Penslar 2007: 70).

### Religion and foreign policy in India and Israel: pragmatic idealism and muscular realism

As new states in an international environment defined by the Cold War there were certain obvious, if crude, parallels between India and Israel. Both were erstwhile British territories that had to cope with the traumatic legacy of a bloody partition based on religious identity, a legacy that included unsettled borders with hostile Muslim neighbours. Both were led for the greater portion of the first two decades of their existence by professedly socialist Western-oriented prime ministers (Nehru and Ben-Gurion) at the head of political parties (Congress and Mapai/Labor) that dominated government for thirty years after independence. In addition, in both secularly inclined elites faced the task of managing the disruptive potential of the politics of religious identity. However, foreign policy choices were shaped, in large part, by the great differences between India and Israel – of geography, size, religion and colonial and pre-colonial history. India under Nehru opted for a foreign policy often expressed in idealist terms but leavened by a measure of pragmatism while Israel under Ben-Gurion embodied a muscular realism, albeit rationalised in idealistic language.

Taking office in 1995 in the wake of the assassination of his predecessor, Yitzhak Rabin, by a Jewish religious extremist, Prime Minister Shimon Peres recalled how he had ‘learned from my teacher and mentor David Ben-Gurion that to be "a light unto the nations" is a Jewish vision, and must be an Israeli strategy’ (Peres 1995). However, this often repeated Zionist reference to the words of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6) was in practise tempered by ‘the harsh reality of the Middle East and of world politics [compelling Israel’s founding fathers] to learn the rules of *Realpolitik*’ (Navon 2004: 1). Such realism, in Ben-Gurion’s case found expression in what became known as *mamlachtiyut*, or the primacy of state interest (Goldberg 1996: 225), but, at times, also coincided with uncompromising interpretations of Jewish tradition by religious nationalists (Shahak 1999: 22). The basis for this convergence was provided by a shared belief in the unique nature of the Jewish people. In Ben-Gurion’s own words, ‘The secret of our survival ... is our qualitative superiority, moral and cultural.’ (Ben-Gurion 1971: 728).

Such shared ground facilitated the tacit understanding between Ben-Gurion and the religious parties whereby the latter oversaw the secular-religious status quo established upon Israel’s creation and acquiesced in the handling of foreign and security policy by the secular Zionist leadership of Mapai/Labor (Maoz 2006: 488).

The religious parties were among the chief material beneficiaries of the segmental autonomy of what has been described by some political scientists (e.g. Hazan 1999) as the consociational features of Israel's politics during its first two decades. State support was crucial for the creation and maintenance of the system of *kollel* (advanced *yeshivah*- rabbinical academies) that were central to the ultra-Orthodox being able to pursue their autonomous lifestyle and avoid absorption into secular Israeli society (Reiser 1991: 74). Consequently, up until the rise of militant religious nationalism in the 1970s religious parties typically concentrated on their narrow material interests (state patronage and funding for their own educational institutions and subsidised housing, as well as exemption of *Haredi* males from compulsory military service) rather than broader issues, including foreign affairs.

Beyond the compact between the socialist and religious Zionists another historic convergence underpinned the evolution of Israeli foreign policy. This was the idea of the 'Iron Wall' associated with the founder of the Revisionist branch of the Zionist movement, Vladimir Jabotinsky, and championed in Israel by the main opponents of Mapai/Labor, the Herut (later expanded to become the Gahal and Likud) group in the Knesset. As early as in 1923 Jabotinsky held that a political agreement between the Zionists and the Palestinian Arabs was impossible and that, therefore, settlement had to 'develop under the protection of a force that is not dependent on the local population, behind an iron wall which they will be powerless to break down' (quoted in Shlaim 2001: 15). Despite being opposed by the Labor Zionists led by Ben-Gurion up until Jabotinsky's death in 1940, they eventually ended up pragmatically adopting the reasoning that lay behind his concept - Ben-Gurion in the period before the Suez War in 1956 successfully countering the attempts of his archrival Moshe Sharett to develop a more accommodative approach in dealing with Israel's Arab foes. Indeed, a recent academic advocate of the 'Iron Wall' credits the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt's to Israel's pursuit of the strategy (Navon 2004: 8).

