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Learning from Israel? ‘26/11’ and the anti-politics of urban security governance

Abstract

This article calls for a greater emphasis on issues of politics and anti-politics within critical debates about transnational security governance in the metropolis. While scholars have documented the growing popularity of policy “models” and “best practices” in policing and urban security planning, we know little about what makes these schemes attractive to the officials who enroll them. I take the government of Maharashtra’s decision to “learn from Israel” following the 2008 Mumbai attacks (26/11) as an invitation to reevaluate the relationships between policymaking, politics and depoliticization. Focusing on references to Israeli security knowhow as a “best practice” by Maharashtra state officials, I explore how an association with Israel was used to negotiate conflicts and controversies that followed 26/11. The article has two aims. First, it addresses *how* transnational policy schemes work anti-politically within particular local contexts. Second, it locates counter-terrorism policy as a form of performative politics, which is generative of policy problems. In doing so, the article helps to reclaim the political contingency of policy responses to terroristic violence and addresses the agency of policy actors in the global south.

Keywords: counter-terrorism, policy mobility, anti-politics, Mumbai, Israel

Introduction

“We [Israelis] have a good reputation in the [security] industry...but...the way we see it, it’s not really the best...it’s a different approach based on our personal experience and...the way that we have had to deal with threats, which was less theoretical [and] more practical...We see a problem and see how best...to solve it.”¹

This article examines the transnational mobility of security knowhow in relation to the management of violence in megacities. Focusing on the government of Maharashtra’s decision to “learn from Israel” after the 2008 Mumbai attacks, I explore “the anti-politics of policy mobility”. Denaturalizing policy decisions as straightforward “responses” to particular terroristic events, I locate policymaking as a site of politics where conflicts and controversies over security matters are played out. In doing so, I address the *diagnostic* roles of policy decisions in constituting policy problems, theorizing them through the lens of performativity.

Developed by Judith Butler in the context of gender studies, the concept of performativity highlights the reiterative and referential practice, whereby discourse generates the outcomes that it names “through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler, 1988: 519, emphasis in original). Increasingly, performativity plays a key role in critical analysis of contemporary geopolitical trends, importantly contesting the premise of preexisting subjects (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007). It also represents a “*profoundly political lens*” that makes visible “the situated challenges, obstacles and stumbling blocks” faced in the making of security agendas (de Goede et al., 2014: 413-4, emphasis in original). In this article I use performativity to address the “set of processes that produce ontological effects”—what Butler calls the “illocutionary form of the performative” (Butler, 2010:

¹ Interview with Director of Business Development, Israeli security firm

147, 150). The emphasis here is on *building* certain kind of realities (rather than producing particular effects) and is associated with forms of sovereign power.

Performativity helps me to make sense of policy decisions on counter-terrorism and further addresses *how* these decisions intervened in public discourses that followed the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

Often known as “India’s 9/11” or “26/11”, the attacks were “scripted” within the Indian media as an unprecedented event that singlehandedly transformed the meaning of terrorism in India (Kolås, 2010). This sense of departure can be seen in two inter-related ways. First, 26/11 was heralded as the moment when a new form of “global” terrorism confronted India. Second, the event was framed as a “failure” of Indian authorities’ management of the 3-day long siege of the city (see Kaplan 2009: 306). While these representations did not go unchallenged, they proved influential and consequential in two ways. First, they had unusual political repercussions: this was the only instance where the Indian state’s response to terrorist attacks forced elected officials out of office, following a wave of public protests. One commentary noted: “Residents of Mumbai are grieving, but also angry. The grief is over the senseless loss of life [...] The anger, however, is over what was clearly a colossal failure of governance” (Sharma, 2008: 13). Second, 26/11 was followed by immediate calls for a major institutional overhaul of India’s governmental architecture for handling terrorism. In particular, the event generated pressure on Indian politicians to address the threat of terrorism by adopting of “hard”, “modern” approaches to security management from the West. In the aftermath of 26/11 the prevailing view was that “terrorism can be stopped or ended by some tough action: that India is a soft state and therefore we are facing such attacks. If we become a hard

state (read: a militarist state), we can overcome terrorism” (Palshikar, 2008: 11). In 2009 the government of Maharashtra took up these calls, sending an official delegation to Israel under the auspices of seeking expertise in urban counter-terrorism and homeland security. Since then Israeli counter-terror experts have trained newly created commando units in the city.

