Islamophobia in India and its Impact on India’s Foreign Relations

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Islamophobia in India and its Impact on India’s Foreign Relations

By Dylan Morgan

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SIT Switzerland: International Studies and Multilateral Diplomacy

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Abstract

India has a vast history of Islam throughout the subcontinent, beginning over a millennia ago. Throughout this time, developments such as Muslim rule over Hindus, British colonization, the partition
to create Pakistan and eventually Bangladesh, as well as the rise of Hindu nationalism throughout India from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have created a dangerous status quo for Muslims in India. Communal, state-sanctioned, violence against Muslims, their businesses, symbols of the religion, and any sort of public display is increasingly common. The impact on India’s international standing, especially with predominantly Muslim countries such as Arabian Gulf countries, Iran, Malaysia, and more, maybe in jeopardy because of clear discrimination due to religion. On the other hand, India may be allying with other countries that have Islamophobia within their governments, such as Israel and even the United States, thereby becoming valuable and powerful strategic partnerships. Islamophobia will impact India’s international relations somewhat; most, if not all, countries prefer to engage with India on strategic opportunities in military and economic areas instead of looking elsewhere because of their domestic issues. Countries are moving away from the U.S.’s imposition on sovereignty in the name of human rights and democracy, and Islamophobia in India is a prime example. While there is some anger towards India, it is only in a few instances and does not harm relations significantly. Meanwhile, India continues to grow closer to Israel and work Islamophobia into their foreign policy.

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Introduction

In 2022 in India, during the Islamic holiday Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of the Holy month of Ramada, festivities were interrupted by mob violence against Muslims. Places of worship were destroyed, homes and businesses were set on fire, and people stood outside Mosques hoping to pick a fight, while police stood by and protected the Hindi mobs (Chowdhury, 2022). A professor from the University of Zurich who chose to remain anonymous spoke to this trend, police are not protecting Muslims. This is not the first, latest, or most gruesome instance of widespread violence against Muslims in India.

There is a large debate on whether actions such as these constitute “Islamophobia”. Scholars I have contacted, some I do not cite in this essay, have ranged from completely denying any sort of Islamophobia in India, while others, including the professor at the University of Zurich and Dr. Suddha Chakravartti, have said there is anti-Muslim violence, but it is not “Islamophobia”. A few, such as Ambassador Zamir Akram have easily equalized the concepts, arguing it is a clear fear of Muslims in India. I could use the term “anti-Muslim violence” in the title to avoid this debate. Still, I will use Islamophobia as it is important to tie the developments in India to the global issue of Islamophobia that is becoming increasingly salient post-9/11. The debate on whether the actions of the Indian government constitute “Islamophobia” is unnecessary and prevents focus on the real issue: the actions that harm the Muslim community in India.

This essay looks at the history of Muslims in India, from the arrival of Muslims to the ruling them on the subcontinent, how anti-Muslim sentiment originated and grew throughout the centuries, and how Islamophobia in India rose as a primary defining attribute of the ruling political party in the 21st century. Then, it will assess how various countries, especially predominantly Muslim countries, have responded to India’s actions. Next, I will address how India’s Islamophobia affects its foreign relations with the Islamic world and the globe. Last, I will consider how this may impact India’s potential rise as a major pole of power in international relations. While there have been scores of detailed publications on the
history up until the present day of anti-Muslim sentiment and Islamophobia in India, there is less literature on its impact on India’s foreign relations and standing in the global community. I seek to understand how, if at all, India’s Islamophobia prevents, encourages, or harms its bilateral and multilateral relations, and if these changes curtail its ability to work with and lead other countries.

The Origins of Indian Muslims

Muslims on the Indian subcontinent can be traced back to the 600s when Arabs first began attacking Indian coasts. Battles were fought but eventually, Arabs retired from the region. (Anjum, 2007). Merchants who did business along India’s Western coast beginning centuries before the Prophet Mohammad’s birth (Anjum, 2007). They settled around in the 600s and were tolerated by Hindus, even given resources if they were refugees. Muslim communities built homes around trading posts and peacefully converted voluntary locals to Islam. Islamic Empires have centuries of history in India as well. The Ommayid Empire, with its capital in present-day Syria, expanded throughout Western into South-Central Asia in the early 700s (Belmekki, 2008). Then, the Ghaznavid Empire and the Ghurid Empire, rose in the late 700s and over several centuries developed and expanded in Asia, eventually including India in the 11th and 12th centuries, based primarily in modern-day Iran (Anjum, 2007). These larger-scale conquests increased migration to Northern India by Afghans, Mongols, and Persians, and included scholars and travelers causing an exchange between Muslims and Hindus (Anjum, 2007). Next, the Delhi Sultanate rose as the previous empires disintegrated in the last years of the 12th century. They expanded throughout southern India through violent conquest. This was not one cohesive dynasty, but some form of it ruled until the mid-1500s. (Kumar, 2021) Eventually, they too were conquered, this time by the Mughal Empire. Originating in Northern Pakistan and Afghanistan, they did not want to face the Iranians or Uzbeks, so they turned southeast. (Moynihan, 2023) They ruled until the mid-1800s, going through periods of weakness, especially starting at the beginning of the 1700s, but rulers were brilliant and successful in controlling the entire region to a large extent.
Hindu acceptance of and treatment by these various Muslim rulers is key to investigate to understand modern inter-religious dynamics in India. Beginning in the 600s, when Arabs attacked areas in India, the violence was not due to religious ideologies. Muslim merchants lived in trading communities and spread to villages throughout India, converting those nearby by demonstrating their values through their actions (Anjum, 2007). Throughout Muslim empires’ rule over India, there was both some acceptance of Hindus and violence towards the faith. Many Muslim rulers destroyed Hindi monuments because they were strongholds for political resistance and to build Mosques, while many Hindi rulers did the same when they were financially desperate, as temples held lots of wealth (Thaper, 2018). Some Muslim rulers during the Delhi Sultanate treated Hindus with tolerance, knowing they were vital to the economy and civilization stability (Klune, 2014). Rulers gave Hindus the title of dhimmis, the title protecting the rights of non-Muslims in Islamic societies. However, oppression depended on the ruler, and many were more violent toward Hindu architecture and iconography (Klune, 2014). Rulers had to balance being too liberal or too harsh to cement control. During the Mughal rule, it was largely a continuation of the same pattern. In many areas, however, especially in northern areas such as Punjab, people had lived under Muslims for centuries and the religion was extremely integrated into civilization (PBS, 2022).

