COVID-19 and India’s Islamophobia

Paula Thompson and Hafsa Kanjwal
Foreword by Dr. Hatem Bazian
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In this report, we attempt to examine India’s recent developments during the COVID-19 pandemic, which comes as a follow up to our more extensive and detailed research on Islamophobia in the country. As the COVID-19 pandemic ravages the world, India’s political and civic leaders have opted to use the opportunity to drive Islamophobic messaging in public discourses and fan the flames of anti-Muslim sentiments. India’s current Prime Minister, Narendra Damodardas Modi, leader of the Hindu ultra-nationalist BJP party, is no stranger to stoking racial and religious tensions to achieve political ends; the pandemic is another example as this report illustrates. The BJP’s platform and India’s policies are textbook examples of utilizing every political and economic crisis to drive maximum benefit for the ultra-nationalists in the country. Furthermore, fear and demonization are used to target marginalized populations that include Christians, Dalits (lower caste Hindus), Muslims, and Sikhs.

The BJP party is founded on the Hindutva ideology, a modern rightwing ultra-nationalist formulation first mentioned in V.D. Savarkar’s book Hindutva, which “constructs an idealized Hindu as the archetypical citizen of India and through the superiorization of the Hindu.” Thus, the Hindutva ideology “necessarily imagines an array of identities to be unworthy of belonging to its conception of India,” and the “otherization project inferiorizes a number of identities: Dalits, liberals, Christians, feminists, but most of all, Muslims.”

Furthermore, Hindutva, in more than one context, “envisions India to have always been a Hindu nation and perceives Islam and Muslims as an alien force which, through invasion and war, caused a seismic shift to the detriment of the natural state of Hinduness in the subcontinent.” Various nationalist groups in India have adopted Hindutva’s ideology, or “Hinduness,” which “has three pillars—common nation, race, and culture—and forms the basis of an exclusionary national narrative focused exclusively on the rights of Hindus.” These groups’ views and activities range across a spectrum: from extreme activities that include the expulsion, killing, or conversion of all non-Hindus, while more moderate forces demand greater influence of Hindu principles in the state’s decision-making process.”

Accordingly, the BJP party and the Hindutva ideology closely resemble Nazi thought and fascism, rather than any type of liberal democracy promoted in the Western press in regards to India. The fact that India has elections and is the largest democracy in the world should not be used as a reference point to obfuscate the nature of the BJP and its affinity to a Nazi and fascistic worldview. The BJP party and its main arm, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), were inspired and referenced in their writings and speeches both Nazi Germany and Mussolini’s fascists in Italy. An example of this is B. S. Moonje, a Hindu nationalist leader, who met Italian dictator Mussolini and expressed admiration and affinity to fascism: “The idea of fascism vividly brings out the conception of unity amongst people...India and particularly Hindu India need some such institutions for the military regeneration of the Hindus... Our institution of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh of Nagpur under Dr. Hedgewar is of this kind.” It comes as no surprise that the RSS was implicated in the assassination of the ‘Father of the Nation,’ Mahatma Gandhi and on the 71st anniversary went as far to stage a re-enactment and celebrate the murder’s success.

Since coming to power in 2014, the BJP government under Modi’s leadership has moved to target all non-Hindu populations systematically and deliberately while making sure to weaken institutional
Thus, India’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic has to be understood and positioned within the broader BJP’s strategy that targets Christians, Dalits (lower caste Hindus), Muslims, and Sikhs as a way to continue to build and solidify a Hindu ultra-nationalist identity based on exclusion and otherization. In India, the COVID-19 pandemic was framed as a Muslim problem or another type of “religious” invasion intended to once again undo the Hindu nation through the use of the virus. This framing was articulated in the media as the “Coronajihad” or “Corona Terrorism,” which resembles the same strategy the U.S president Donald Trump used in framing it as the “Chinese Virus” to push anti-China discourses that are key to his 2020 election campaign. Here, the public discourses used by India’s BJP government officials and the Trump administration in the U.S are paradigmatic of populist and ultra-nationalist politicians utilizing crisis to stoke racial, ethnic, and religious tensions to cement their hold on power while driving further divisions in societies.

Across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the effects of neoliberal economic and political order. Indeed, over the past 40 years, the neoliberal order has moved to cut healthcare coverage, reduce spending on education, and dismantle the social welfare safety net, and shifting the blame makes it possible to divert attention from the unfolding structural crisis. Here, the massive push for privatization, deregulation, and corporatization of society’s critical services and assets has led to an intensification of poverty and marginalization of the middle class and poor, which were instrumentalized to deepen the racial, class, gender and religious, societal fault lines. In the Global North and Global South, the pandemic has brought upon power consolidation and domination of public discourses by populist and ultra-nationalist parties and racist public figures, which is also a primary symptom of the neoliberal economic and political order. The pandemic has exposed the structural effects that weaken every aspect of societal collective social safety nets in a short period.