Post-26/11 policy developments raise broader questions about why cities “learn” from policy experiences elsewhere. Given that 26/11 was widely understood as a failure of local governmental capacity, the decision to learn from Israel might appear rather unproblematic. It also seems to reflect Israel’s position as a leading security purveyor, particularly in relation to urban spaces (Graham, 2010). Yet while Israeli security policies were quickly valorized as an unequivocal success story in 26/11’s aftermath, Israel’s “experience” fighting terrorism is highly controversial. The strategies of control and warfare used in Israel/Palestine represent perhaps the quintessential form of contemporary colonial rule (Mbembe, 2003), frequently criticized for their brutality. It is also far from obvious what Israel offered to Mumbai authorities that was lacking at the local level.

These issues transcend the case at hand. While scholars have documented the growing popularity of policy “models” and “best practices” in policing and security planning, we know little about what makes them attractive to the officials who enroll them. Furthermore, despite recurring media representations of terrorist attacks like “26/11” as self-evident events with supposedly predetermined consequences, there is a need to defamiliarize the policy “responses” to them and thereby reclaim their political contingency. I do so by addressing what Stephens and Vaughan-Williams (2009) call “the politics of

response”. In other words, “how responses to terrorism, by politicians, authorities and the media, legitimize certain forms of sovereign politics” (ibid: 2).

So how might we make sense of the impulse to seek Israeli security knowhow in in 26/11’s aftermath? Part of the reason why the government of Maharashtra gravitated to Israel was because of the strategic actions of the Israeli state, which sought to capitalize on 26/11 to expand the reach of Israel’s homeland security industry within India. After publicly criticizing India’s handling of 26/11 as primitive and incompetent, Israeli government officials offered technical assistance and Israeli trade representatives openly declared their intention to exploit 26/11 as a commercial opportunity (see Peretz, 2008). These interventions did not come out of nowhere. Since the early 1990s ties between Israel and India have strengthened, resulting in an increasingly close bilateral alliance, with Israel recently emerging as India’s fourth largest weapons supplier (Oza, 2014). Yet Israel’s role in training Indian security forces prior to 2008 was limited. While these external pressures and geopolitical ties are important, we must be careful not to overstate them. Otherwise we risk obscuring the agency of the officials who take up transnational policy regimes, particularly in the global south (Steinberg 2011: 351). In making sense of the decision to learn from Israel, the perspectives of local actors therefore need to be considered.

My central claim is that the decision to enroll Israeli security “solutions” must be situated in relation to the local public pressures, controversies and conflicts to which 26/11 gave rise. I take the government of Maharashtra’s decision to learn from Israel as an invitation to reevaluate the relationships between policymaking, politics and depoliticization, showing how the association with Israel was used strategically by

Maharashtra state authorities in managing public dissent and restoring their authority to govern.

I begin by reviewing how the issue of policy transfer has been discussed in literature on urban security governance and policing and sketch an alternative theoretical framework. I further examine how the decision to seek Israeli expertise was portrayed in the Indian media and how state officials explained this decision to me. I then proceed to show how learning from Israel was used to negotiate conflicts and controversies that followed 26/11. Finally, I intervene in debates about the depoliticization of security.

This article is based on 10 months of fieldwork in India and Israel, including interviews with representatives from Israel's homeland security industry and public officials involved in the state of Maharashtra's security planning including senior Indian Police Service (IPS) officers, bureaucrats and government ministers. I also analysed policy documents including the classified High Level Enquiry Committee (HLEC) report (hereinafter known as "the Report"). The Committee was appointed by the government of Maharashtra on December 30th, 2008 to look into the handling of the attacks and make recommendations to strengthen the state's governmental architecture for handling future terrorist attacks. I approached my interviews with a "self-consciously disruptive posture" (Peck and Theodore, 2012: 26) to unsettle and interrogate the taken-for-granted-ness and self-implied necessity of policy prerogatives.