In the quarter century preceding the establishment of Israel, a minority of the Jewish intelligentsia in Palestine advocated an alternative to both the Revisionist 'Iron Wall' strategy and the realist pragmatism of Ben-Gurion. Coming together in the Brit Shalom (Covenant of Peace) and then the Ihud (Unity) movement, men like Judah Magnes, the first Vice-Chancellor of the Hebrew University, and the philosopher Martin Buber, sought a bi-national solution to the conflict between Zionist settlers and the existing Arab inhabitants of Palestine. Dismissed by the Zionist mainstream as dreamers and spurned by the Palestinian Arab leadership, they did not get anywhere but, nevertheless, reflected an idealistic approach to international relations that survived in Israel, albeit on the political fringe.

Buber and Magnes' hope that in the aftermath of World War Two a supra-national future would emerge (Navon 2004: 7) was shared by Nehru in India (Nehru 1961: 536, 540). Nehru, even more than Ben-Gurion for Israel, drew the parameters and set the tone for Indian foreign policy. During his seventeen years in power India emerged as a leader of the newly independent states of Asia and Africa, and, spurning alliance with both West and East in the Cold War, of the Non-aligned Movement. Although nonalignment was a strategic, as well as a principled choice for the internationally-minded Nehru (Chiriyankandath 2004: 200), it contributed to a moral authority that, together with the legacy of Gandhi's successful non-violent struggle against British

colonialism, is still credited with endowing India with ‘soft power’ in the global arena (Kamdar 2004).

Yet Hindu nationalists regarded this Gandhian legacy as based on illusion. Writing in the 1960s, M.S. Golwalkar, the second *Sarsangchalak* (supreme philosopher-guide) of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) (National Volunteer Organisation), the parent organisation of the organisational family (*sangh parivar*) of Hindu chauvinist organisations to which the BJP belongs, stated:

the only basis for our free and prosperous national life is invincible national strength – a strength that will strike terror into the hearts of aggressive powers and make other nations seek our friendship. (Golwalkar 1980: 345)

From this perspective Golwalkar saw India’s acquisition of the atom bomb as an imperative (Golwalkar 1980: 429). (In Israel Ben-Gurion had already come to the same conclusion, taking the decision to develop nuclear weapons before leaving office in 1963. (Maoz 2006: 303).)

Bharat Karnad, the arch-realist Indian international relations theorist, agrees. He has argued that ‘traditional Indian statecraft, built around the concepts of ready use of force, expediency and amorality are, in fact, in sharp contrast to Gandhi’s teachings’ (Karnad 2002: 3). Drawing on the ancient *Vedas* (from the Sanskrit *vid*, to know) and *Puranas* (mythologies), as well as the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, the Indian treatise on statecraft dating from the fourth century BCE, he holds that traditional Indian doctrines on foreign policy were based on *machtpolitik* (power politics) rather than Nehru’s *moralpolitik* (Karnad 2002: 18), the latter denoting the conversion of Gandhi’s legacy into ‘the aggressive use of morality to advance national interest’ (Karnad 2002: 3).

### The rise of religious nationalism

The year 1967, two decades following the emergence of India and Israel as independent states, marked a turning point in the politics of both countries. In India three years after Nehru’s demise his Congress Party suffered its first severe setback in national elections under his daughter Indira Gandhi. The Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the precursor to the BJP, gained nearly a tenth of the popular vote and emerged as its leading opponent in the populous Hindi-speaking states of north India. Three months later the Six-Day War occurred, proving a transformative event for the politics and foreign policy of Israel. Within a decade both Congress and the Labor Alignment were ousted from power by coalitions dominated by right-wing parties including Hindu nationalists in India and militant religious Zionists in Israel.

The Six-Day War gave rise to “religious Zionism” as a significant force in Israeli politics. Israel’s lightning triumph over Arab armies that saw the conquest of East Jerusalem and the West Bank of the Jordan was seen by many Orthodox Jews as the providentially redemptive hand of the God of the Jewish people at work and confirmation that they were living in messianic times (Shlaim 2001: 549). Thereafter political discourse in Israel acquired a religious element when it came to discussing foreign policy and security, something that had hitherto been absent (Maoz 2006: 488). However, this shift did not immediately become apparent. It was the 1973 Yom

Kippur War, in which Israel initially suffered traumatic reverses, which sharpened disillusionment with the post-independence political dispensation. With the Ashkenazi (European Jewish) Labor leadership resented by Sephardic (Oriental) Jews for their elitism and seeming to have lost the pioneering zeal once symbolised by the *kibbutz*, the Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful) soon won widespread public acceptance after it was launched in 1974. Its purpose was to secure Israeli ownership of the West Bank (described in Israeli parlance as Judea and Samaria) through the settlement of Jews throughout the occupied territories (Dowty 1998: 228). Gush Emunim's public appeal extended beyond the national religious camp because it seemed to offer a vigorous and decisive Zionist response in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War (Sandler 1993: 156-7).