Many cases of violence and conquest were not solely for religious reasons. Rather, they were because of political rivalries and power dynamics (Thaper, 2018). Despite this notion, though, religion was a clear difference that could easily be used to separate groups and pit them against each other. Discrimination was not exclusive to Muslims, rulers suppressed to an extent any religion that was not Islam. However, some rulers were extremely harsh and violent. Hindus, for centuries, were forcibly ruled by non-Hindu and non-Indian rulers. Any seemingly balanced and tolerant approach was under the condition that Hindus were ruled by Muslims by force. They inflicted their will upon Hindus as they saw fit. A large grievance Hindus have today is the lumping of different castes into the simple label of “Hindu” (Thaper, 2018). However, this has been used today, primarily by upper caste people, to justify violence against Muslims, while ignoring how the notion of untouchables is religious violence by Hindus onto Hindus.
Perhaps the conversion away from Hinduism should be seen as a failing of Hinduism, rather than a persecution of it.

A key aspect of Islamophobia in the status quo is rooted in Islam’s goal to convert others and spread Islam. Many Indian Muslims are converts from Indian Hindus (Lal, 1990). Many Muslim empires, especially the Mughals, forcibly converted many Indian Hindus as well (Ushama, 2020). This creates an understanding of why Hindus may be fearful and hateful towards Islam. There is a long history of forced rule and conversion by them, as their faith is inherently outwardly growing. Meanwhile, Hinduism does not have requirements or rules to encourage converting others to Hinduism. However, this creates a dangerous justification for violence against Muslims who do not seek the forceful conversion of others. It is important to know where Hindu nationalist perspectives come from, but not to justify large-scale violence. In fact, many Muslims in India also came as immigrants, as traders and merchants. The sentiment of forced conversion may be a prejudice against Islam generally. However, the immigration of Muslims towards the originally Hindu land of India, settler-colonists who had a goal, ranging in each individual's conviction, to spread their faith, under the protection of a Muslim Empire for centuries can foster hatred by the occupied over time (Lal, 1990). It is also important to note that not all conversions were by force, many lower-caste Hindus converted out of desperation for a better quality of life. Although, they were usually at the bottom of the totem pole within Muslim society as well. A root cause of Islamophobia in present-day India dates back to centuries of occupation by outside Muslim rulers, coupled with conversions from Hinduism.

**Indian Muslims and British Colonization**

The British arrived in India in the 1700s, as traders, under the protection of the Mughals. However, as the Mughals disintegrated, they began to expand from the coastal areas inwards. Funnily enough, Hindus were not too bothered by a new imperialism ruler, as they had been subject to them for the past several centuries (Anjum, 2007). They accepted British rule, and learned English, British ideals, and education systems, creating Hindi intellectual societies, organizations, and movements. They became
pioneers of Hindu nationalism (Belmekki, 2008). However, many Hindu princes and rulers had their power taken by the British. Meanwhile, Muslims entered a less bright era, falling into poverty and away from power. The British allied with Hindus and separated the two religious societies so much so that they could not work together to oust them. Hindus were employed by the British for jobs like tax collection, creating a new class of eventual landowning elite, who then overcharged Muslims even during famines, reducing them to peasants and serfs (Belmekki, 2008). Imperial pride may have prevented Muslims from adapting to the new rulers. They only focused on how they used to rule, for centuries they had been used to this dynamic. Now, they had no experience or willingness to accept dominance by outsiders. They eventually revolted against British rule, it was unsuccessful and increased British suppression of Muslims in India. Despite Hindus also being part of the 1857 revolt, the Brits placed sole blame on Muslims, justifying harsher treatment, including torture, mass killings, removal from any government positions, increased surveillance, etc. (Belmekki, 2008). They did not enjoy seeing Muslims and Hindus fight side by side against a common enemy. The Brits immediately divided them by repressing the Muslims.

This was all to the benefit of Hindus, some of whom welcomed the mistreatment of Muslims. A common conclusion for how the Hindi-Muslim conflict began was British colonial rule. While British rule magnified hate between the groups, it already existed. Muslims ruled Hindus in the majority of India for centuries, causing Hindus to bear understandably negative feelings. There were riots between groups in localities centuries before the British stepped foot on the subcontinent (Verghese, 2018). The British did magnify these issues though, for example, introducing the concept of a nation-state. This rigid notion meant only one nation could truly be the face of the society (Clark-Elsayed, 2022).

Eventually, British rule deteriorated, ending in the infamous partition of British India into Pakistan (including what is today Bangladesh) and India. There were numerous reasons for this, but the most likely one may be continuing the “divide and rule” colonial strategy. Right before they left, they ensured a unified Indian subcontinent could not occur, and divided the region into states based on religious ideology, a defining characteristic of the population they noticed from the beginning (Tharoor, 2017). This is a good argument, but the Muslim League, a political party created in 1906, along with other
Muslim groups, demanded a homeland for Muslims. The divide-and-rule strategy meant a unified India could never exist. Resulting in millions dead, over a dozen million migrating, and billions worth of property destroyed. Both sides were eager to rid their communities of the other side, some had wanted to for decades, and the sentiment may have been building for centuries (Singh Balla, 2019). Interestingly, Ambassador Akram argued that the situation would have been much worse if not for the partition. Civil wars would have been fought constantly and over decades. Partition was a quick fix that jump-started the separation of Muslims and Hindus which most likely would have happened anyway.

