

Warring Against the Diaspora: India's Campaign Against Khalistan

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Diaspora politics can often be testy. While the mother country maintains its own fashioned narrative, governed by domestic considerations, the diaspora may, or may not be in accord with the agreed upon story. While countries such as China and Iran are seen as the conventional bullies in this regard, spying and monitoring the activities of their citizens in various countries, India has remained more closeted and inconspicuous.

Image: Photograph of the slain Canadian Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar. (Licensed under Fair Use)



Of late, that lack of conspicuousness has been challenged. On September 18, Canadian **Prime Minister Justin Trudeau** revealed that there were “credible allegations” that agents in the pay of the Indian government had murdered **Hardeep Singh Nijjar**, a vocal supporter for an independent Sikh homeland known as Khalistan and deemed by Indian authorities since 2020 to be a terrorist. He was alone in his truck when he was shot to death on June 18 outside the Surrey temple, Guru Nanak Gurdwara.

While the death remains under investigation by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police,

Trudeau was convinced enough time had lapsed to warrant open mention. After all, **Pavan Kumar Rai**, the Canadian head of New Delhi's foreign intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), [had been expelled](#) by **Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly** as a direct consequence of the acts.

In his [statement](#) to the House, Trudeau revealed that Canadian security agencies had been pursuing such links between New Delhi and the Nijjar's death. "Our top priorities have therefore been 1) that our law enforcement and security agencies ensure the continued safety of all Canadians, and 2) that all steps be taken to hold the perpetrators of this murder to account." The matter had also been raised with Indian **President Narendra Modi** at the G20 summit.

Trudeau went on to reiterate the standard protocols that had been outraged in such matters.

"Any involvement of a foreign government in the killing of a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil is an unacceptable violation of our sovereignty. It is contrary to the fundamental rules by which free, open and democratic societies conduct themselves." Canada's "position on extra-judicial operations in another country is clearly and unequivocally in line with international law."

Public Safety Minister Dominic LeBlanc [also added](#) further detail on the contact between Ottawa and New Delhi.

"The national security and intelligence adviser to the prime minister and the director of CSIS have travelled on a number of occasions in recent weeks also to India to meet their counterparts in India to confront the intelligence agencies with these allegations."

The Indian response was predictably sharp, with New Delhi also expelling a "senior Canadian diplomat," asking the individual to leave within five days. Prior to that, the Canadian high commissioner to India, **Cameron MacKay**, was summoned for a bit of an ear-bashing, while the Indian Ministry of External Affairs [expressed](#) the "Government of India's growing concern at the interference of Canadian diplomats in our internal matters and their involvement in anti-India activities."

For its part the MEA [rebuked](#) Canada for its sympathies for what it called Khalistani terrorists.

"Such unsubstantiated allegations seek to shift the focus from Khalistani terrorists and extremists, who have been provided shelter in Canada and continue to threaten India's sovereignty and territorial integrity." It was also a "matter of deep concern" that "Canadian political figures [had] openly expressed sympathy for such elements".

The interest by New Delhi in the tetchier elements of the Khalistan movement would have been sparked by a smattering of reports that seem to add weight that a resurgence was in the offing. *The Conversation*, for instance, thought it significant enough [to note](#) acts of vandalism against the Indian consulate in San Francisco in March, and discuss the activities of a "group of separatists" who had "blocked the entrance to the Indian consulate in Brisbane, forcing it to close temporarily." And just to note the gravity of these acts, the publication went on to document attacks on three Hindu temples in Australia, a point that gave Prime Minister Modi the chance to moralise and vent to his Australian counterpart,

Anthony Albanese, in a visit in May this year.

That same month, Sydney's Blacktown City Council [cancelled](#) a June 4 booking that would have featured a purely ceremonial, symbolic "Khalistan Referendum". A similar event had taken place in Melbourne's Federation Square earlier in the year, an initiative of the US-based Sikhs for Justice. A Blacktown City Council spokesperson called the booking "in conflict with adopted Council policy," posing "risks to Council staff, Council assets and members of the public".

A frontline against the Khalistan movement has become violently visible. While Indian authorities maintain a watch on Sikh activists at home and initiate arrests (this, along with keeping a tight rein on other dissident movements in line with Modi's all suffocating notion of Hindutva), killings have taken place in other countries.

Paramjit Singh Panjwar, designated the Khalistan Commando Force (KCF) chief, was gunned down in Lahore in May. Indian [reports on the killing](#) took a certain glee in the brutal demise of Panjwar, who had "fled to Pakistan in 1990 with the help of its spy agency ISIS, which allegedly provided him a safe house in Lahore and a new identity: Malik Sardar Singh."

Another, **Harmeet Singh**, leader of the Khalistan Liberation Force (KLF), suffered the same fate in January 2020, also on Pakistani soil. His death [was put down](#) to either the tawdry business of a love affair with a married Muslim woman from Pakistan, or a dispute over drug money.

Not to be outdone, certain members of the Sikh diaspora in the United Kingdom have also expressed concern that the death of Birmingham-based **Avtar Sigh Khanda** remains suspicious. Khanda is said by Indian security sources [to be responsible](#) for grooming the prominent Khalistani separatist **Amritpal Singh**, who was arrested in April. West Midlands police, however, found nothing to warrant opening an investigation into Khanda's death. The same, it would seem, cannot be said about Nijjar, whose assassination has taken some of the shine off Modi's garish publicity machine.

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Featured image: The Guru Nanak Gurdwara, outside of which Nijjar was killed (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0)

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