Historically the religious parties in Israel, unlike the BJP and its precursors in India, have drawn their support almost exclusively from the religious electorate (Hazan 1999: 114). Gush Emunim, though linked to the religious Zionism of the National Religious Party (NRP), did not limit itself to the strictly religious repertoire of the ultra-Orthodox but was more eclectic, drawing upon both religious and Zionist tradition, thus becoming both 'the ideological vanguard of the New [post-Labor or neo-revisionist] Zionism ... and ... a bridge between religious and secular nationalists' (Dowty 1998: 118). In this respect its significance for contemporary Israelis has been compared to that of the secular *kibbutz* movement in an earlier era in providing 'models for Jewish patriotism, Zionist commitment, civic duty, and spiritual guidance' (Lustick 1993: 109).

The electoral rise of the religious parties became marked in the 1990s, peaking at 31 of the 120 Knesset seats in 1999, five being claimed by the religious Zionist National Religious Party and most of the rest by ultra-Orthodox groups including, most notably, Shas, a 1983 Oriental Sephardi Jewish breakaway from the Ashkenazi Orthodox Agudat Israel, which won 17 seats. Shas' spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadya Yosef, believed that the Oriental Jews historically underprivileged position in Israeli society stemmed from a loss of pride in their cultural/religious heritage and therefore advocated 'a spiritual-religious transformation of an ethnically conscious sector of society' (Weissbrod 2003: 102). Shas has enjoyed striking political success, taking part in all but two of the eleven Israeli governments formed since it entered the Knesset in 1984 (it became the third biggest partner in the governing coalition formed by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert after the 2006 elections).

Although Shas added an ethnic dimension to the politics of religious interest traditionally pursued by Israel's ultra-Orthodox parties, it has not departed fundamentally from their typical approach of focusing on 'narrow interests (funds and patronage) rather than broader issues of principle' (Dowty 1998: 169). It is in this respect that critics of the religious parties such as the late Israel Shahak make a qualitative distinction between the Gush Emunim-NRP form of Jewish 'fundamentalism' from the *Haredi* form, the potential danger of the former arising from their desire to eventually appropriate the state as the Labor Zionists had succeeded in doing (Shahak 1999: 77).

A rough parallel can be made between the transformative objectives of the national religious camp in Israel and the RSS *sangh parivar* in India. Started in 1925 by K.B. Hedgewar, a Brahmin doctor, the RSS was led for more than three decades during its

formative phase by his successor, M.S. Golwalkar. It concentrated on a wide spread of cultural and social activity aimed at building up a distinct, strong, martial Hindu ethos. Temporarily banned in 1948-49 after a onetime member assassinated Gandhi, the distance it kept from direct involvement in party politics facilitated its steady growth into what by the 1980s was a formidable force in Indian public life. Organised in thousands of *shakhas* (branches) across India guided in each region by *pracharaks* (celibate full-time propagandists), its influence was disseminated through the network of linked organisations known collectively as the *sangh parivar* (organizational family). The latter included the BJP, one of India's two biggest parties from 1991, the second biggest national students and labour federations, as well as a multiplicity of political, religious cultural, intellectual, social service, cooperative, peasants and women's bodies.

Just as the aftermath of the Six-Day and Yom Kippur wars, disillusionment with Labor Zionism and the disaffection of Oriental Jews all played a role in strengthening both the secular and religious right in Israel, several factors made the theme of giving a more distinctly 'Hindu' hue to national identity central to Indian politics in the 1980s and 1990s. First, there was, after Indira Gandhi's return to power in 1980, the increasing exploitation by the Congress Party of the ambiguity of Indian secularism for the political use of religion, especially in the form of populist invocations of a majority Hindu identity. One reason for the movement away from the more secular attitude espoused by Mrs. Gandhi's father, Jawaharlal Nehru, lay in the steady decline of Congress as a mass political institution at a time when its authority was under increasing challenge not only from the Hindu right but also from low caste and regional parties. Another was the increasingly strident, even violent, separatist demands on the part of some non-Hindus in peripheral regions, which culminated in the descent into effective civil war in border states like Assam, Punjab and Kashmir. This was itself to some degree the consequence of short-term Congress stratagems involving the exploitation of communal divisions.