Partition split the subcontinent Muslims into three groups: Muslims in Pakistan, what is now Bangladesh, and India. Hindus consolidated and kept their civilization's history and location alive. The Muslim leadership argued that having their states in the Northwest and East of India was the best way to secure their rights. Muslims who stayed in India were left by others, or perhaps not forced to leave their homes by Hindu locals, for the more promising new states (Puri, 1993). Post-independence India was set on democracy, minority rights, and secularism. Muslims however, were extremely weak and accepted Hindi as the official language while withdrawing demands of reservation in the economy and government (Puri, 1993). Few political parties excluded members based on their identity, and Muslims' submissiveness did not last long, throughout the late 1900s they began protesting against their grievances as their leaders died or were imprisoned because of perceived danger to the state. However, because of the leaders' demise as well as the vacuum of power left by the Muslim League, Muslims lacked sufficient organization. Even still, after police suppression of protestors over the theft of the Prophet Mohammad's hair in Kashmir, riots erupted across the subcontinent (Puri, 1993). This eventually caused the first Indo-Pakistan war in 1965, harming Muslims in India more, as they may now face consequences for other Muslim's actions. They were not as hateful towards Pakistan as their Hindu counterparts either, increasing calls of disloyalty to India onto government officials and Muslim civilians more generally. Eventually, throughout the late 1900s, Indian Muslims became more confident and less guilty of their presence and identity; rioting thousands of times over the decades to defend their language, Urdu, as well as a historically Muslim university, Muslim Personal Law and other important areas of their identity and faith.
Over time, these issues caused protests and riots between groups, the push from Hindus and the state for universality, while Muslims sought to maintain their distinct identity, practices, and values. While some acceptance and attempts at equality were made, the general dynamic was uneasy tolerance in some areas to patterns of extreme violence in others by Hindu nationalist groups. Over the decades, various government officials who were pro-Hindu such as Indira Gandhi and her son, worked to create favorable conditions in the legislature for the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) by increasing the majoritarianism of Hindus (Maizland, 2022).

Indian Muslims and the 21st Century

The September 11th, 2001 attacks in the U.S. increased Islamophobia worldwide, and India was no different. Crackdown on “terrorists” included the arresting and killing of many Muslims in the wake of global propaganda against Islam (Ahmad, 2014). This was furthered in 2002 as a train was set ablaze, with no cause concluded. Nevertheless, Hindu nationalists and the BJP party, of which current Prime Minister Modi held large power, enacted large-scale violence against Muslims, who were suspected as the culprits. They refused to intervene and provided lists of Muslim-owned businesses, causing displacement of hundreds of thousands, and the killings of hundreds to thousands (Ellis-Peterson, 2023). They are attempting to destroy remnants of Muslim history in India, as Ambassador Akram noted, there are campaigns to remove or change the names of Muslim roads, buildings, and cities.

The BJP was formally created in the 1990s, but in 2004 they made known their radical goals, including ending the special status of Kashmir and creating a universal civil code, ending Muslims' distinct personal law, among other goals (Maizland, 2022). Their roots are in organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an all-male chauvinist organization that carried out extreme violence against minorities and more egalitarian people. The group still exists and is the on-the-ground Hindu nationalist organization, while the BJP is the political party, but they are separate organizations (Britannica, 2023). However, they can formally and informally work together to progress on their common goals. A notable event occurred in the late 90s that increased the BJP’s support by energizing
RSS members in India. A mosque called the Babri Mosque was alleged to have been built on a Hindu holy place. Eventually, approximately 200,000 people took it upon themselves to demolish the mosque. Ambassador Zamir Akram first spoke of this in our interview. He was a diplomat stationed in New Delhi when this occurred, and noted it was an important source of conflict at the time.

The BJP gradually increased its power during this time. As Chief Minister of Gujarat province, north of Mumbai, Modi’s strategy to unite Hindus was successful. He promoted economic growth and embraced neoliberalism while prioritizing religious causes such as opposing the killing of cows. This bridged gaps between traditionalists and those who sought better living conditions (George, 2022). Next, lower castes needed to support them. To do this, he found a common enemy in Muslims. From the global war on terror, association with Pakistan, the Babri Mosque issue, legacies of being conquered by Muslims, and the notion of India being a Hindu state, furthered by partition, he was quickly successful. By 2014, he became Prime Minister of the BJP and the party won sole control of the government. He used this strategy to win reelection in 2019, canvassing with the slogan “India is for Hindus only”, creating a unifying factor behind him and the Hindu majority against a common enemy (George, 2022).

This era marked a strong increase in the transparency of Islamophobia in India - it did not have to be hidden anymore. In 2019, Modi withdrew the semi-autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir. He then cracked down hard on any political dissenters in the regions who supported independence from India, arresting thousands (Silverstein, 2020). Tens of thousands of troops have occupied Kashmir, committing acts of sexual violence, shutting down businesses, blocking internet access, and monitoring daily life. The Home Minister of the BJP party defended the demolition of Muslim homes and businesses after communal violence against Muslims by Hindus caused the Muslims to be punished, by saying they were constructed illegally or on holy sites (Tazamal, 2022). If Indian Muslims protest injustice, they are punished. The BJP does not stop genocidal calls against Indian Muslims.

Islamophobia in India touches all corners of daily life: a Bollywood film released *The Kashmir Files*, which many say is anti-Muslim propaganda. The government gave their employees half days so they could see it. Many audiences were reported to have been shouting hate speech and preventing
Muslim people from seeing the film. Indian Muslims are increasingly denied services due to the location of their home, which was controlled because housing loans for residency in a Hindu neighborhood were refused for Muslims (George, 2022). The professor from the University of Zurich also mentioned this housing discrimination. An important policy the government took was the Citizenship Amendment Act, which allows for rapid citizenship for immigrants from surrounding countries, but only if they are non-Muslim. The BJP argues it is to ensure religious minorities in countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are not discriminated against like they were in Muslim-majority countries (Human Rights Watch, 2020). This attempts to paint the picture in as many cases as possible that Muslims are the wrongdoers. They are denied fair trials and objective due process without harassment and violence.