Even before the onset of the pandemic, the global political landscape experienced a dramatic swing toward a populist and ultra-nationalist end with a poisonous mixture of racism, xenophobia, violence, and the shaping of an exclusivist closed and surveilled civil society spaces. In Austria, Brazil, the U.S, U.K, Israel, and India, the world witnessed in shock the arrival to power of populist political figures promising a national rescue and a project to reconstitute an imagined pristine, pure and idealized past. Trump’s “Make America Great Again” was a powerful populist call to reclaim a distant past and project it into the present to shape the country’s racial, social, political, religious, and economic future horizons. Not surprisingly, the call for a glorified “stolen” or “undermined” past came on the heels of the 2008 economic crisis and the coming to power of the first Black president, Barack Obama, a threat to the idea of Whiteness of America’s imagined and exclusivist narrative. Indeed, the search for the pristine glorified past disrupted by a designated and demonized group is the normative pattern deployed by every populist, xenophobic and racist political party or figures and India’s BJP strategy is following the same course.

Populist political rhetoric that fans the flame reads: If it was not for the “x” group in society (Muslims in India), then our people, nation, state, tribe, and religion would have been better positioned than they find themselves today. It is “x” that is causing your pain and suffering, but if you give me the reins of power and elect “me” and the populist party, then we will make sure to get rid of the “problem people” and reconstitute the pure and pristine distant past. The suffering is real, the pain is real, and the need for solutions is more urgent than at any given time before. However, the populist leader and his political party are offering the people as sacrificial lambs to climb over their skulls into seats of power.

“Do Not Let This Crisis Go To Waste” is the ultra-nationalist and populist apt description of the unfolding COVID-19 crisis; rather than responding with sound healthcare plans and policies and building collective empathy, they selected to solidify racist and xenophobic attacks and intensify their campaigns. The pandemic crisis was not wasted by the populists to drive their malicious and racialized agenda. Blaming the targeted group for the virus, a foreign country, or the
real domestic political opposition is the populist ultra-nationalist and preferred xenophobic responses to the unfolding crisis.

Consequently, India, Brazil, U.K, the U.S, and the Russian Federation are the five countries that are led by populist politicians and have so far have experienced a sustained increase in the rates of COVID-19 infections with no end in sight. Here, the calamity of the biological virus itself is only matched by the catastrophe and the consequences of populist, xenophobic and racist leadership that used the crisis to intensify the social-political-religious divide and deployed to solidify or shape upcoming elections cycles. More critically, the populist leadership in these states utilized the healthcare and financial responses to the pandemic to redistribute resources to their corporate supporters and electoral base. Simultaneously, the pandemic was utilized to deploy a militarized authoritarian framework in response to the crisis, which further targeted the already marginalized and demonized group or groups.

Pouring fuel to stoke the flames of racial, religious, and ethnic tensions is intended to provide the populist leader a stage to ride into town to put out the fire and give the impression that all is fixed. However, the flames are created, and the extinguisher is brought into the scene by the same populist actors. They also are skilled in using all of the media platforms to drive their messaging and stoke their base into violence and intimidation. Nothing is unique in the strategy and its success is tried and tested throughout history.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides the best cover for the populist to drive toward maximum consolidation of power and reshape society in line with their worldview. Just like the Plague in the Middle Ages, it was used to fan the flames of anti-Semitism and target the Jewish population as a strategy to consolidate Christian Orthodoxy and identity by manipulating public sentiments and fear. Fear can make people do and accept things that, under normal circumstances, they deem unacceptable and beyond the pale. Populist political and religious groups are stoking fear on top of the real horror of the COVID-19 pandemic to shield themselves from any responsibility and building more support for their distorted and ill-conceived policies. They will target anyone who dares to express opposition. In the days and months ahead, we will see further stoking of fear for populist political purposes while leaving behind the stench of death and destruction, along with divided communities. The only hope is that people of goodwill and intelligence take principled and collective steps to change the societal course toward optimism, inclusiveness, and a shared future.
Be it the lead up to elections or the 2020 global COVID-19 pandemic, Islamophobic statements from members of India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are rampant. For example, claiming that “The growing population of the country, especially Muslims, is a threat to the social fabric, social harmony, and development of the country” and scapegoating Muslims for the spread of the coronavirus via “coronavirus terrorism,” all represent the continual and intensifying context of Islamophobia in India.

In 2019 the Center for Race and Gender’s Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project at the University of California, Berkeley released a first of its kind report titled Islamophobia in India: Stoking Bigotry focusing on the status of Islamophobia in India. The report specifically focused upon the 2017-2018 time period with Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party regime (BJP) at the helm. The report highlights how the BJP is using Islamophobia to push ultra-nationalist policies and further disenfranchise Muslims as a minority group.

Muslims and Islam have been at the center of many of the global right-nationalist movements that mobilize Islamophobia; this is true whether Muslims have been constructed as a demographic, economic, spatial, cultural, political, religious or physical threat or now a biological threat within the coronavirus pandemic. This is also the case in India where right-wing nationalism is driven by the ideology of Hindutva and its quest for “sociocultural homogenization.”

Although the coronavirus is not Muslim specific and Muslim predominant countries are not listed among those nations with the highest cases of infection, Muslims have been pathologized in various global media outlets and linked to the coronavirus. Social media took note of articles depicting Muslim women in hijab wearing masks and the disinfection of mosques, as well as Muslims and mosques in general as the stock photos and back drops for articles about COVID-19. This framing covertly serves to create Muslims, their houses of worship and Muslim predominant countries as a threat while linking them to the spread of a potentially deadly virus vexing the world. Such framing taps into latent Islamophobia and “can trigger an individual's preexisting attitudes, beliefs and prejudices” which can lead to discrimination and violence.

