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India covers up Israeli war crimes in Gaza

By Deepal Jayasekera

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The response of India's new government to Israel's military onslaught against the Palestinian population in Gaza indicates that the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) is looking to forge a closer alliance with Israel. For over a fortnight, the government maintained a virtual silence as Israel mounted a murderous air war on Gaza then launched its ground assault on the Palestinian territory.

A Ministry of External Affairs statement on July 10 hinted at a shift in the government's position. It expressed India's deep concern "at the steep escalation of violence between Israel and Palestine, particularly the heavy air strikes on Gaza resulting in [the] tragic loss of civilian lives and heavy damage to property." However, it sided with Israel, expressing alarm "at the cross border provocations resulting from rocket attacks against targets in parts of Israel." In other words, in the guise of neutrality, the government supported Israel's justification for its criminal actions in Gaza.

As public opposition mounted to Israel's killings, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government refused to condemn Israel's actions and last week blocked debate in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha—the lower and upper houses of the Indian parliament. The official opposition parties, including Congress and the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist

Party of India-Marxist (CPM), demanded that the government immediately denounce Israel's actions.

The stance of these parties is completely hypocritical. Congress has traditionally postured as a friend of the Palestinian people and issued empty criticisms of Israel's actions, even as it forged closer diplomatic and military ties with the Zionist state. In 1992, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's Congress government that established diplomatic relations with Israel.

The push for a parliamentary debate took place amid relatively small but widespread anti-Israeli protests across India, including in New Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Kashmir. In a crackdown on protests in Kashmir, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) shot and killed a youth in Kulgam district last Saturday.

The opposition parties finally secured a discussion on Gaza in the Rajya Sabha on Monday, after the chairman rejected the advice of External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj to block any debate. Swaraj justified her position by declaring: "We have diplomatic ties with both nations. Any discourteous reference to any friendly country can impact our relations with them."

Swaraj's comments reflect the balancing act in which India has been engaged for the past two decades. Since 1992, successive Congress and BJP-led governments have established close ties with Israel, which is now India's second largest arms supplier, after Russia. An Israeli Knesset study noted that India buys 40 percent of Israel's arms exports. India and Israel have also developed deep links between their militaries and intelligence apparatuses, in the name of fighting "Islamic terrorism."

Among the final acts of the outgoing Congress-led government was signing a homeland security agreement with Israel. Last December, it purchased 15 drones from Israel to deploy along India's borders with Pakistan and China. In 2009, the Congress-led government bought the Phalcon tactical and surveillance system from Israel.

At the same time, India remains heavily dependent on energy imports from the Middle East and cannot afford to alienate the region's Arab bourgeoisie by too openly siding with Israel or supporting its war crimes against the Palestinian people.

During the debate in the Rajya Sabha, opposition leader Ghulam Nabi Azad from Congress challenged the external affairs minister by asking whether India's foreign policy had changed. Swaraj replied: "There is absolutely no change in India's policy towards Palestine, which is that we fully support the Palestinian cause, while maintaining good relations with Israel."

Behind this so-called even-handed approach, the government is indicating a shift in India's foreign policy. To refuse to issue even a nominal condemnation of the Israeli war machine's

onslaught on the defenceless population of Gaza, or to equate it with the limited rocket attacks on Israel by Palestinian militants, is a step that would be noted in Israel and internationally.

The BJP, which is based on anti-Muslim Hindu chauvinism, undoubtedly feels a political affinity with the Zionist regime and regards it as an ally in its war on “Islamic terrorism.” As chief minister of the state of Gujarat before the BJP won this year’s elections, Modi forged close relations with Israel.

An *International Business Times* article in mid-May hailed Modi as “Israel’s best friend in South Asia.” It noted: “Under Modi’s leadership and encouragement ... Israel has poured billions of dollars of investment into Gujarat. Officials from both Gujarat and Israel have visited each other over the past few years to deepen trade and economic links.”

At the same time, the Modi government cannot afford an open breach with the Arab regimes in the Middle East. Well aware of the duplicitous role of the Arab bourgeoisie toward the Palestinian people, Swaraj latched on to Egypt’s offer to mediate, declaring in the debate: “We should tell both the nations—Israel and Palestine—to accept Egypt’s offer of talks.”

The Egyptian junta, a US client state, has openly collaborated with Israel, including by sealing its border with Gaza to prevent Palestinians fleeing Israeli military operations from finding sanctuary in Egypt. If the Egyptian military is offering to broker talks, it is only because it fears the groundswell of revulsion being produced across the Middle East by Israeli war crimes.

While allowing the debate to go ahead in the Rajya Sabha, the BJP-led government refused to allow the opposition parties to put a resolution condemning Israel’s attacks on Gaza. In response, Congress and other opposition parliamentarians stormed out in a sham show of protest.

In an apparent about-face on Wednesday, the Modi government instructed its representatives at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva to vote for a Palestinian resolution condemning attacks on civilians by both sides and calling for an independent inquiry into human rights violations in occupied Palestinian territories, especially in Gaza.

Voting went according to an established pattern. The United States was the only vote against, while its allies in Europe and Asia abstained. The motion was passed on the votes of African, Middle Eastern and Asian countries, including India.

Indian external affairs minister Swaraj pointed to the vote as proof that the government had not changed India’s foreign policy. A vote against or an abstention would undoubtedly have provoked criticism in the Middle East. While not prepared to immediately take such a step, the BJP government is clearly preparing the ground for closer relations with Israel.