1. The anti-politics of policy mobility

My analysis begins from the premise that the handling of 26/11 emerged as an object of public dissent that previous incidents of terrorism in Bombay/Mumbai had not. Specifically, the event quickly became understood both as a technical and governmental

failure, prompting an elite-led anti-politician backlash. This “political” response to 26/11, however, was articulated as a form of “anti-politics” (Palshikar 2008:11; Sharma 2008). As Roy (2009: 316) points out, while the attacks and their aftermath engendered the rise of elite-based expressions of citizenship through a language of accountability, “[p]aradoxically [...] this particular public articulated its claims through a totalized rejection of ‘politics’, which was conflated with histories of corruption and criminal inefficiency”. So while 26/11 gave rise to an apparent consensus that perceived mishandling of 26/11 represented a narrow technical matter, the event was also understood as an abdication of the Indian state to secure its citizens, thereby provoking public dissent and controversy. In this context it becomes necessary to unpack the broader relationships between policy transfer, politics and anti-politics and security. *How* 26/11 became politically contentious and created new public pressures to “secure” Mumbai, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

Recently there has been a resurgence of interest in urban spaces as sites of security across the social sciences, where the issue of terrorist violence figures centrally (Coaffee 2009; Graham 2010). *The urban* here is not synonymous with security dynamics that simply happen to take place within the space of cities. Rather, the question is “how cities, warfare, and terrorism are currently remaking each other” (Graham 2004: 24). Because the contemporary rescaling of political violence is taking place within the context of rapid planetary urbanization, Graham argues that it is imperative “to place the intersections of war, terrorism, and subnational – specifically urban – spaces at the center, rather than the periphery, of analysis” to conceptualize what he calls an “urban geopolitics” (ibid). Most importantly for my purposes here is that this re-scaling of

security is being accompanied by policy interventions, including those of a specifically *transnational* character.

Scholars have increasingly drawn attention to the production and transmission of knowledge through the sharing of “best practices” (Coaffee et al., 2009b) and export of policy “models” (Coaffee, 2009), alongside the growth of global policing networks. Much like Israel’s “experience” fighting terrorism, however, scholars frequently note that the success of so-called models is far from unequivocal. As Ellison and O’Reilly (2008) point out, despite being exported abroad, Northern Ireland’s policing experiences remain deeply contested ‘at home’. Jones and Newburn (2007: 2) similarly note the paradox that, “despite its alleged faults”, the American criminal justice system has become “strangely seductive” among British politicians. They suggest the appeal of policy transfer in the area of crime control is largely rhetorical and symbolic, arguing that we “go beyond the notion of policy transfer” (132). Swanson (2013: 984) similarly argues that “[t]he transfer of zero tolerance [policing strategies] to Latin America is simply a tool for showcasing get-tough politicians; its only real merit lies in being a great political catchphrase”. Steinberg (2011:351) goes a step further, arguing that the importation of crime prevention strategies in post-Apartheid South Africa has been used by political actors “to blunt the teeth” of their opponents.

Despite developing some suggestive insights, there remains much to be done in theorizing the relationships between local politics and the global mobility of urban security and policing expertise. Here geographical literature on “policy mobilities” (McCann, 2011; Peck, 2011) has developed some fruitful avenues. This scholarship has emerged as a critique of and alternative to mainstream literature on “policy transfer”

(Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996). It has challenged the conception of policy transfer as the literal “export” of policies from one place to another, alternatively situating policy transfer as a social, relational and power-laden process. Although scholarship on urban security and policing has engaged little with policy mobilities scholarship to date, there is much to be gained from a more extensive cross-fertilization between these discussions, particularly in conceptualizing the relationships between policy mobility and local politics. Scholars have recently linked policy mobility with the suppression of public dissent (e.g. McCann, 2011a: 8; Peck, 2011: 176-8; Peck and Theodore, 2010: 206), though as Clarke (2012) has recently argued, there is more to be done here, particularly in the context of urban governance. To this end, he connects the rise of “anti-politics” (Schedler, 1997) with forms of policy mobility and vice versa.

