

Activists protest Israeli military affairs minister's visit to India

New Delhi, June 5 (RHC)-- The growing proximity between India and Israel has angered civil society and human rights activists in India, who have expressed indignation over the top Israeli military official's visit to New Delhi.

Israeli military affairs minister Benny Gantz arrived in New Delhi on Thursday after his scheduled visit at the end of March was postponed due to "unavoidable reasons." Gantz and his Indian counterpart Rajnath Singh signed a military pact on Thursday and held discussions on expanding bilateral cooperation to mark 30 years of ties between them.

They expressed a desire to further develop military cooperation in a manner that harnesses Israel's "technological advance and operational experience", together with India's "extraordinary development and production capabilities", the joint statement said.

Gantz is accompanied by a delegation of military experts as well as representatives from the Israeli weapons industries, according to media reports.

Alarmed by the growing military cooperation between the two sides, activists in India have cautioned that it will have severe consequences for Palestinians as well as for India's minorities. They described the visit as "shameless" and warned that the further entrenchment of the military-industrial complex between the two sides could not be ignored. A report in the Middle East Eye (MEE) quoted activist Amrit Wilson as saying that Gantz's India visit "will no doubt lead to further purchases of weapons 'tried and tested' on Palestinians" and "to further militarize the Indian state which is killing Kashmiri Muslims and Dalits, Christians and Muslims in India."

Wilson, who works with the South Asia Solidarity Group, said the visit was particularly damning given that there has been no resolution to the Pegasus spyware revelations that said the Narendra Modi government in New Delhi used software from Israeli company NSO to hack the phones of around 300 Indians, including the leader of the opposition as well as activists and journalists.

Israel's military affairs ministry signs off on all sales of Pegasus, and a report in the New York Times earlier this year said the sale was part of a \$2 billion weapons deal between India and Israel in 2017. It "shows the shameless criminality and lack of accountability of both governments," Wilson asserted.

In 1948, India was the only non-Muslim state to vote against the UN partition plan of Palestine. In the 1967 and 1973 wars, India denounced Israel as the aggressor. In the early 1990s, the policy began to change with the opening of the Indian embassy in Tel Aviv.

Since 2014, when the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party came to power, India has made its pro-Israel stance very clear, much to the chagrin of Indians who remain loyal to the Palestinian cause.

In the world's second-most populous country, home to more than 10 percent of world Muslims, solidarity with the people of Palestine has been deeply ingrained in the country's socio-political fabric. This is while the government in New Delhi has in recent years drawn closer to Israel with lucrative military deals,

marking a departure from India's traditional position on the Palestine issue.

In 2017, Modi became the first Indian leader to visit Israel, and during his tenure, New Delhi has become Israel's biggest arms purchaser, amounting to around \$1 billion per annum. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sipri), India's arms purchases from Israel increased 175 percent between 2015 and 2019.

In October 2021, India and Israel agreed to form a task force to formulate a comprehensive 10-year roadmap to identify new areas of cooperation as part of efforts to boost military cooperation. Apoorva G, Asia Pacific coordinator for the Palestinian Boycott Divestment and Sanction (BDS) National Committee, was cited as saying in the MEE report that Gantz's visit and expansion of ties did not just affect the Palestinian cause, but also helped facilitate the persecution of India's minorities.

"From the purchase of weapons worth more than a billion dollars annually to the bulldozing of houses of the poor and minorities as a form of collective punishment to the brazen killing of journalists and making religion a basis for citizenship - all of these are standard practices of apartheid Israel that are finding their way in India," he said.

"The Hindu right in India sees apartheid Israel as a 'model'. The people of India, however, and their movements in defense of the Indian constitution are in solidarity with Palestinian rights."

Writer and activist Achin Vnaik said the Indian government's affinity with Israel was ideological. "This government has a very strong admiration for Israel and how it has established a Jewish state through the repression and humiliation of Palestinians," he said.

The Hindu nationalist government in India has been accused of persecuting minority Muslims and carrying out a settler-colonial project in the disputed state of Kashmir, on the model of Israel's illegal settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories.



Israel's military affairs minister Benny Gantz (left) meets with Indian prime minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi, June 2, 2022. (ANI Photo)

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