COVID-19 brought an interesting new development of Islamophobia to India. At the beginning of the COVID pandemic, March 2020, the Tablighi Jamaat Society, a Muslim preacher organization, held a large congregation of members from across the region (Ahuja and Banerjee, 2021). While this was irresponsible and led to many COVID-19 infections, the severity of the COVID-19 crisis was unknown at the time. Furthermore, other religious meetings also took place (Perrigo, 2020). Indians lodged complaints and hate, singling out the Muslim event. The response to COVID-19 in India became extremely religiously segregated (Ahuja and Banerjee, 2021). Patients were separated by faith, Muslim patients were denied treatment and randomly quarantined Muslims. Social media largely exacerbated this hate, the spread of disinformation under hashtags like “#CoronaJihad” was used to spread violent rhetoric (Perrigo, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic allowed a new wave of Islamophobia to grow in India.

There is no doubt that Islamophobia is alive and well in India. The root causes are debated, but the root cause of the status quo’s hatred is rooted in Islamophobia being “industrially fabricated” (Ushama, 2020). That is, the hated have been created and manipulated by political rulers to gain power and, as the professor from the University of Zurich noted, was convenient to divert attention away from material inequality existing in India. There are clear roots for the foundation of this narrative to be created in India’s history. Instead of promoting unity among India, the BJP party has only unified parts of the
country, against another part. They consciously or unconsciously took a part out of their colonizer's playbook, divide and rule.

Internationalization of India’s Islamophobia

India’s Islamophobia is mostly concentrated within its borders, used as a political tactic for the BJP party to unite the majority around a common enemy. However, India has shown its Islamophobic tactics can have international effects and sources, and influence India’s international policy. One of the most recent and salient developments is that India has been one of the most vocal supporters of Israel globally. President Modi condemned the attacks by Hamas extremely early and publicly supported the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, against terrorism. Then, India refused to support a ceasefire at the UN General Assembly (The Wire Staff, 2023). While not all of India’s government agrees with Modi and the BJP’s stance on Israel, the party in power is using its power to support Zionism. While India has strong economic interests in the region, including Indians living in the region who send remittances to India, and thus seek stability, Hindu nationalism is still a primary framework for how the government and many citizens view the situation (Markey, 2023). They sympathize with Israel as they both face the perceived threat of Islam against their civilizations that seek to be solely Jewish and Hindu. This is another example, similar to the COVID-19 pandemic, where Hindu nationalists use any opportunity possible to further their anti-Muslim hate. Israel is helping Modi securitize its strategy to respond to political opposition, and working together for the same goal; curbing terrorism (Markey, 2023). Netanyahu and Modi have become increasingly close, with more visits to Israel than many previous Indian Prime Ministers. There have been large increases in tourism and military trade, creating real-world impacts for their partnership founded on Islamophobia. Interestingly enough, though, is India voting in the UN General Assembly to condemn Israel’s settlements in Palestine. This may illustrate the complex stance India may have on the specific issue between Israel and Palestine at the moment, but India noted that this is routine and is almost entirely symbolic as they are the same every year, with no true action taken (Haidar, 2023). India deeply opposes any form of terrorism but seeks to balance that
with the goal of humanitarian aid and peace (The Economic Times, 2023). Perhaps this is to balance pressure with the Gulf and other Muslim countries, whose leaders have called for more Palestinian support. India will continue to prioritize its national interests, balancing their alliances depending on the day, and prioritizing its nonaligned historical strategy (Haidar, 2023). This situation is deeply interesting though, as India is not one that is known to pick sides, let alone this quickly.

Indian social media has perpetuated Islamophobia globally, in large part because of India’s active diaspora, where Hindu nationalist sentiment and loyalty to President Modi continues. The professor from the University of Zurich argued they are in favor of Modi’s economic liberalism and buy into the state's propaganda abroad. Many right-wing social media accounts based in India denied Israel’s guilt of hospital bombings in Gaze, attributing them to Hamas, despite evidence to the contrary (Hourany, 2023). This shows how there has been a large spread of disinformation around this conflict as well. In the Gulf region, members of the diaspora spew hate directed primarily towards Muslims in India as well as Islam and Muslims generally. The UAE government issued a public warning against discrimination. Many Indians were fired due to Islamophobic posts on social media (Zhou, 2020). In Canada, there is a large backlash on social media and against any sort of pro-Islam policy. Many fake accounts were noticed spreading disinformation and hate about Muslims. Canada has attempted to be inclusive of Muslims and all sides. However, in late 2023, a Sikh separatist leader was killed in British Colombia, with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau suggesting India may have had a hand in his death (Reuters, 2023). While there is no evidence of this, it would follow the pattern in India of cracking down and killing separatist leaders, even internationally in Pakistan, along with the equally suspicious deaths of other separatist leaders around the world during the same time as the murder in Canada (Ellis-Peterson, 2023). In the West, a loyal Indian diaspora would prevent politicians from criticizing India or Modi. Canada kept silent at the next example of Islamophobia in India, killing at least 50. This trend has continued during other issues such as when Modi removed Kashmir's constitutionally autonomous status (Zhou, 2020).

Besides the diaspora, Indian media reach and organization networks increase Islamophobia directly or indirectly throughout many countries. “Over 265 fake local news sites in more than 65
countries are managed by an Indian influence network” (Alaphilippe et al, 2019). This includes various newspapers including “timesofgeneva.com”, which report similar news as other organizations, including anti-Pakistan stories about Kashmir. They also report on other news such as sports, but this is a cover for a strategic agenda. Lobbies are another way India internationalizes its Islamophobic sentiment (Alaphilippe et al, 2019). Next, the U.S. the Indian lobbyist network turned towards the established Israeli lobbying machine for guidance. This increased the already predominantly Hindu-nationalist sentiment. Indian American organizations such as the Association of Indians in America, the Indian American Center for Political Awareness, the National Federation of Indian Associations, and the US-India Political Action Committee are all institutions that may lobby, all having various perspectives on political issues including Islam and India. Many do not have many, if any, Indian Muslims in their organizations, and are not publicly anti-Muslim. Rather, they are anti-Pakistan and Islamism generally (Thewarth, 2007).