5 Hindutva forms the basis of an exclusionary national narrative focused exclusively on the rights of Hindus. “Hindutva constructs an idealized Hindu as the archetypical citizen of India, and through the superiorization of the Hindu, Hindutva necessarily imagines an array of identities to be unworthy of belonging to its conception of India. Hindutva’s otherization project inferiorizes a number of identities: Dalits, liberals, Christians, feminists, but most of all, Muslims. Hindutva thus envisions India to have always been a Hindu nation and perceives Islam and Muslims as an alien force which, through invasion and war, caused a seismic shift to the detriment of the natural state of Hinduness in the subcontinent. Prashant Waikar, “Reading Islamophobia In Hindutva: An Analysis of Narendra Modi’s Political Discourse”, Islamophobia Studies Journal, 2 (2018) Forthcoming.


As much of the world battles the COVID-19 global pandemic which has claimed thousands of lives across the world and brought economies to a stand still, Islamophobia in India is rampant. However, Coronavirus related Islamophobia is only the latest manifestation of anti-Muslim racism and another excuse to marginalize Muslims in India.
Following Modi’s reelection in 2019, Islamophobia has surged in India. Muslims continue to face discrimination, violence and death. There are accounts of Islamophobia which include: Muslims being beaten and forced to chant ‘Jai shree Ram’ (Glory to God Ram), being thrown off of moving trains, hate crime lynchings, complete Muslim areas under attack and destroyed, mosque destruction including attempts to destroy Babri Masjid at the hands of Hindutva mobs, and efforts to denationalize Muslims through the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which deserves to be detailed in a separate paper at a later date. Of particular concern is a report by Citizens for Justice and Peace, which reveals that prior to the ethnic-religious cleansing of Muslims in Modi led Gujarat in 2002, some of these same acts occurred in early 2020 including: the selective targeting of Muslims, brutality and bestiality of attacks, unprecedented scale and degree of violence-ethnic cleansing, looting and destruction of property. \footnote{“Jai Shri Ram!” is a chant of loyalty to the Hindu God Rama. Hindu nationalist vigilantes and mobs have forced Muslims under the threat of or during acts of violence, to chant the phrase as recognition of the Hindu God and Hindu rashtra (Hindu nation/polity) as a form of submission and declaration of their loyalty to Hinduism. In addition BJP leaders such as Subramanian Swamy have made claims such as “Muslims should take an oath declaring that their ancestors were Hindu if they want to prove their citizenship.” See our report Islamophobia in India: Stoking Bigotry, 58.}

Islamophobia tends to spike during elections. In February 2020 when mass violence occurred, Delhi was holding assembly elections. The BJPs according to Economic Times, has not been in power in Delhi for 20 years and was eyeing the election seats. Political scientist Bhanu Joshi and a team of researchers found that “the BJPs perfectly oiled party machinery [was] constantly giving out the message about suspicion, stereotypes and paranoia.” Political scientist Ashutosh Varshney suspects that the “Delhi riots” also called anti-Muslim mob violence, are pogroms in that the police did not act neutrally to prevent riots, police at times are participants in the mob violence, and/or looked on when Hindu mobs attacked.

A young Hindu man removes the nationalist flag that was placed on the minaret of the mosque in Delhi.
Today during the COVID-19 crisis Hindutva flags are being flown in marketplaces to signify Hindu run businesses in an effort to economically boycott Muslim ones. In fact, Senior health journalist Vidya Krishnan has stated that “You cannot isolate the February riots in Delhi from what’s happening in everyday media briefings where the Health Ministry and Home Ministry are actively painting a target on the backs of one community.” She continues, what the “Indian government is doing during the pandemic is just the next step in the kind of persecution of minorities that has been happening under the Modi administration.”

Coronavirus Ground Zero

Muslims have been blamed for the Coronavirus outbreak in India and for deliberately spreading the illness. Moreover, a particular event pre-government nationwide lockdown involving a Muslim missionary group Tablighi Jamaat in early March has been framed as a sort of ‘ground zero’ leading to the circulation of an Islamic conspiracy to spread coronavirus to Hindus nationwide. It became the key politicized spectacle casting Tablighi Jamaat members as a sort of ‘folk devils’ and by extension, all Muslims in India as COVID-19 spreaders.\(^\text{10}\)

Muslims in India are already defined as threats to society, especially Hindus (demographically, civilisationally, and by engaging in love jihad e.t.c.) and it appears that ‘health threat’ during the COVID-19 pandemic is another. It has been reported by health officials that this gathering led to a large cluster of Coronavirus cases. However there are also claims of bias sampling and gauging the impact of the Tablighi congregation. In fact, many Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and other religious communities across the globe continued to gather in places of worship all the way until states declared a state of emergency. The singling out of Tablighi Jamaat is highly problematic and emerged out of existing animus toward Muslims. In India around the same time Hindu groups were hosting cow urine drinking parties with hundreds of people to ward off Coronavirus, and India’s Parliament met as late as March 23, 2020. Hours after the call for nationwide lockdown Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath participated in a religious ceremony along with priests, officials and security personnel in spite of government guidelines that no religious congregations would be held, without any exception.

thus becomes a focus and a threat to Hindu society and such framing constructs Muslims as terrorists which calls for sanctions as well as extraordinary securitization measures. Stripped of good characteristics such as Tablighi Jamaat members donating blood plasma for therapy to help others, instead attention is focused upon real or imagined acts transforming Muslims into what Stanley Cohen referred to as “folk devils.”