An additional element fostering the growth of Hindu nationalism at this stage in India's development was the liberalisation of the economy, initiated in the 1980s and adopted more wholeheartedly by the minority Congress government of P.V. Narasimha Rao in the wake of a balance of payments crisis in 1991. Some of the repercussions of the economic changes initiated by liberalisation facilitated the growing appeal of a kind of 'syndicated Hinduism' (Thapar 1990: 31). As one commentator put it, the 'overlap between the narratives of communal and consumer identity formation' (Rajagopal 1996: 341), together with the rapid expansion of electronic communication, allowed for the emergence of a kind of retail Hindu identity that the Hindu nationalists were able to turn into a valuable political resource.

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Hindu-Muslim tensions reached a fever pitch in December 1992 when Hindu militants, unrestrained by the BJP state government of Uttar Pradesh and in the presence of party leaders including party president Lal Krishna Advani, destroyed the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, a disused 16<sup>th</sup> century mosque claimed as the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram (*Ram Janmabhoomi*). The nationwide communal violence that followed was the worst since partition, claiming at least two thousand lives, and led to the RSS being briefly banned. Although the intensity of the passion whipped up by the Ayodhya confrontation paid rich political dividends for the BJP, in the years that followed the BJP's political strategy, recognising the logic of India's political



demography, shifted steadily towards building a network of alliances with regional parties. This aimed at outflanking Congress by gaining strength in areas of the country where Hindu nationalism remained a peripheral force. The strategy proved remarkably successful. Despite continuing to trail Congress in the popular vote, it emerged as the largest single party in parliament in three successive elections (1996, 1998 and 1999). This provided the platform for six years of BJP-led coalition government from 1998 until its unexpected defeat at the hands of a rival Congress-led combination in 2004.

### Religious nationalism and foreign policy

Assessing the influence that religious nationalism has on foreign policy in the context of coalition governments, as both Israel since its creation and India, since 1996, have had, is not easy. In Israel the overlapping agendas of secular and religious Zionists, especially in relation to issues such as the Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories, complicates analysis. In India the continuity between the foreign policies pursued by the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance suggests a broad consensus regarding perceptions of national interest and foreign policy objectives that tends to cloud the notion of a distinct Hindu nationalist foreign policy vision.

A recent survey of the role of religion in international relations enumerated a number of factors that made the continuing influence of religious movements and parties on Israeli policymaking likely (Haynes 2007; 344-5). Perhaps most important among these is the convergence between national security concerns and religious interests, something clearly apparent in the handling of the issue of Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories over the past thirty years. One critical observer suggests that ‘Since 1967, the cutting edge of imperial Israel has been provided by Jewish fundamentalism’ (Masalha 2000: 105). Yet there has been little attempt to systematically analyse the role of religion in shaping foreign policy outcomes. A study of religion and public policy in Israel published in 1996 concluded, after having chosen to totally disregard foreign policy, that issues of peace and war would test the viability of its analysis (Sharkansky 1996: 156)!

Central to the religious nationalist perspective on foreign policy, whether in India or Israel, is the sanctity of the land. In *Hindutva. Who is a Hindu* (1923) the chief ideologist of Hindu nationalism, Veer Damodar Savarkar, defined a Hindu as a person who “looks upon the land that extends ... from the Indus to the Seas ... as his Fatherland (*Pitribhu*)... as his Holyland (*Punyabhu*), as the land of his prophets and seers, of his godmen and gurus, the land of piety and pilgrimage” (quoted in Gottlob 2003: 154-155). For over a century Zionists, whether secular or religious, have based their claim to Palestine on God’s biblical promise to Abraham: ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates’ (Genesis 15:18), although interpretations of what this should mean in practise in setting the borders of Israel have varied considerably (Shindler 2001/02). Menachem Begin, the incurably romantic first Likud prime minister of Israel and disciple of Jabotinsky, wrote, “faith itself creates reality” (Begin 1951: 11).

A defining feature of the New Zionism that brought together most followers of Likud with the Jewish settlers and the National Religious Party was the emphasis on the

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Land of Israel (*Eretz Israel*) over the State of Israel (Ram 2003: 28). Begin wrote in 1951, “this wandering people had returned to its Homeland. The secular tour was ended.” (Begin 1951: 372). Forty years later, his successor as prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir, addressing the Middle East Peace Conference in Madrid, declared: ‘No nation has expressed its bond with its land with as much intensity and consistency as we have ... Only Eretz Israel, the Land of Israel, is our true homeland.’ (Shamir 1994: 238).