While there is considerable variation in how the term is used, anti-politics is broadly concerned with active strategies that seek to delimit or close down the space of the political – both within a technical setting and in the sense of a wider deliberative space. Building on a conception of democratic decision-making based on the centrality of language and deliberative process, Schedler (1997: 12-14) frames as “antipolitical” those “efforts to subvert communicative rationality of politics and replace it with other, one-sided forms of rationality”. My focus on the anti-political is quite specific. It concerns those practices and strategies that aim to replace popular disagreement (Rancière 1999) with consensus among a narrow group of stakeholders, particularly through appeals to scientific or technocratic expertise. In aftermath of 26/11 there were forms of disagreement surrounding three main issues: the basic facts of what actually took place

during the attacks, who or what was responsible for alleged failures, and the kinds of measures that might be undertaken to resolve any such deficiencies.

I draw on anti-politics scholars in two ways. First, is their assertion that the practice of politics often takes place through active strategies to delimit the space of the political. Anti-political tendencies, in other words, should be understood as part of, rather than an alternative to the operation of politics (Barry, 2002; Hindess, 1997). Of particular concern is the uncertain boundary between forms of political and anti-political activity as observed in the *practice* of politics (see Barry 2002: 271). Second, anti-politics literature is helpful in moving beyond the prevailing conception of depoliticization in terms of “rendering technical” (Büscher, 2010). I build on this scholarship by exploring the anti-political repercussions of governance through best practice.

In my work on Israel’s emergence as a homeland security “model” (), I have made no reference to it as a “best practice” because the term never came up in my discussions with Israeli security industry representatives. The few times I did introduce the notion, it either failed to resonate at all or was actively rebuffed. Yet the term was used by a number state officials in Mumbai, sometimes specifically in relation to Israel. This raised questions of why Indian officials invoked Israel as a best practice when the purveyors of Israeli security expertise resisted this designation? It also provoked my interest in addressing the role of this term in legitimizing policy decisions.² In other respects, however, the use of the term is less than surprising. After all, best practice is nothing if not utterly ubiquitous; it has emerged as an influential buzzword and

² I have found no media references to Israeli urban security knowhow as a “best practice” by public officials in the context of post-26/11 Mumbai. My understanding of how best practice learning “works”, then, is derived from my own private conversations with police and government officials who invoked the term.

governmental/public policy strategy over the past few decades, characterized by its intuitive, commonsensical appeal. As Morrell and Lucas (2012: 184) point out, “[t]he idea that [...] there is a model of ‘best practice’ [...] is appealing because it suggests a route to effective administration without the substantial costs and risks associated with learning or experiment”. The “logic” here is that the most efficient approach to policymaking takes place by emulating the practices of other successful paradigmatic cases to avoid “reinventing the wheel”.

Among critical scholars the concept of best practice has been treated skeptically, though has not been fully interrogated. For instance, literature on the privatization of security notes the role of best practice alongside other neoliberal governance regimes like benchmarking and standardization (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2007a: 134; Leander and van Munster, 2007: 209). Policy mobilities scholars have problematized the concept considerably by contesting the idea that the “best” designation can be taken at its word. However, the tendency is to put inverted commas around the term and leave it at that. Building on this work, I seek to better understand how best practice learning actually *works* anti-politically by examining it in practice.