10 Muslims in India have been created as ‘folk devils,’ those who refuse to follow protective measures such as quarantine and are juxtaposed against good Hindus, those who follow orders. The behavior of Muslims in India are already defined as threats to society, especially Hindus (demographically, civilisationally, and by engaging in love jihad e.t.c.) and it appears that ‘health threat’ during the COVID-19 pandemic is another. It has been reported by health officials that this gathering led to a large cluster of Coronavirus cases. However there are also claims of bias sampling and gauging the impact of the Tablighi congregation. In fact, many Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and other religious communities across the globe continued to gather in places of worship all the way until states declared a state of emergency. The singling out of Tablighi Jamaat is highly problematic and emerged out of existing animus toward Muslims. In India around the same time Hindu groups were hosting cow urine drinking parties with hundreds of people to ward off Coronavirus, and India’s Parliament met as late as March 23, 2020. Hours after the call for nationwide lockdown Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath participated in a religious ceremony along with priests, officials and security personnel in spite of government guidelines that no religious congregations would be held, without any exception.

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The singling out of Tablighi Jamaat has also played to fears over the virus “amplifying existing prejudices, playing into growing Hindu nationalism which in recent years has seen India’s Muslim societies increasingly marginalized” and provided the fodder for right wing populists.

Sumit Sarkar a historian of modern India wrote, “communalism veers close to everyday racism, with the Muslim – like the black or colored immigrant – felt to be a biological danger” and a threat through their very existence. Expanding on this, Peggy Froerer argues that “within Hindu nationalist discourse, the ‘threatening Other’ has historically been the Muslim community.”

New York University professor Arjun Appadurai explains that “One of the key features of anti-Muslim sentiment in India for quite a long time has been the idea that Muslims themselves are a kind of infection in the body politic...so there’s a kind of affinity between this long-standing image and the new anxieties surrounding coronavirus.” Moreover, the “Hindu nationalist quest for power can only succeed in a context where there exists a perceived threat – real or imagined – to the majority community of Hindus.”

Distorted Media Campaigns

Common to moral panics “distorted mass media campaigns are used to create fear, reinforce stereotypes and exacerbate pre existing divisions in the world, often based on race, ethnicity and social class.” The religious gathering has been cast as a conspiracy with Muslims cast as a fifth column engaging in ‘Corona Jihad’ among Hindu society. Hashtags attributing the spread of the coronavirus to Muslims while linking them to terrorism have circulated such as: #CoronaJihad #BioJihad #CrushTablighiSpitters and #TablighiJamatVirus further stoking Islamophobia. Moreover, fake news circulating via the hashtags have been fact checked and debunked and although they violate Twitter policy and the policies of other social media platforms many have been allowed to remain.

Andre Oboler warns that “Online Islamophobia is likely to incite religious hatred and xenophobia leading to real world crimes.” This is exactly what is happening in India.

A scathing August 2020 article in the Wall Street Journal reveals that BJP politicians such as T. Raja Singh who has called for explicit violence against Muslims and other “Hindu nationalist individuals and groups who have been flagged internally for promoting or participating in violence” have been allowed to remain on Facebook. The article claims that Facebook Inc employees charged with oversight argue that given India’s history of communal violence and recent religious tensions, rhetoric such as Singh’s “could lead to real-world violence, and he should be permanently banned from the company’s platforms.” But insiders such as Ankhi Das – the head of Facebook’s public policy in India, have been accused of shielding BJP linked politicians from labeling, hate speech rules and bans from the platform. It has also been said that doing so would allegedly “harm India’s business prospects” as well as relations with the BJP ruling party. According to Billy Perrigo writing for Time.com, “those business prospects are sizeable. India is Facebook’s largest market, with 328 million using the social media platform. Some 400 million Indians also use Facebook’s messaging service WhatsApp — a substantial chunk of the country’s estimated 503 million internet users.”
Stoking Islamophobia: The BJP and Fake News

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party has cyber war rooms and troll armies ready to engage in propaganda and fake news. In fact, scares and scams made up the majority of the fake news shared on WhatsApp in India in 2018 at 36.5 percent which are widely circulated by the public. Jyoti Yadav from The Print wrote “Its troll armies have taken to the Covid-19 pandemic as if a Lok Sabha election was going on and they have to make sure the BJP wins, by hook or by crook.”14 He continues, “the IT cell went into overdrive to shame the community and put the blame entirely on them.” The media platform TikTok has been found by Delhi Based digital lab Voyager Infosec in its digital investigation submitted to the Union Home Ministry “as the most preferred medium of a disinformation campaign.” The investigation found that “30,000 clips circulated this week suggests a set pattern of targeted disinformation campaign aimed at the Indian Muslim community.” Furthermore “a range of high-impact videos that stoke religious sentiments of the Muslim community against lockdown guidelines” have been watched by more than 10 million users by April 3, 2020. The disinformation campaign targets Indian audiences with Hindi texts and Urdu voiceovers.

