



News Middle East

DISPUTED REGION

India bars protests in Kashmir that support Palestinians

AP Srinagar, India

From Western capitals to Muslim states, protest rallies over the Israel-Hamas war have made headlines. But one place known for its vocal pro-Palestinian stance has been conspicuously quiet: Indian-controlled Kashmir.

Indian authorities have barred any solidarity protest in Muslim-majority Kashmir and asked Muslim preachers not to mention the conflict in their sermons, residents and religious leaders said.

The restrictions are part of India's efforts to curb any form of protest that could turn into demands for ending New Delhi's rule in the

disputed region. They also reflect a shift in India's foreign policy under populist Prime Minister Narendra Modi away from its long-held support for the Palestinians, analysts say.

India has long walked a tightrope between the warring sides, with historically close ties to both. While India strongly condemned the Oct. 7 attack by the militant group Hamas and expressed solidarity with Israel, it urged that international humanitarian law be upheld in Gaza amid rising civilian deaths.

But in Kashmir, being quiet is painful for many.

"From the Muslim perspective, Palestine is very dear to us, and we



Kashmiris pray for Palestinians killed in Israel's military operations in Gaza at a mosque in Budgham, northeast of Srinagar. AP

essentially have to raise our voice against the oppression there. But we are forced to be silent," said Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, a key resistance leader and a Muslim cleric. He said he has been put under house arrest each Friday since the start of the war to keep him from leading

Friday prayers at the region's main mosque.

Anti-India sentiment runs deep in the Himalayan region which is divided between India and Pakistan and claimed by both in its entirety. In 2019, New Delhi removed the region's semiautonomy, drastically

curbing any form of dissent, civil liberties and media freedoms.

Kashmiris have long shown strong solidarity with the Palestinians and often staged large anti-Israel protests during previous fighting in Gaza. Those protests often turned into street clashes, with demands for an end of India's rule and dozens of casualties.

Even beyond Kashmir, Indian authorities have largely stopped protests expressing solidarity with Palestinians since the war began, claiming the need to maintain communal harmony and law and order.

Some people have been briefly detained by police for taking part

in pro-Palestinian protests even in states ruled by opposition parties. The only state where massive pro-Palestinian protests have taken place is southern Kerala, which is ruled by a leftist government.

But in Kashmir, enforced silence is seen not only as violating freedom of expression but also as impinging on religious duty.

Aga Syed Mohammad Hadi, a Kashmiri religious leader, was not able to lead the past three Friday prayers because he was under house arrest on those days. He said he had wanted to stage a protest rally against "the naked aggression of Israel." Authorities did not comment on such house arrests.