Even more than for the Revisionist Zionists, it is attachment to *Eretz Israel* that frames the attitude of the ultra-Orthodox parties to Israel as a state. Following the Six-Day War this, together with the fact that their followers tended to be more hawkish, inclined them towards pursuing a harder line in foreign policy (Dowty 1998: 181). However, the attitudes of the different ultra-Orthodox parties towards the Occupied Territories are not uniform (Reiser 1991: 79-83). Shas in particular seemed inclined to pursue an ambivalent or pragmatic line over territorial compromise, trading its votes in the Ehud Barak government (1999-2000) on agreements with the Palestine National Authority and the dismantling of unofficial settlements for funding concessions (Weissbrod 2003: 86). Together with its electoral strength, this helped the party replace the National Religious Party as the central religious player in government.

For the spiritual leader of the National Religious Party, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, the son of Israel’s first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, there were no Occupied Territories, only redeemed land. After the Six-Day War he demanded their complete annexation and Jewish settlement in line with the *halakhah* (Masalha 2000: 113; Dowty 1998: 228). His followers responded by establishing Gush Emunim in 1974 and with the new Defence Minister, Shimon Peres, readily responding to pressure, were able to begin significant settlement activity in 1975-6 (Shahak 1999: 55-6). In 1977 Menachem Begin knelt before Kook after becoming Prime Minister (Lustick 1993: 110) and in the decade that followed the transformation of large chunks of the Occupied Territories into *Eretz Israel* proceeded apace (Masalha 2000: 119-21; Sprinzak 1993: 133-41). Begin’s successor, Yitzhak Shamir, even compared the settlers to Israel’s founding fathers, ‘creating the historical facts for which future generations of Israelis will bless them’ (Shamir 1994: 151). When settlers engaged in anti-Arab terrorism in the early 1980s it took five years for the security forces to arrest the perpetrators and all the convicted were soon pardoned (Maoz 2006: 257).

The rise of Gush Emunim drew together the secular and religious right in Israel with a tacit alliance taking shape between religious nationalists, secular Zionist extremists and annexationist elements in Labor as well as Likud (Maoz 2006: 489). The effect on the discourse and practise of politics were apparent. It was not just religious nationalists who denounced the 1993 Oslo Accord with the Palestine Liberation Organisation as a violation of the holiness of *Eretz Israel* but Yitzhak Shamir, who likened it to a golden calf, a reference to how the people of Israel had turned to idol worship while waiting for Moses to come down from Mt. Sinai (Exodus 32:1-6). Yigal Amir, the religious Zionist who in 1995 assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who had signed the Accord, voted in the 1992 elections not for any of the religious parties but for the secular Zionist extremist Moledet Party that advocated the transfer of Palestinian Arabs out of Occupied Territories (Shlaim 2001: 549; Masalha 2000: 176-85).

Religious extremists in Israel have become more nationalist while religious nationalists have become more extremist (Hazan 1999: 126). The ultra-Orthodox are also affected by this symbiosis of nationalism and religiosity with the marked growth in “nationalist-*Haredi*” (Dowty 1998: 183) being reflected in the changing attitudes towards military service on the part of young *Haredi* males (Stadler 2003). Eleven per cent of Israeli men are ultra-Orthodox and excused from military service to engage in religious study (this translates into an annual number of about 30,000) (McGirk 2007: 29; Stadler 2003: 18). Religious Zionists by contrast combine military service with Talmudic study (Sandler 1993: 152-3) with the NRP’s *yeshivot hesder* programme being used by the settler movement to infiltrate and influence the Israel Defence Force (Shahak 1999: 91-3). This has given rise to concerns about reconciling a growing reliance on religious Zionist soldiers, often regarded as being especially committed and ruthless fighters, with the need to maintain army discipline if action needs to be taken against Jewish settlers (McGirk 2007: 28-9).

The centrality of the future of the Occupied Territories for Israel’s security has made the role of religious nationalism in foreign policy of great import. In the case of India no such issue of transcendent significance exists. Although the 60-year dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir has always been a focus for Hindu nationalism, the problem for the idea of Hindu nationalism has been how to come to terms with the fact that Indian religious tradition has been quintessentially plural rather than singular. By bequeathing what was, from the viewpoint of modern Hindu nationalists, a messy civilisational unity to the subcontinent, the bewilderingly overlapping peculiarities of the multiplicity of Indian religions and cultures (Indian variants of Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Judaism, as well as the traditions rooted in the subcontinent – Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh) have served to deny *Hindutva* the kind of coherent corpus of tradition that Jewish religious nationalists are able to draw upon. Though, like Israel’s Arab foes for Zionists, religious or not, the existence of Pakistan and India’s large Muslim minority provide an ‘Other’ for Hindu nationalists, the sense of the Hindu ‘We’ remains less than convincing for the majority of Indians.