“Fake News in The Time of Coronavirus: A BOOM Study” analyzed 178 fact checks on COVID-19 related misinformation and disinformation from January to May. They found that the bulk of COVID 19 related fact checks were false allegations of Muslims “purposefully spreading the virus.” The false claims circulated via videos (35%) and text messages (29.4%), images (29.4%), and news reports by mainstream media organizations (4%). Most of the stories, according to the study, “were found to make false claims against a particular community.” A brief timeline reveals that in February 2020 the fake news cycle was dominated by the Delhi elections, Delhi riots, and Donald Trump’s India visit. BOOM found a “drastic” topic change in March as more COVID-19 misinformation went viral online. It began with medical misinformation and associating the virus with China. In March conspiracy theories related to the virus being a “bioweapon” became viral.15 By April a “new trend” targeting Muslims became more frequent (see interactive chart changes).


15 Timeline: According to Al Jazeera, March 24 was the day “police cleared out the last vestiges of the anti-CAA protest sites led by Muslims in New Delhi” and a nationwide lockdown initiated. The Tablighi Jamaat meeting was associated with the spread of COVID-19.
Many TV channels communalised the epidemic, with one even calling it an act of "corona jihad".

Islamophobic news outlet screenshot depicting Muslims in relation to coronavirus courtesy of Scroll.in

Tweet from Amit Malviya, BJP’s IT cell troll army leader, referring to “Islamic insurrection” and the Tablighi Jamaat gathering as “radical.”

Delhi’s dark underbelly is exploding! Last 3 months have seen an Islamic insurrection of sorts, first in the name of anti-CAA protests from Shaheen Bagh to Jamia, Jaffrabad to Seelampur. And now the illegal gathering of the radical Tablighi Jamaat at the markaz. It needs a fix!

ANI UP 🚹 @ANINewsUP · Apr 29
Lucknow: In a viral video, BJP MLA Brij Bhushan Sharan was seen harassing a vegetable vendor and asking him not to enter the area for identifying himself with a Hindu name being a Muslim.

BJP MLA Brij Bhushan Sharan was caught on video harassing and threatening a Muslim vendor not to enter the area as a non-Hindu.

Tweet from Amit Malviya, referring to “Islamic insurrection” and the Tablighi Jamaat gathering as “radical.”
Various news outlets and seasoned journalists such as Zee News Editor in Chief Sudhir Chaudhary have also spread COVID-19 related Islamophobia.

BJP leadership known to issue Hindu nationalist and Islamophobic statements are exacerating public concern, fears and stoking Islamophobia along with equating the religious meeting with an act of terrorism. In an interview regarding the meeting of the Tablighi Jamaat, BJP MLA Sangeet Som (with his face mask pulled down exposing his nose and mouth while speaking face to face with the reporter) referred to the meeting of Muslim religious missionaries as “Coronavirus Terrorism” and stated that “the punishment should be as such which is given to terrorists of the country.” BJP chief propagandist and IT cell troll army leader Amit Malviya’s tweet labeled the Tablighi Jamaat as “radicals,” and referred to the religious gathering as well as anti-CAA protests “Islamic insurrection.” He has been called out by NDTV who tracked his Islamophobic social media posts on the subject.

BJP Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi has called the gathering a “Talibani crime.” Additionally, BJP President of Telangana unit Bandi Sanjay Kumar of Telangana has accused the Telangana government of hiding COVID-19 positive cases in order to provide facilities to Muslims in Ramadan. Prior to COVID-19 Hindu nationalists complained similarly about “appeasement” policies such as subsidies for Muslims to make the religious pilgrimage to hajj which has been ended by the BJP while funding of pilgrimages for the Hindu majority continues. In Uttar Pradesh headed by Yogi Adityanath known for stoking Islamophobia, the administration has named eight out of 18 coronavirus hotspots in Lucknow after mosques, according to reports. For example, hotspots are dubbed “Masjid Ali Jaan and nearby areas,” “Mohammadiya Masjid and nearby areas,” and “Khajoor Wali Masjid and adjoining areas” etc. In addition, accusations that Muslim vendors smear saliva on vegetables to pass on coronavirus are circulating and some BJP leaders are stoking dangerous Islamophobia. Speaking to his constituency BJP legislator Suresh Tiwari of Uttar Pradesh warned in a video that has since gone viral, “Keep one thing in mind. I am telling everyone openly. There is no need to buy vegetables from ‘miyans’ [Muslims].” In another instance, BJP MLA Brij Bhushan Sharan was caught on video harassing and threatening a Muslim vendor. Further, members of the RSS have been accused of forcing Hindu vendors to hoist saffron flags in order to delineate themselves from Muslim vendors in an economic boycott against Muslims.

NDTV reports that several incidents have been reported where Muslim vendors have been targeted and their produce and carts damaged. There are also accounts of Muslim volunteers trying to distribute aid that have been attacked and called “terrorists spreading the disease” and told that they “are spitting in the rations and have come from Tablighi Jamaat to spread the virus’ by gangs of local BJP members in Karnataka. Signs have been posted in areas of New Delhi, as well as Karnataka, Telangana and Madhya Pradesh to ban Muslims from entering those areas. Some mosques have been vandalized, muezzins attacked and calls for Muslim daily prayers banned, according to a recent Al Jazeera article. In another case a pregnant Muslim woman was interrogated about her religious identity at a government hospital when she went to give birth. When the physician found out that she was Muslim he refused treatment. En route to the next hospital the baby died. In another instance, a hospital posted an ad in a local newspaper that it would not treat Muslim patients and a female Muslim nurse was beaten and molested by a Hindu mob including neighbors she had known for years. “Corona vigilantes UK” much like their counterparts ‘cow vigilantes’ are attacking and beating Muslim truck drivers, and there are reports of Muslims in general being physically attacked by mobs across India.