Moreover, India’s BJP launched the 1991 Overseas Friends of the BJP initiative, at first to influence India’s perception abroad, especially in the U.S., then moved to help U.S. Indian lobbyist organizations. The India Caucus in the U.S. was soon born as well, with the help of various Congresspeople, they furthered the partnership and sought to include Israel as well (Essa, 2023). Israeli and Indian lobbies in the U.S. work together to support mutual interests. Throughout the West and especially the U.S. there are organizations with thinly veiled Islamophobia disguised as pro-Hindu or pro-Jewish that work together (Silverstein, 2020). India’s ability to increase Islamophobia’s international presence is alarming. Hindu nationalists are extremely loyal to the cause in India, silencing any societal and political dissent as best they can. Lobbyist organizations have organized well and partnered together with Israeli lobbyists, some of the most potent lobbyists in the U.S., to collectively promote their anti-Muslim policies. India’s willingness to pursue these strategies is concerning, its internationalization of Islamophobia impacts many countries' abilities to promote their values and objectives, while India claims it does not like interfering in other domestic issues and wishes other countries do not interfere with its domestic issues.
International Responses

India is largely unwilling to admit its narrative on the global stage. Ambassador Zahir Akram noted that while he was Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva, specifically on the Human Rights Council, Indian representatives did not acknowledge or rarely acknowledged any sort of discrimination against Indian Muslims. The UN Human Rights Office described the treatment of Indian Muslims as “functionally discriminatory” while urging the country to impose its human rights record. (Al-Jazeera, 2022). Despite these calls and others on the multilateral level, India only defended itself on the calls against the use of torture and repeated its respect for human rights (Al-Jazeera, 2022) India’s government and society have demonstrated its willingness to commit large-scale acts of violence against its Muslim community while denying it. This is not unlike other countries such as the U.S. publicly backing Palestinian genocide and generally selective condemnation of human rights abuses worldwide. However, just because the U.S. does this does not mean India can, both must come under scrutiny. India’s unwillingness to admit its violent acts illustrates its descent into a more authoritarian and abusive state.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the second largest international body after the UN and an international alliance between countries with Muslim people, has officially denounced the increasing number of violent attacks on Muslim people and Muslim places. (OIC). However, India responded with the argument that condemning these acts of violence was a clear “anti-India agenda” that tarnished the OIC’s reputation by showing off its “communal mindset” (Reuters, 2023). This continues the trend that India refuses to acknowledge its actions even when publicly called out. Various members of the OIC have attempted to include India in the organization, such as Saudi Arabia seeking it to be an observer state, Bangladesh arguing for its inclusion, and Qatar supporting its membership (Robbi, 2022). However, India has rejected their invitations to join the Organization, as it does not agree with the foundation being a religion, and does not want them to be able to pressure India on issues such as Kashmir. India does not want to take part in international cooperation based on Islam, preferring to pursue bilateral ties to maintain its sovereignty and security.
An important example of backlash from the Muslim world is when an Indian official publically insulted the Prophet Mohammad. A large Kuwait grocery store CEO pulled all Indian products from shelves, Qatar demanded an apology from the visiting Indian Vice President, Bahrain welcomed the removal of the official from office, Iran demanded the Indian ambassador’s presence to apologize, and various other predominantly-Muslim countries voiced their disapproval. Here, India wavered, it sent diplomats to Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and others to diffuse tensions. This is a change in the trend. India had to quickly enact damage control diplomacy and other actions to decrease hostilities. It changed its pattern because there has not been this level of clear outrage by the populous of many countries, pressuring their governments to do something, the governments then did, vocalizing their outrage widely. As Ambassador Akram noted, India is also increasingly reliant on trade and economic cooperation from many in this region, trade between India and the Gulf Cooperation Council, or the GCC, doubled in 2022, primarily oil and gas (Al-Jazeera 2022). Saudi Arabia and the UAE are India’s third and fourth-largest trading partners respectively. There are large infrastructure investment projects in India, and millions of India’s diaspora living in the region, furthering economic exchange between India and the Gulf (Ganguly and Blarel, 2020). Saudi Arabia and the UAE continued economic cooperation even after India removed Kashmir’s special status, dubbing it an “internal matter” for India. Ambassador Akram emphasized power relations are almost always preferred over identity issues, which may sometimes have an impact, but they are not equal. When Modi traveled to Saudi Arabia for bilateral talks, the Kashmir issue did not come up as a topic of discussion (Essa, 2019). Interestingly, the Gulf countries could change India in ways the UN and the U.S. could not. This is because they have a certain power over India’s economy, specifically their oil and gas, in the wake of Russia’s war against Ukraine, curbing India’s energy imports (Cafiero). At first, Gulf and other Muslim countries accepted India’s behavior against its Muslim community for economic and power reasons, but now that they had some leverage over India, they were able to use it to control the growing Islamophobia. India also prefers its economic interests over its identity political goals, once it sees its economic security may be put into jeopardy, it backtracks on its unwillingness to acknowledge its Islamophobia. Furthermore, India is pursuing its “moving west” strategy, which entails
increasing alliances with Middle Eastern countries. Up until then, and still now, both sides prefer to leave domestic matters to the respective sovereign. However, insults over the Prophet Mohammad publically crossed a threshold that showed India wanted alliances with these countries more than they needed it. India will be more wary of the public vocalization and internationalization of its Islamophobia.

In Turkey, a historically powerful and significant Muslim country, relations are more tense. In 2019, India threatened to cancel a multibillion-dollar co-manufacturing deal with Turkey over President Ergodan’s remarks on the Kashmir conflict, calling for cooperation between India and Pakistan (Siddiqui, 2020). However, the deal continued as India sought to gain more control over Turkey, to not only decrease its more forward stance against India’s actions and also to decrease its alliance with Pakistan. The next year, on the anniversary of the removal of Kashmir status, Erdogan did not make any public statement, but the government still did, and the Turkey-Pakistan alliance upgraded to a strategic partnership (Siddiqui, 2020). In 2020, Turkey gathered academics and researchers to discuss India’s anti-Muslim actions, furthering the tense relationship are the accusations of Turkey promoting the radicalization of Indian Muslims. Despite economic cooperation, there are plenty of issues surrounding Indian Muslims that both countries are less cooperative on. Recently at the G20 Summit that was held in India, Erdogan urged member countries to reevaluate their actions and policies that allowed the burning of the Quran under police protection (Guldogan, 2023). The two’s relationship has less strong foundations to build on other cooperation because of Islamophobia in India.