This was part of the reason why when the BJP found itself leading a coalition government in Delhi in April 1998, it was in the foreign rather than the domestic arena that they took their most dramatic initiative, within weeks making public India’s military nuclear programme by carrying out a series of tests in the Rajasthan desert. Faced with overwhelming pressure to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and abandon India’s forty-year-old policy of maintaining nuclear ambiguity, a policy also pursued by Israel, a Congress government would probably also have reflected the preponderant view in the Indian security community and acted likewise. Yet that the decision was eventually made by India’s first Hindu nationalist prime minister so soon after taking office gave it particular resonance. It seemed the most striking manifestation of the assertive militaristic nationalism of the votaries of *Hindutva*; the realisation of a long held aim of the BJP and its precursor, the Jana Sangh, that India should produce nuclear weapons. (It was not just Indians who noted that the tests were codenamed Shakti, after the Hindu goddess of strength and energy, just as India’s medium-range missiles had been called Agni, after the god of fire; so did Strobe Talbott, the US Deputy Secretary of State deputed by President Bill Clinton to conduct talks with India on the nuclear issue (Talbott 2004: 21,50).)

India's adoption of nuclear weapons was not the product of an aberrant Hindu nationalist obsession. However, AB Vajpayee, unlike his immediate predecessors, and despite heading an unstable new coalition government, had few qualms about taking the final decisive step. Having been a leading member of the Hindu nationalist movement that had for four decades favoured India's adoption of nuclear weapons, he did not share the moral scruples that had arguably inhibited Congress leaders since Nehru. Moreover, unlike other cherished Hindu nationalist fetishes, most notably the construction of a temple to the god Ram on the site of the Babri mosque destroyed in 1992, national security was relatively uncontroversial as far as the coalition the BJP led was concerned. Vajpayee could afford to act decisively without risking the survival of his government. It was the conjuncture of the shift in the distribution of power in the post-Cold War world and the advent in government of Hindu nationalists with a predilection to follow realist perspectives in making foreign policy that caused India's abandonment of four decades of nuclear ambiguity.

Apart from Vajpayee, other politicians privy to the nuclear test decision also harboured few misgivings on the subject. Home Minister LK Advani, who in the 1980s played an important role in committing the BJP to the *Ram Janmabhoomi* campaign, had favoured the development of nuclear weapons as president of the Jana Sangh in 1974, and of the BJP in 1987 (Perkovich 1999: 179, 282). More abrasive than the emollient Vajpayee, he unnerved US envoy Strobe Talbott at a meeting in July 1998 by musing about the happy day when the entire South Asian subcontinent, as well as Myanmar (Burma), would be 'reunited' in a single 'confederation' (Talbot 2004: 101). Set against the RSS' conception of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) extending from Iran in the west to Singapore in the east 'with Sri Lanka (Ceylon) as a lotus petal offered at her sacred feet' (Golwalkar 1980: 111), and the history of Hindu nationalist hostility to Pakistan, it was not a reassuring vision. Yet, while relations were often tense, the policy of the BJP-led government towards Pakistan proved not strikingly different from earlier periods. Vajpayee, after appearing to lead the country to the brink of war after cross-border incursions by Pakistani-backed Muslim militants in 1999, 2001 and 2002, ended his premiership by initiating a peace process, since continued by his Congress successor.

#### Religious nationalism, security interests and Indo-Israeli military cooperation

It is only in recent years that the nexus between religion and nationalism in India and Israel has attracted attention as a factor in leading to a convergence of foreign policies in the face of the Muslim foes they each confront (Prashad 2003; Pant 2004; Blarel 2006). Having itself just suffered the trauma of religious partition, and mindful of the sensitivities of the large Muslim population that remained, India was the only non-Muslim country to vote (unsuccessfully) in the United Nations against both the partition of Palestine (in 1947) and the admission of Israel to membership of the organisation (in 1949). Despite extending recognition to Israel in 1950 and the emigration of some 20,000 Indian Jews to Israel in subsequent decades, for more than forty years the two countries did not even have diplomatic relations and contacts were generally low level, spasmodic or indirect. However, since the establishment of full diplomatic ties fifteen years ago, a substantial relationship has developed in areas such as defence (under the BJP-led government Israel became India's biggest arms supplier and India Israel's chief client) (Koshy 2006: 155), civil trade (especially involving the diamond industry) – India became Israel's second biggest trading

partner in Asia in 2003<sup>1</sup> - and tourism (India has become a favoured destination of Israeli tourists).