The Indian government announced that some members of the Tablighi Jamaat group would be charged under India’s National Security Act for violating quarantine although other religious meetings occurred in the same time frame as well as a meeting in Parliament. The National Security Act “is a stringent law that allows preventive detention for months, if authorities are satisfied that a person is a threat to national security or law and order.” It is commonly misused and claimed to be “the latest weapon against Muslims.”

Real or imagined threats often exist in combination with calls for regulation and surveillance in order to contain them. Under the cover of the coronavirus and the extended governmental powers deemed necessary to combat it, political dissent is further criminalized leading to arrests of CAA-NRC (Citizen Amendment Act-National Register of Citizens) protesters. Some arrests have been made under the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, according to Scroll India. The initiatives have been “widely condemned for adding a religious element to Indian citizenship law [and] many feared they could be used to harass India’s Muslims.” Soumya Sankar wrote “the BJP turned the registry into a predominantly anti-Muslim exercise: Ultimately, a major portion of the 2 million residents of Assam who were excluded from the list were Muslim.”
Calling Out Islamophobia

In the past couple of weeks organizations, activists, governments and Gulf royalty “have called out Islamophobic hate speech by Indians seen to be accusing the country’s Muslims of spreading the novel coronavirus.” The US Commission on International Religious Freedom urged the State Department to designate India as a “country of particular concern” over “severe violations” of religious freedom. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has condemned the Islamophobic campaign in India along with negative profiling of Muslims and the discrimination and violence with impunity that occurs against them. It has been reported by Al Jazeera that on April 18, 2020 the OIC issued a statement, urging India to take urgent steps to “stop the growing tide of Islamophobia” in the country.

Members of Arab royal families along with intellectuals have been condemning Islamophobia in India and also on social media. Princess Hend al-Qassimi, a member of the UAE royal family warned non-Muslim Indians in UAE who are circulating COVID-19 related Islamophobia of the nation’s law forbidding hate speech and said that “they would be fined and asked to leave.” Kuwaiti lawyer Khalid al-Suwaifan, has called the Islamophobia and violence in India a “crime against humanity.” He also claimed that “A heinous practice of racism with international silence and the absence of human rights organizations is happening.” Al Jazeera revealed that a Kuwaiti lawyer and director of International Human Rights group, Mejbel al-Sharika, tweeted that he will “adopt the cause of Muslims in India” at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva “for free.”

A hashtag called #Send_Hindutva_back_home is circulating to mobilize efforts to “list all militant Hindus who are working in the GCC and spreading hate against Islam and Muslims or our beloved Prophet Muhammad.” Some Indian nationals working in the UAE have been fired for their hate filled social media reports targeting Muslims. Al Jazeera reported that approximately 8.5 million Indians live and work in Gulf countries, a significant number of them Hindus. United Arab Emirates Gulf News has called for a ban on hate preachers and “India’s most prominent news channels-Republic TV, Zee News, India TV, Aaj Tak, ABP and Times Now for exporting hate through Islamophobia in the Gulf region.”

In Canada home of one of the most violent mosque massacres in January 2017, Canadian Anti-Hate Network retweeted an Islamophobic tweet by Canadian real estate agent Ravi Hooda calling him out and tagging his employer on May 2, 2020. Hooda’s hate filled tweets were directed at the Canadian government’s decision to allow the Muslim call to prayer (athan) over loud speakers during the holy month of Ramadan.

Tweet from Princess Hend al-Qassimi, a member of the UAE royal family warning non-Muslim Indians in UAE who are circulating COVID-19 related Islamophobia, of the nation’s law forbidding hate speech.
The real estate agency responded by tweeting that the man had been terminated and the agency does not share or support his views. He has also been removed as the School Council Chair by the Macville Public School. Peel Schools followed with a tweet that “Islamophobia is not acceptable and a clear violation of our Safe and Accepting Schools Policy.”

