# Behind India's near-total silence on the Israeli assault on Lebanon

**Arun Kumar, Keith Jones**
**12 August 2006**

India has pretensions to be a world power, professes to be a spokesman for the underdeveloped countries in world affairs, considers west Asia to be part of its "extended neighbourhood," and has hundreds of soldiers deployed in Lebanon as United Nations peace-keepers. Yet it has remained all but completely silent on the four-week-old Israeli aggression against Lebanon—an aggression that has cost more than a thousand Lebanese civilians their lives, forced a million Lebanese to flee their homes, destroyed much of the country's infrastructure and threatens, due to the blockading of vital food and medical supplies, to cause an even greater humanitarian crisis.

Behind this silence lies India's pursuit of a strategic partnership with the US, its burgeoning military and security ties with Israel, and its own use of the "war on terror" as a propaganda and geopolitical weapon.

On July 13, less than 48 hours after Israel had launched bomb and missile attacks on Lebanon, and sent in troops, India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance issued a perfunctory statement "on the tension at the Israel-Lebanon border." The statement demanded Hezbollah return the two captured Israeli soldiers and condemned in "equally strong" terms "the excessive and disproportionate military retaliation by Israel."

Then over the next two weeks—two weeks during which Israel waged a war of terror against the Lebanese people, a war it vowed would end only once it had irreversibly altered the geopolitical equation in the Middle East, and the Bush administration came to Israel's aid by rushing it military supplies and opposing a ceasefire—the UPA government fell all but completely mute.

New Delhi could hardly stir itself to issue a protest when an Indian soldier serving with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFL) was injured by an Israeli bomb in Lebanon's south. And an Indian External Affairs Ministry officially tartly dismissed a reporter who asked whether New Delhi intended to protest the July 18 bombing of a Bekaa Valley factory in which one Indian migrant worker was killed and three others injured, saying it was not a "diplomatic incident but a bombing incident."

Only on July 27, after demonstrations and protest rallies had been held in cities across India, did Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh make a statement to parliament on the situation in Lebanon and call for an "immediate ceasefire."

Not wanting, however, to offend either Washington or Tel Aviv, Singh's statement was almost entirely equivocation, obfuscation and diversion.

Much of the statement was given over to explaining what the UPA government had done to evacuate Indian nationals from Lebanon. After reiterating India's July 13 joint condemnation of Hezbollah and Israel, Singh decried Israel's continued detention of ministers of the Palestinian National Authority, then affirmed—without stating that Israel and the US are responsible for it—that the destruction of Lebanon is deplorable. Said Singh, "The virtual destruction of a country, which has been painfully rebuilt after two decades of civil war, can hardly be countenanced by any civilized state."

Four days later, and in the immediate aftermath of the Israeli atrocity at Qana, India's lower house of parliament (Lok Sabha) unanimously passed a resolution on the crisis in West Asia. It called for an "immediate ceasefire" and condemned "the large-scale and indiscriminate Israeli bombing of Lebanon that has been under way for many days, which has resulted in the killing and suffering of large numbers of innocent civilians, including women and children, and caused widespread damage to civilian infrastructure."

Unlike Singh's July 27 statement, the resolution made no reference to the hollow pretext Israel has given for its war of aggression—Hezbollah's July 12 capture of two Israeli soldiers.

The Lok Sabha motion, however, has in no way changed the stance of the Indian government. Rather it is using the motion to provide political cover for its continuing refusal to lift a diplomatic finger to protest the Israeli aggression against Lebanon, an aggression which is being wholly supported by the Bush administration as part of its preparations for possible future military action against Syria and Iran.

The UPA government has repeatedly denied that it has made any changes in India's traditional geopolitical posture to win Washington's support for a nuclear accord under which India will be given a unique exemption from the international nuclear regulatory regime, thereby allowing it to gain access to international civilian nuclear technology and fuel.

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But this is belied by India's voting record at the International Atomic Energy Agency. In the 13 months since Manmohan Singh and Bush initialled a framework agreement on the nuclear issue, New Delhi has sided with the US in key votes on Iran's nuclear program at the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Bush administration officials and US congressmen, meanwhile, have repeatedly made clear that the nuclear accord is contingent on India siding with the US in its confrontation with Iran and that their long-term aim is to harness India to the US and thereby contain, and, if need be, threaten China.

The UPA government and India's corporate elite perceive the nuclear accord as critical for several reasons: It constitutes implicit recognition of India as a nuclear weapons state and great power; provides tangible proof of US willingness to enter into a strategic partnership with India, while consigning arch-rival Pakistan to a lesser status; and will give India access to the nuclear fuel and technology it needs to reduce its dependence on oil and natural gas imports, while enabling it to concentrate the resources of its domestic nuclear program on developing its nuclear arsenal.

As the legislation that will enable the Bush administration to implement the Indo-US nuclear accord is now before the US Congress, the UPA government is especially anxious not to do anything that could rile a US political establishment that views Israel as Washington's most important ally in the oil-rich Middle East and Hezbollah as a synonym for Iran.

While placating the US is certainly the principal reason the UPA government has failed to oppose in any meaningful way the Israeli aggression against Lebanon, it is not the only reason.

For decades India's political establishment, especially the Congress Party, postured as champions of the dispossessed Palestinians. But since India established full diplomatic ties with Israel in 1992 under the Congress government of Narasihma Rao, India has become increasingly closely allied with the Zionist state and this alliance has become of great importance to the realization of India's ambitions of becoming a major military power throughout the Indian Ocean region.

Israel is now the second largest supplier of arms to India's military (some analysts say it has even surpassed Russia to become India's most important source of weaponry) and is particularly important in supplying India with high-technology weapons. For example, Israel has contracted to supply India with three "Phalcon" AWACS (airborne warning and control systems), which can detect cruise missiles and low-flying aircraft much earlier than ground-based radars, at a cost of $1.1 billion.

A senior Indian defence official recently told the *Times of India* that Israel has proven a particularly valuable ally because, unlike France, it does not also sell weapons to Pakistan and has proven willing to rush weapons to India in times of crisis.

In 1999, when fighting in the Kargil region of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir almost led to all-out war between India and Pakistan, Israel supplied India with unmanned aerial surveillance vehicles (UAVs) and sent military specialists to Kashmir to instruct Indian troops in counterinsurgency tactics.

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance government spoke openly about a US-Indo-Israeli axis in the war against terrorism. While the UPA has eschewed such inflammatory rhetoric, it has enhanced military and security cooperation with both Washington and Tel Aviv.

A third reason for India's silence over the Israeli aggression against Lebanon is that the UPA government and Indian political and corporate elite are loathe to challenge the claims of an "international war on terror," a formulation it has found useful in trying to politically isolate and browbeat Pakistan and in denying the political and social causes of the insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir.

The launching of Israel's war of aggression against Lebanon coincided with the attempt of the Indian government, egged on by the Hindu supremacists and corporate media, to hold Pakistan responsible for the July 11 Mumbai terrorist atrocity.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front, which is providing the UPA with the parliamentary votes to remain in office, has vigorously denounced the US-supported Israeli aggression against Lebanon and is calling on the UPA government to lead a campaign for international sanctions against Israel and to initiate such a campaign by suspending India's purchase of Israeli arms.

But this amounts to little more than hot air. While they deplore the UPA government's forging of a strategic partnership with the US and its neo-liberal socioeconomic policies, the Stalinists have repeatedly said that they intend to prop up the Congress-led UPA for a full five-year term.

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