The coincidence of the advent in 1977 of Begin's Likud-led government in Israel and the Janata coalition in India (with Vajpayee as Minister for External Affairs) led to an inconclusive secret visit by Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan. A decade later a triangular dynamic that became an important feature of Indo-Israeli relations first appeared with the formidable Zionist and emerging pro-India lobbies in the United States overlapping to apply pressure on Rajiv Gandhi's Congress government to move faster towards developing relations with Israel (Chiriyankandath 1989). However, it was only in the wake of the end of the Cold War that in January 1992 the Congress government of PV Narasimha Rao finally established full diplomatic relations with Israel, a course long advocated by the BJP and its precursor, the Jana Sangh (Baxter 1969: 200-01).

Indo-Israeli cooperation intensified after the BJP-led government took office in Delhi in 1998 with frequent exchanges of visits by cabinet ministers culminating in Ariel Sharon becoming the first Israeli premier to visit India in September 2003. The Indo-US rapprochement marked by US President Bill Clinton's successful visit to India in 2000 and the threats from militant Muslim violence faced by all three states (India, Israel and the US) provided a further fillip to this cooperation, especially after the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Addressing the American Jewish Congress in May 2003 India's National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra, noting the presence of many members of the US Congress who were friends of Israel and also of India, spoke of the 'shared values of our peoples' and of how the US, India and Israel faced 'the same ugly face of modern day terrorism'<sup>2</sup>. At the end of Sharon's visit to India, Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Yosef Lapid echoed these sentiments when he spoke of American support for such an unwritten axis to combat international terrorism<sup>3</sup>

The non-partisan basis for Indo-Israeli military cooperation became apparent by its maintenance after the Congress-led government came to power in 2004. Defence Minister Pranab Mukherji noted the 'convergence when it comes to securing the country' (Koshy 2006: 253). His successor, AK Antony, informed parliament in May 2007 that Indian defence purchases from Israel since 2002 amounted to over US\$5 billion and two months later a cabinet commission, chaired by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh approved a US\$2.5 billion on a new joint venture with Israel to build missiles to strike aerial targets (Kumaraswamy 2007). Whatever mutual admiration there may be - calling for the construction of a grand temple in Ayodhya in January 2006, BJP President Rajnath Singh referred to how Jews had kept their national aspirations alive by venerating the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem<sup>4</sup> - the

<sup>1</sup> India, Israel trade touch \$1.23 bn. Available online at <http://www.rediff.com/cms/print.jsp?docpath=/money/2004/aug/26israel.html> (accessed 27/08/2004).

<sup>2</sup> 'Fundamental similarities'. Available online at <http://www.outlookindia.com>, 14/05/2003 (accessed 20/05/2003).

<sup>3</sup> Israel for trilateral axis with India, USA. *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 11/09/2003. Available online at <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2003/20030911/main1.htm> (accessed 13/09/2003).

<sup>4</sup> Jews have wailing wall, we need Ram temple: BJP chief. *The New Indian Express*, 20/01/2006. Available online at <http://www.newindpress.com/Print.asp?ID=IEH20060120214826> (accessed 21/01/2006).

burgeoning ties between India and Israel owe much more to perceptions of mutually advantageous security cooperation than religious nationalist sentiment.

#### India and Israel – the limitations of religious nationalism

The Zionist founders of Israel expected it to resolve the issue of Jewish identity in the modern world (Ravitzky 2005: 159). Instead it simply provided a focus for continued controversy, both over what kind of state for the Jews Israel should be and its place in the world. Domestically, by essentially recognising Orthodox Judaism as the *de facto* official state religion, the compromise arrived at between Ben-Gurion and the ultra-Orthodox at Israel's creation proved an obstacle to a fully-fledged debate on the relationship of religion to the state (Ben-Zadok 2001: 143). Formulations such as the definition of Israel as 'a Jewish and democratic state' in the Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty enacted in 1992<sup>5</sup> elided the two central contradictions of the Zionist state – the Orthodox Halakhic religious interpretation of the word 'Jewish' (Neuberger 1999: 81-2) and the way in which the state's democratic character is permanently limited by defining it as 'Jewish'. As one of the most outspoken critics of the Israeli state put it, for Israeli Jews unprepared to accept fundamentalist strictures, all varieties of Jewish fundamentalism are dangerous, while for the Palestinian Arabs and Israel's neighbours, the messianic variant of the religious nationalist camp represent the greatest danger (Shahak 1999: 148-9).