However, there is a larger network of Islamophobia to be addressed including that of Canada’s own Tarek Fatah who identifies as “an Indian born in Pakistan, a Punjabi born in Islam” and “an immigrant in Canada.” Fatah serves Islamophobia on multiple continents and has achieved celebrity status in India since Prime Minister Modi came to power. In fact, Fatah has been referred to as “poster-boy of the Hindutva brigade.” Fatah, who is often a critic of Islam, is conveniently making his way around India’s Right wing circuits, writing, hosting programs and speaking at conferences providing what has been referred to as “dollops of Islamophobia with the legitimacy of it coming from a Muslim.” Moreover, a 2017 HuffPo article reveals that the Fatah’s reference to himself as “an Indian born in Pakistan” appeals to the Hindutva concept that all people in India were once Hindu, and it is a claim utilized to force conversion of Muslim and Christians back to what ultra-nationalists claim is their original state. As of late, Fatah who often serves as a sort of native informant has littered his Twitter feed with the social media campaign in Canada against the call to prayer during Ramadan. Further stoking Islamophobia, he has posted Muslim children (who he labels as “Indian Muslim youth”) in a Tik Tok video allegedly calling for the “slaughter” of kafirs (non-believers), and retweeting pieces linking the Tablighi Jamaat to terrorism as sleeper cells Islamicizing non-Muslim countries from American Islamophobe Daniels Pipes and the Middle Eastern Forum (MEF). Pipes has spent decades pontificating “alarmist rhetoric” about the threat of “Muslims, Sharia, and even the instruction of Arabic as affronts to American freedom.” Pipes was also cited in the manifesto of mass murderer Anders Breivik of Norway. In April 2020, Fatah was a driving force of “coronavirus Jihad” fear mongering on his own talk show and “virus jihad” in the Toronto Sun.
In New Zealand, where Islamophobia has also led to social media live-streamed mass violence against innocent mosque worshippers in March 2019, it has been reported that a “well known Indian leader” Kantilal Bhagabhai Patel has been removed from Wellington Justice of Peace Association for his Islamophobic social media posts. Research from the Center for Countering Digital Hate shows a convergence between hate groups in the UK and India. According to the Center, the British far-right has adopted the Indian hate campaign blaming Muslims for coronavirus. Islamophobic individuals and far right groups in the UK have shared India’s #coronajihad hate campaign on social media blaming Muslims for the spread of coronavirus. For example, video footage of British Muslims taken at mosques before COVID-19 were being circulated as current depicting Muslims as disregarding safety measures to contain the virus much like in India. Claims that Muslims were breaching lockdown had to be debunked. Screen shots obtained by the Center for Countering Digital Hate of Tommy Robinson News feed on Telegram show the circulation of Islamophobia far right propaganda from India targeting Muslims as “superspreaders” and using the hashtag #germjihad.” Additionally, they shared a post on Telegram by BJP’s Priti Gandhi which equated the Tablighi Jamaat meeting to an act of terrorism, and referred to members as “coronabombs.” A Jayda Fransen Supporters page (Fransen was Former Deputy leader of Britain First’s right wing group) also posted a video that originated in India that went viral depicting Muslims claiming that their faith made them immune to COVID-19 and therefore they can engage in ‘coronajihad’ and wipe out non-Muslims.

Following the public outrage by powerful leaders and activists in the Gulf, Prime Minister Narendra Modi who is known for Hindu nationalist statements and stoking Islamophobia tweeted on April 19, 2020 “COVID-19 does not see race, religion, colour, caste, creed, language or borders before striking. Our response and conduct thereafter should attach primacy to unity and brotherhood. We are in this together.” Islamophobe Mohan Bhagwat, the chief of the far-right Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) stated in an online speech from the group’s headquarters that it is “not right to blame the entire community for the mistakes of few individuals.” More often that not such statements seem nothing more than lip service. Will anything change? In a recent article penned by Princess Hend al-Qassimi she wrote “I pray for an India without hate and Islamophobia.” We do too.
In Indian occupied Kashmir, the COVID-19 lockdown has meant an intensification of India's military operations, tensions with neighboring Pakistan and China, and the advancement of a settler-colonial project. As with a number of states that have used the cover of the pandemic to enhance authoritarian practices, India's brutal military occupation has resulted in what many have called a “lockdown within a lockdown.” This refers to the continuation of the military siege that commenced on August 5, 2019, when the Indian government revoked the special status of Jammu and Kashmir and made the region a union territory, directly under Indian control. For India’s Hindu nationalists, this was a huge victory towards the creation of a Hindu Rashtra, or Hindu state. The world’s most militarized zone was militarized even further, and placed under a complete communication clampdown for months—something that persists until today, as internet speeds in the region remain throttled. Thousands of Kashmiris were detained, to ensure that there would be no dissent.

At the time the COVID-19 lockdown began in late March, Kashmiris had already spent over eight months in strikes and curfews, which had a devastating impact on the region's economy and student's education. The poor medical infrastructure, which includes one of the highest doctor to patient ratios (1 doctor for every 3866 Kashmiris, well above the 1:1000 norm set by the World Health Organization), lack of ventilators, and lack of PPE and testing, was not set to accommodate the rise in cases. There have been cases of intimidation and physical assault against doctors and healthcare professionals, as well as deliberate administrative negligence in providing poor quarantine facilities for individuals who were traveling to Kashmir or were suspected to have come in contact with an infected person. Up until June 23, there were nearly 90 COVID-19 related deaths, and over 6,000 total cases. The “double lockdown” has completely devastated Kashmir’s economy, especially agriculture, horticulture, tourism, and small businesses. The poor Internet speeds have hindered access for online businesses, made it difficult for students to continue their education, and doctors to access life-saving information.