Indonesia, which is a growing strategic, security, and economic partner of India, with similar interests in not interfering in the other separatist movements in Kashmir, India, because of its own independence movement in Papua, Indonesia. It is also one of the largest Muslim countries and is an increasingly strong democracy and regional or middle power. In response to the Citizenship Amendment Act, various Islamic organizations in Indonesia protested outside the Indian embassy and pressured the Indonesian government publicly (Robby, 2022). The Indonesian state-sponsored supreme religious body, the Council of Ulama, invited the Indian Ambassador to a meeting with Indonesian Islamic organizations to clarify their positions, but the Ambassador skipped the meeting. However, the Ambassador did tell
other officials that the Indian government had it under control. (Robby, 2022) Several Indonesian parliamentary members and officials voiced concerns over India’s actions against its Muslim community, including the Minister of Religious Affairs. However, the official stance of the Indonesian government was not to comment and to leave it as an internal issue within India, their partnership did not change largely (Robby, 2022). Therefore, the pattern continues of countries not prioritizing internal violent actions of the government because it is in their sovereign territory, and speaking out may jeopardize other strategic areas of cooperation with more material and physical benefits like trade.

Malaysia is another economically strong predominantly Muslim country, there is also a large Indian diaspora there. Interestingly, a study assessing the configuration of Islamophobia in non-Muslim Indian Malaysians found despite different levels of exposure to Muslims, levels of Islamophobia remained the same throughout the sample (Siah et al, 2022). Furthermore, Mahathir Mohammad’s leadership harmed relations. He is a Pan-Islamist, and remarked on Kashmir, defending his perspective by saying it was in line with the UN regulation, but India banned imports of palm oil from Malaysia in response (Robby, 2022) This pattern continued with the Citizenship Amendment Act, Mahatirs comments were found to be derogatory by India and they expanded bans of imports. Other government officials reflected his statements and India’s image in the eyes of some of the Malaysian government has decreased. In 2022, the Malaysian Foreign Minister warned India that its Islamophobia would harm the Muslim communities in many Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and called for India to work with Malaysia to decrease this issue (Dunia, 2023). Indonesia and Malaysia are extremely close partners. Both of them demanded Indian envoys over the insults against the Prophet Mohammad in 2022. They both call for cooperation with India to decrease the issue of Islamophobia.

Pakistan and Bangladesh cannot be ignored when discussing India’s Islamophobia. First, Pakistan; India’s already bad image in Pakistan only gets worse with every instance of state-sanctioned communal violence against Muslims in India. India’s Hindu nationalism has further prevented any sort of bilateral engagement (Syed, 2023). For instance, taking away Kashmir’s autonomous status caused Pakistan to publicly call for an international response to India’s violations of the Kashmiri people’s rights.
Following the Kashmir conflict’s development, India removed Pakistan as a Most Favored Nation (MFN) country (Syed, 2023). These moves align with India’s Hindu nationalist strategy to rid India of threats, the primary one is Muslims. The Pakistani government publicly spoke out against this continuation of cyclical conflict. This is one of Pakistan’s primary tools to respond to India’s Islamophobia: name and shame. It continuously exposes India for its anti-Muslim actions at the UN General Assembly and urges other Muslim countries to work together against rising Islamophobia (Latif, 2020). These efforts are difficult to make succeed, as Pakistan was one of the only countries in the OIC that prevented India from joining despite popular support.

Next, Bangladesh is an important regional actor because of its history as a Muslim country partitioned from colonial India. Thousands of Muslims in the country protested extensively after an Indian official insulted the Prophet Mohammad, but the government has been silent in condemning the Indian government (Mahmud, 2022). There has been large criticism against the government for not taking action, especially by opposition parties of the ruling party in Bangladesh and the Muslim groups that helped coordinate protests. The government publicly stated it did not want to antagonize India; their threshold for criticizing India was not directly insulting the Prophet. This has caused internal strife in Bangladesh, participants at protests called for boycotting Indian products until they changed their Islamophobic policies (Mahmud, 2022). Despite this, Bangladesh has been vocal on the world stage against Islamophobia. However, this has primarily been in secure spaces where there would be little backlash, such as at the 2023 OIC conference (Sakib, 2023). The Foreign Minister who spoke, though, did not specify which areas he was talking about. Bangladesh is clearly frightened of what India may do if it publicly criticizes their Islamophobia, they must prefer their interests over values with a strong adversary.

Interestingly, Islamophobia globally is pushing Muslim countries closer together. Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Malaysia are working more closely together. At the UN General Assembly, they all meet bilaterally to coordinate increased cooperation. Turkey and Malaysia worked together on a speech condemning the increase in Islamophobia globally. Bilaterally, the two discussed strategies to combat
Islamophobia, meetings will continue when Erdogan visits Malaysia in December 2023 (Asia News Network, 2023). Furthermore, Pakistan joined this alliance in the past to work on an anti-Islamophobia TV to have a media presence that educates people and fights misconceptions about Islam that are increasing (Gul, 2019). Therefore, if India continues its Islamophobia, it may drive its potential partners and allies away, towards countries such as Pakistan and Iran.