Baruch Kimmerling defined the opposing visions of Israel in the following terms: an *Eretz Israel* based on primordial Jewish kinship, borders based on Jewish history and laws on Jewish tradition, and a State of Israel based, however ambiguously, on the Western civic tradition, negotiated borders and secular law (Kimmerling 1984). A clear parallel can be drawn between this Israeli dichotomy and the Nehruvian and majoritarian 'Hindu' visions of India (Chiriyankandath 2000: 21). The crucial difference was that in a state not established on religious identity it was possible to devise a constitutional framework and develop a polity that transcended the limitations of a nationalism circumscribed by the cultural parameters of a religious group.

The circumstances of the genesis of the modern state of Israel have left it locked into an existential conflict, one in which the strategy of the 'Iron Wall' has remained, literally and metaphorically, the overarching template for foreign policymaking. A decade after the Oslo Accord, Israel was engaged in building an actual wall through the Occupied Territories to keep out potential Palestinian attackers as Israeli analysts warned of how the strategy of the wall needed 'to be rebuilt around a Jewish state, not a bi-national inferno' (Navon 2004: 37). Yet this will not solve the dilemma that as long as Israel remains a Jewish state ruling over politically marginalised and resentful Palestinian Arabs, both in the Occupied Territories and its pre-1967 borders, this 'domestic' political fact will trammel its foreign policy and preclude it securing its position internationally.

In post-independence India too what Indian secularism should mean in practice has remained a live issue, especially with the political salience of *Hindutva* in the last two

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<sup>5</sup> Available online at [http://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/basic3\\_eng.htm](http://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/basic3_eng.htm) (accessed 21/08/2007).

decades, and owing to the state legacy (Pakistan and Bangladesh on its borders) of the religious partition of the subcontinent. These linked factors have helped inspire an influential, albeit somewhat crudely realist, strand in Indian strategic thinking. Bharat Karnad exemplifies this. Criticising Indian leaders for being responsible for a 'soft state' and lacking the will to power, he rhetorically concludes his polemic for India to become a nuclear superpower by arguing that 'the bulk of the people, attuned to the vagaries of *machtpolitik* depicted in the ancient Hindu texts and conditioned by life-long deprivation, are hard as nails, crave respect for India in the world and are willing to make whatever sacrifices' (Karnad 2002: 701).

Yet the reality is that India owes much of the greater stature she has gained on the world stage since the end of the Cold War not to the formal acquisition of military nuclear capability but its rapidly expanding economy and 'soft power' attributes such as its democratic record, cultural exports (film, food, music etc.), the benign aura shed by the legacy of Gandhi and Nehru and the wealth and skills of the global Indian diaspora. These were the elements of power emphasised by the outgoing BJP Minister for External Affairs, Yashwant Sinha, in his last major speech, one in which he also described national unity and social harmony as a '*sine qua non* for India's progress in the international arena'. He declared: 'India's biggest strength is its secular and multi-cultural ethos ... To damage our heritage of tolerance and pluralism or to waver in upholding these principles is the biggest setback that can occur to our great power ambitions' (Sinha 2004).

While the foreign policies pursued by India and Israel appear to have grown closer in recent decades, both in terms of bilateral relations and a shared emphasis upon realist thinking, there remain important differences. In India the past forty years have seen a gradual movement away from Nehru's internationalist, albeit also pragmatic, idealism towards an approach more baldly articulated in terms of national interest. Especially after the end of the Cold War, this change has been a bipartisan process and today there is a large measure of, at least tactical, agreement on foreign affair between the 'secular' Congress and the 'Hindu nationalist' BJP. This is reflected in the continuity in policy in, for example, closer relations with Israel and the USA and India's maintenance of the military nuclear option. However, when it comes to envisioning the Indian nation the traditions informing the outlook of the two main parties still represent fundamentally different perspectives, the one inclusive, the other exclusive. In Israel, on the other hand, whatever their tactical differences, most, if not all, Zionists have long shared a common perception of the small, beleaguered state as engaged in an existential conflict, one that the Jewish people cannot afford to lose. The main difference in the decades since the Six-Day War is that the rise of religious nationalism has resulted in Ben-Gurion's muscular realism becoming increasingly infected by an idealistic messianic quality, thereby further complicating any resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict that continues to dominate Israel's foreign policy.

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