Yet, it has been India's escalating military operations in the region that has resulted in well over 100 rebels, civilians, and army personnel being killed—far more than those killed by COVID-19. Despite the UN calls for a ceasefire amid the pandemic, India’s focus has been to completely eradicate armed resistance in Kashmir. During these “encounters” with rebels, the Indian army has demolished homes in the area in which the rebels are expected to be hiding, in order to punish local support for armed resistance. These home demolitions are seen as a “collective punishment” against the
civilian population and constitute war crimes in international law. There have been dozens of cordon and search operations throughout the region, during which Kashmiri civilians are taken as human shields to enter homes in which suspected rebels are said to be hiding. Indian forces have also engaged in massive looting and destruction of property, including an entire village being ransacked. Locals have complained of increased police and army brutality against civilians, as well as increased methods of surveillance—ostensibly to monitor the rise in cases, but also, as many fear, to find novel ways of suppressing all forms of dissent.\footnote{Umar, Rauf, Haroon. “In Kashmir, the Coronavirus Means Increased Police Powers.” Jacobin Magazine, 17 April 2020. Access here: https://jacobinmag.com/2020/04/kashmir-coronavirus-covid-india-lockdown-jammu/} The erection of permanent road blockades to manage Covid19 red zones are seen as sinister steps to find more methods of control over the local population.

As governments around the world released prisoners on humanitarian grounds, India continues to hold pro-freedom leaders and young men in jail, often under unsafe conditions. Furthermore, additional individuals have been picked up or detained for supposedly violating lockdown procedures or stay-at-home orders. The Indian government has also used the cover of the pandemic to clampdown on freedom of speech—targeting journalists and the media fraternity in Kashmir. In late March, two Kashmiri journalists were charged under terrorism-related cases, while one was questioned for his reporting. Other journalists have been physically threatened, harassed, and detained. During the pandemic, the government also passed a stringent new media policy, which “empowers the government to decide what is ‘anti-social and anti-national’ news.”\footnote{Zargar, Safwat. “Jammu and Kashmir’s New Media policy is Aimed at Demolishing the Local Press, Editors Say.” Scroll.in. 24 June 2020. Access here: https://scroll.in/article/964900/jammu-and-kashmirs-new-media-policy-is-aimed-at-demolishing-the-local-press-editors-say} This policy brings the media into the direct fold of the military-security apparatus, by devising a “coordination and information sharing mechanism,” between the two. Local journalists decry that this step will pressure the already threatened journalist fraternity, and silence the press to do no more than issue out press statements on behalf of the government.

Across the Line of Control, Indian and Pakistani armies have engaged in cross-border shelling, which has claimed the lives of a number of civilians, including children. More recently, Indian and Chinese armies have faced-off across the Line of Actual Control, with China increasingly laying claim to parts of the former state of Jammu and Kashmir that was under Indian occupation. With three nuclear
powers holding claim to the region, the threat of war continuously looms high and wrecks havoc upon the civilian populations living in border areas.

India’s militarized response can be seen as an attempt to restrict Kashmiri dissent towards its full-fledged settler-colonial project, which it has also advanced during the pandemic. The government published a series of legal changes in a gazette order that was issued out by the Ministry of Home Affairs on March 31, under the title “Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Order, 2020.” This order repeals a number of existing laws in the state and amends others—most significantly in the realm of determining domicile or residency status.

These laws define “domicile” as anyone who has lived in Kashmir for 15 years, or has studied for a period of seven years and appeared in “class 10th/12th” examinations in an educational institution located within the state. (It also includes the children of a range of Indian officials (working in various bureaucracies, universities, or banks) who have worked in Kashmir for 10 years (not continuously), even if the latter have not ever resided in Kashmir. In addition, it includes people who are registered as migrants by the government.

The implications of this change are far-reaching and staggering, given that a massive number of Indians can now have residency benefits in a region that is disputed under international law. Given that the Indian occupational machinery in Kashmir consists of over 700,000 Indian army and paramilitary forces, as well as thousands of Indian officials who have served in various capacities in Kashmir’s decades long occupation, the shift in domicile status is a clear path to demographic change. Most crucially, the order is retrospective, meaning that it includes those who already meet these requirements. While the domicile order focuses on government jobs, analysts say that sweeping changes are to be expected as the category of domicile is extended to voting rights, land rights, and other benefits. And this is just the beginning—now that more Indian businesses and corporations will be legally able to operate in Kashmir as a result of the revocation of ‘special status’—the number of those who will claim domicile will steadily increase.

There are concrete fears now of a slow and steady ethnic cleansing. The government will create separate colonies—settlements—for those who can now claim domicile. They will be protected by an ever-expanding military grid and infrastructure. Combined with the fact that the Indian government has also repealed a series of laws relating to land protection, this means that land itself will be available for Indians to buy—and they will drive out the local population. As the Indian consul-general in NYC, Sandeep Chakravorty, already chillingly declared last fall, India already has a model—the Israeli one in the occupied West Bank. This settler-colonial project is replete with gendered violence, as leading Indian politicians have bragged of being to not only buy land in Kashmir, but also “marry fair-skinned Kashmiri women.” Leading Indian multinational corporations are working with western corporations to plan ‘investment summits’—which will lead to the continued economic destruction of the region as Indian businesses will be able to come in, take over land, bring non-local employees, and decimate local business. This settler-colonial project also means environmental destruction—already, there have been reports of vast tracts of land that are being subject to deforestation, and contracts for industries like mining have been given to outside businesses that have no understanding of the local ecology.

The most sinister aspects of these changes is that the Modi government has advanced them during the pandemic—a time when the government is well aware that much of the world’s attention is focused on COVID-19, and also during which it will be difficult for Kashmiris to mobilize amid such heavy repression. For Kashmiris, COVID-19 has only made their preexisting condition of life under military occupation all the more severe.