The U.S. has a diverse set of opinions that are vocalized. The State Department condemned the insults against the Prophet Mohammad and used it as an opportunity to advertise the actions they supposedly take regularly to combat human rights violations, Islamophobia, and discrimination in India (Al-Jazeera, 2022). However, the State Department’s Religious Freedom Report of 2022 highlighted various issues publicly. For example, it noted that religious conversion was simply against the law in some states, that minorities were attacked regularly, and concluded there was a clear and concerning trend of hateful violence (Rajvanshi, 2023). The Indian government released a statement arguing the report was misinformation and biased from select US officials. This is not the first time an interaction with this dynamic has occurred. Secretary of State Blinken raised concerns about religious freedom, which the Indian government angrily responded to (Rajvanshi, 2023). India has denounced the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent bipartisan governmental panel, that has acknowledged the anti-Muslim violence in India. However, the U.S. continues the trend of not prioritizing and acknowledging Islamophobia in India. Biden, despite making his pro-human rights stance known repeatedly and distancing himself from Trump’s stances, prefers to work with India as much as possible to strengthen the alliance against China, as Trump would do (Chubb-Confer and Kunze, 2023). Biden does not seem too publicly concerned with India’s actions, withholding his voice on the issue. In fact, the U.S. and India have Islamophobia in common. The U.S.’s War on Terror vilified Muslims and enabled an increase in Islamophobia globally so that it may be more sympathetic to the sentiment privately. Thus far, the U.S. and Biden specifically have largely not acknowledged India’s Islamophobia, similar to Indonesia, where there has been some criticism, but not truly attempting to get India to change its opinion and actions on the issue.
Will India Continue to Rise?

India is a regional power and one of the top contenders of what could be called “rising great powers”, it is the most populous country in the world, with the fastest growing economy, as well as military foundations, and nuclear capability (Pande, 2023). Specifically, massive consumer demand in India is driving investment, jobs, wages, and more. It also has a historically low dependency ratio in its demographic dividend, meaning there are many more working-age people than dependents, like children and the elderly. These are compiled along with many other factors that make India’s growth almost inevitable (Chakravorti and Dalmia, 2023). Furthermore, like great powers, it has the notion that is exceptional in some way. India sees its history, including the peaceful acquirement of independence, and maintaining neutrality throughout world conflicts such as the Cold War, it sees itself as a moral teacher for the world, that does not wish to revise the status quo (Pande, 2023). This can make it easier for Indians to work harder individually toward the growth of India, if they already believe they are a great power or should be, they will be more incentivized to live up to that belief or expectation.

Hindu nationalism has taken the country in full force with the help of the BJP. This may provide India with several issues on its rise to power: as already mentioned, predominantly Muslim countries have voiced concerns over the treatment of Indian Muslims, but is this problem enough to prevent them from cooperating with India in other areas? No. Although even the U.S., a non-Muslim country that has a bad reputation in the Islamic world, complained about India’s increase in anti-Muslim violence, the strategic alliance founded on countering China reigns supreme. India was incredibly defiant against the U.S. voicing its concerns as well, but the conflict stopped there. Perhaps the U.S. only provides lip service to its calls for human rights and democracy, but when it comes down to it, it will not prioritize its values over its strategic goals. Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait, are rather similar, despite India’s treatment of Muslims in Kashmir, for example, they cooperate with India economically and while diplomats meet, do not bring up issues like Kashmir. However, when an Indian government official publicly insulted the Prophet, receiving a large backlash from civil society, they were
quick to jump on India. This seems to be a continuation of the pattern of publicly ensuring values are met when it is important to, but not necessarily prioritizing them over other interests. However, India knows that these issues can become important, and when Gulf countries demanded apologies from the Indian government, India was quick to act (The Economist, 2022). India needed to ensure its interests were secure, including investments from Gulf countries and their oil and gas supplies. Gulf countries may take more aggressive action against India’s Islamophobia if thresholds are crossed. It seems the threshold here is public and direct insults against Islam’s Prophet, which may cause instability and violence between Indians living in Gulf countries, of which there are many, and Muslims of the country. It is interesting then, that India’s treatment of Muslims internally, is not crossing the threshold of Gulf and other Muslim countries. With the U.S., India knew the Americans needed it to contain China more than India needed the U.S., so it could afford to not publicly acknowledge its Islamophobia to any extent and risk the loyalty of the BJP’s voting base. This is similar to other predominantly Muslim countries, such as Indonesia, which heard its people protest India’s Islamophobia and attempted to mend tensions but was largely turned away by Indian officials. India seems to prioritize its Hindu nationalism and massive impacts on Muslims that the ideology calls for over more tight nit strategic partnerships even with an increasingly powerful regional ally, Indonesia. This trend continues with Malaysia and Turkey, two other rather powerful predominantly Muslim states that have had tensions with India over its treatment of Muslims, to no success. India remains aggressive on this issue when brought forth, except in specific circumstances where countries with power over India demand enough force behind it that India’s strategic interests may be at risk. Turkey specifically is not keen on India at the moment. While Erdogan has toned down his public criticisms of India’s involvement in Kashmir relatively compared to the past, Turkey is still one of the most outspoken countries about India’s Islamophobic actions and the Kashmir conflict. Largely, though, countries do not interfere or take action directly against India’s Islamophobia because it is within India’s borders, they strongly respect other countries' sovereignty. Countries want their sovereignty to be respected by India, so they must respect India’s, even if it harms their values. The balance the BJP party is attempting to strike, between being anti-Muslim at home while pursuing closer ties with predominantly
Muslim countries, is tricky and has had its tests. Despite them, the balance is progressing even though it is clearly contradictory, especially when considering India has the image of itself as a moral leader.

India may be making more enemies than friends, as Hindu nationalism increases the country’s aggressiveness internationally. For instance, near the port that leads to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, India has become more hostile. Not only did it boost its navy capabilities in the area, but it also struck the Chahabar deal with Iran for involvement in a port near the China-Pakistan port (Syed, 2023). These types of actions worsen regional and global polarization, as they increase security tensions and the potential for conflict. Next, India’s aggression prevents cooperation methods such as confidence-building measures (CBM), trade, sports relations, and cultural and student exchanges (Syed, 2023). Hindutva seeks to increase mistrust between any perceived threat, preventing any positive inclination towards, even incremental, cooperation with an adversary, despite Pakistani efforts. India is on an offensive realist path, seeking militarism for protection and to become the dominant regional power, using perceived threats as justification for its aggression (Syed, 2023). India even goes so far as to fund terrorist activities and support insurgent and independence groups in Balochistan in Pakistan to keep the country destabilized (Sahoo, 2019). Ambassador Akram argued India’s international reputation and image will be harmed, undermining its claim to global power.

