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## Islamophobia Rising in India

### Modi of Operation

by ALAN POTTER

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Barack Obama recently visited India, where he was received with open arms by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a lavish Republic Day celebration. But with Western countries badly needing to heal their rift with the Muslim world, the timing was not fortuitous.

In recent weeks, after all, the Indian government has been behind a number of anti-Muslim outbursts and renewed clashes with Pakistan.

On January 1, for example, the government blocked 30 popular websites in order to prevent publication by “jihadi activists.” The next day, reports came out of Modi’s home state of Gujarat of anti-terror drills involving mock terrorists dressed in traditional Muslim clothing.

Just a few days later, the government announced the discovery of a small ship along the Indian coast full of “suspected terrorists” from Pakistan, though there was no real evidence that the boat’s passengers were anything other than run-of-the-mill smugglers. On the same day, the government put all airports on high alert for potential hijackings due to unnamed intelligence reports.

Throughout this time, confrontations between Indian and Pakistani military forces increased, including an incident on January 1 in which Indian forces killed five Pakistanis.

Of course, Modi has a history of stoking communal violence against Muslims. In 2002, while chief minister of Gujarat, Modi was accused of failing to stop and perhaps even encouraging viciously bloody anti-Muslim riots. The U.S. government later banned him from entering the United States because of his involvement in the riots. His party, the BJP, is traditionally based on a Hindu nationalist, anti-Islamic platform.

But over time, Modi has been able to shed some of this negative reputation by rebranding himself as an economic technocrat and modernizer.

Gujarat became the prototype for attracting foreign direct investment under his leadership. And his 2014 campaign for prime minister was based on an economic program of growth and, to a lesser degree, liberalization. Because of this, pundits around the world began to overlook his past and, perhaps more importantly, the past of his party. The question now is whether we're beginning to see Modi and the BJP turn back to their traditional Hindu nationalist policies — and if so, why?

Modi is often characterized as a typical politician (if a particularly shrewd one), more interested in polls than ideals. Because of this, the logic goes, he will not stoke Hindu-Muslim violence as prime minister — the backlash would be too great, and it wouldn't provide the same kind of benefits that it did at the state level.

By the same logic, however, if Modi is unable to produce the economic gains he promised, then he might return to stoking communal violence. A sputtering economy, in other words, could prompt Modi to “wag the dog” by encouraging Hindu violence against Muslims and thus placating his Hindu nationalist base.

However, the present increase in anti-Muslim rhetoric coming from the government does not appear to be a function of a failing economy or a drop in Modi's popularity. The Indian economy has shown signs of life after a particularly tumultuous first half of 2014. Furthermore, the BJP performed well in recent state elections in Jharkhand and, to a lesser degree, in Jammu and Kashmir.

Nor does the increase in anti-Muslim rhetoric seem to result from an upsurge in confrontation along the Pakistan border. Those tensions are more likely to be the result of Indian rhetoric and actions than a cause of them, particularly as initial reports indicate that India has been the aggressor in recent clashes.

Another possibility is that the BJP is pushing the issue and Modi is simply trying to keep up.

After all, it's not Modi so much as other members of the BJP that have most pushed the envelope in recent weeks. A government minister, for example, recently asked her supporters at a rally to choose between children of the Hindu God Ram and “bastards.” Modi stated that he didn't

approve of the comments, but he didn't sack her either. Another BJP member of parliament recently praised the killer of Gandhi, who was a Hindu nationalist.

Additionally, the RSS — a right-wing paramilitary politically allied to the BJP — has been accused of forcibly converting entire Muslim and Christian villages to Hinduism.

However, Modi himself has continued in his attempts to shed his anti-Muslim image. For example, he was the first Indian prime minister to invite the leader of Pakistan to his inauguration. And more recently, he made a direct appeal to all schools in India for two minutes of silence after the Taliban's massacre of students in Peshawar, Pakistan last December.

If Modi is unable or unwilling to rein in his party's instrumental use of Hindu nationalism, then this will portend trouble for nearly all aspects of Indian society. Religious minorities, specifically Muslims, will be in danger of mass violence and persecution. Additionally, India's standing in the international community could drop precipitously.

But while Modi's own role in the unfolding drama remains unclear, it was disappointing that on January 14 — just before Obama's highly publicized visit to India — a U.S. court dismissed a case against Modi for his role in the 2002 Gujarat riots.

If the new anti-Muslim rhetoric is coming from the BJP, then there's still hope that Modi can rein in the extremists. If it's coming from Modi himself, though, then the trend will likely worsen, as his own party will certainly not oppose him in on the issue. And the opposition, particularly the Indian National Congress, is in complete disarray after the last national election.

Modi has only recently begun to shed his nationalist reputation, and the international community is watching closely.