Underlying these changes is India’s growing autocracy. In 2023, the V-Dem Institute, a research organization for international democracy, categorized India as an “electoral autocracy”, not a democracy. In fact, it is one of the worst backsliders of the last 10 years (V-Dem, 2023). India’s Islamophobia is deteriorating its democracy. Clearly, there have been unjust actions by the Indian government against its Muslim population: crackdowns on Kashmiri people's rights and freedoms, violence against Muslim protests for rights, boycotting of Muslim businesses, and many more (Ahmad, 2014). The Brown Political Review specifies that this decline in democracy is because of the BJP’s increase in censorship, curbing freedoms, and increasing Islamophobia (Fayaz, 2022). These developments make international competition inevitable and cooperation impossible, isolating India from various countries such as Pakistan and Turkey. These negative relations are not isolated to India’s Islamophobia, but its root in
Hindutva and the international aggression that comes with it. This may increase the probability of conflicts such as the border dispute with China when India unilaterally claimed territory that China already claimed. This resulted in China arguing India violated its sovereignty and led to a border conflict leaving dozens wounded and dead (Ashraf et al, 2022). A professor from the University of Zurich emphasized this point: despite India attempting to continue its non-aligned stance, it has partners it prefers such as the U.S. and Israel. This dispute is rooted in Indian aggression, which Hindutva and Islamophobia play into greatly. However, the Islamophobia aspect of Hindutva makes India increasingly hostile towards predominantly Muslim countries because of the added threat of Islam that exists there. Furthermore, it is important to note that this increase in hostility towards a common enemy, with the likes of Israel and even the U.S., may cause India to become much closer with these countries. Therefore, Islamophobia may not solely deteriorate India’s alliances, it may drive similarly-minded countries closer together. 

Islamophobia prevents hundreds of millions of Muslims from progressing economically, politically, socially, and more; preventing India from reaching its full potential. The professor from the University of Zurich highlighted how India’s inequality strongly damages its democracy and potential prosperity. Despite previously mentioned attempts to promote economic well-being for all, Muslim communities throughout India are entrenched in poverty, living in slums neglected by the state (Sing, 2020). Infrastructure, including “water, sanitation, electricity, schools, public health facilities, banking facilities, anganwadis [community child nutrition areas], ration shops, roads, and transport facilities” either do not exist altogether or are inadequate (Singh, 2020). This creates segregated cities throughout India, resulting in polarization and hostilities. The professor from the University of Zurich compared segregation with that of the American South. Furthermore, banks, especially nationalized banks, discriminate against Muslims who seek to build credit: many banks simply do not offer credit to large designated areas, which are often predominantly Muslim areas (Singh, 2020). While India’s neoliberal economy has helped people out of poverty, it has also left hundreds of millions behind, and will not be sustainable if it continues to ignore so many (Wankhede, 2012). India is not showing any sign of
including its massive Muslim population. India will not be able to grow into a globally dominant power economically as easily, if at all.

Economic inequality increasing relative deprivation, alongside widespread state-sanctioned and communal violence, may cause a larger-scale conflict, specifically communal riots, in India (Bulutgil and Prasad, 2022). Some Muslims are becoming more militarized and Islamic extremism organizations, such as the Popular Front of India (PFI), are growing in response to their mistreatment. They have organized protests and riots, leaving dozens dead at a time (Pandya, 2017). Dr. Suddha Chakravartti mentioned this development, with the growth of Salafi Islam, a conservative form of Islam, in the PFI. They are working towards a pan-Islam identity in India (Pandya, 2017). As the BJP will likely be re-elected in 2024, fear is rising in the community about enacting a universal personal civil code, restricting Muslims’ freedoms and rights (Pandya, 2017). It is likely protests will increase around the elections and if policies such as these are passed, riots and terror attacks, with the help of outside terror organizations in countries like Pakistan, Turkey, and Qatar, will be extremely probable (Pandya, 2017). The Indian state's backlash will be strong, as it already has been, bulldozing rioters' houses. It is key to note that non-terrorist actors will support riots and protests, inevitably causing more widespread backlash and cycles of state and civil violence (Bulutgil and Prasad, 2022).

Conclusion

The rise in India’s Islamophobia has its roots in the country’s history: centuries of Muslim immigration, invasion and rule, followed by British colonization dividing the two groups to rule them more easily. These created a hostile foundation that made it easier for the BJP party to use Islamophobia to gain political loyalty and power. Now, the BJP and Prime Minister Modi enact policies that infringe on Indian Muslims rights, crackdown on protestors, allow violence against Muslims by Hindu Nationalists, and prevent Muslims from becoming as prosperous as their Hindu counterparts. Internationally, this Islamophobia is part of India’s agenda: it has vehemently supported other countries, such as Israel, that hold their Ismaophobic beliefs, as well as use loyal and Hindu Nationalist parts of the Indian diaspora and Indian organizations and lobbyists to ensure their foreign policy interests are met. This includes
disincentivizing dissenters from speaking against the Indian government, and boost policy in other countries that is favorable to India. The Islamic world, multilaterally and unilaterally, has spoken out against India’s actions, but to little success. This is primarily because, like the U.S. who has also spoken out, they prefer to ensure their international interests are met, rather than their values; meaning they would prefer secure access to India’s economy, for example, than fight India on their Islamophobic actions. India is extremely defensive when its called out for its Islamophobia, so these concerns are grounded in probability of retaliation. India is a rising power, but it is unclear if it will be able to cement itself as a great power. Its Islamophobia prevents better alliances with a large portion of the globe, tensions prevent confidence and security in relations, especially if the public speaks out or begins conflicting with the Indian diaspora more. This rise in Islamophobia is met with increased distrust of many other countries as well as an decrease in democracy, making India more aggressive internationally and preventing good relations. Last, India’s disenfranchisement of hundreds of millions of its Muslim population will harm its sustainable economic growth and harm its ability to become a global economic power. In the future, India’s BJP party will most likely continue its Islamophobic strategy, creating a more probable atmosphere for more severe violence. This is another future scenario that will hinder India’s ability to securely rise into a global power. India’s international image is tarnishing rapidly, and if it cannot use, for example, its economy to shield itself from criticism, it may find itself with few allies, such as the U.S. and Israel, who are disliked in the international arena.
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