2. Learning from Israel

Before examining the decision to learn from Israel more closely, I briefly address the nature and consequences of the interactions between Israeli counter-terror experts and Maharashtra authorities, which began shortly after 26/11. While occasional media reports of Israeli trainers working with special units in Mumbai remain ongoing, there have been stories suggesting that high costs and a lack of funds constrained the use of Israeli trainers by local authorities. Israeli security firms also faced challenges gaining public

contracts with Indian state authorities in Maharashtra and elsewhere. Accordingly, a number of such companies decided to exit the Indian market entirely in the years since 2008. The effects of learning from Israel are also far from definitive. Certain officials did mention specific contributions of the Israeli private contractors who provided training to local forces. For instance, I was told that Israeli trainers provided local police with expertise in “built-up area intervention” for hostage rescue and disaster management operations as well as some “good practices” in shooting and training in the Israeli martial art *Krav Maga*.³ Yet my discussions with Indian officials who traveled to Israel suggested that the delegation did not result in the transfer of counter-terror expertise or security technology from Israel to Mumbai. These officials struggled to recall any substantive lesson or tactic that they had picked up during their stay and categorically rejected the suggestion that a foreign model – Israeli or otherwise – had been taken up by the Mumbai city or Maharashtra state police. Thus despite official statements to the contrary (see below), the scope of Israel’s activities in Mumbai has proven rather limited. Yet the lack of identifiable policy outcomes resulting from the interactions between Israeli security experts and Indian officials should not be read as a failure. It points to the importance of moving beyond the idea of policy transfer as a straightforward process involving the literal transfer of expertise.

What is striking about the decision to learn from Israel is its intuitive appeal; it seems to flow straightforwardly from media portrayals of 26/11 as a technical failure of local capacity. For instance, on the eve of the delegation to Israel in 2009, a leading Indian journalist remarked that given the clear deficiencies in the handling of 26/11, it is

³ Fmr. Senior IPS officer, Mumbai City and Maharashtra State Police (Ret’d)

unsurprising that the government of Maharashtra “was the first off the block to respond to Tel Aviv’s offer for assistance to export its expertise on counter-terror responses and homeland security” (Sarin, 2009a). After returning from his visit to Israel, newly appointed Mumbai Commissioner of Police D. Sivanandan declared that, in sharp contrast to Israel, which responds unapologetically to terrorist attacks, India suffered from its lack of a similar “killer instinct”: “For thousands of years, we [Indians] have been passively witnessing terror attacks. We never want to fight with anybody. That’s what our main problem is and we lack the killer instinct” (cited in *Times of India*, 2009). He further proclaimed that “[w]e will strongly recommend replication of certain Israeli solutions in India”, praising their standard operating procedures (SOPs) for emergency management (cited in Sarin, 2009a).

Media coverage of the visit to Israel gave the impression that some coherent Israeli model for urban security was available and ready for adoption. One article claimed that the “team will look to develop, with Israeli cooperation, a total security solution for a city like Mumbai in order to prevent another 26/11-type terrorist attack” (Sarin, 2009b). Another similarly asserted that “[t]he decision to visit Israel was taken after a consensus among senior [police] officers and the government, that 26/11 had exposed several chinks in the city’s armour, and plugging them would need a complete overhaul of police’s approach towards security” (Tiwary, 2009a). In this way, learning from Israel was portrayed as a kind of catchall solution to a set of alleged technical deficiencies at the local level.

Upon closer inspection, however, the decision to learn from Israel is far from straightforward. First, there was never any obvious need to which the delegation to Israel

actually responded. While officials like Sivanandan publically lauded Israeli security approaches, at no point did they specify what was lacking at the local level in terms of technical knowhow nor did they spell out how the use of Israeli security expertise would help to address any alleged gaps. Second, the decision to seek Israeli solutions in no way reflected the Report's findings. While the Report makes a number of recommendations, there was no suggestion that foreign expertise was necessary to improve Mumbai's security preparedness. In fact, the Report did not serve as the basis of the post-2008 policy process. Many key decisions were taken before it was even submitted to the government on April 18, 2009. The document was later classified and partially rejected just before its scheduled release in 2009. Finally, there were questions of fit. Even advocates of Israeli security approaches raised doubts about their applicability to Indian conditions (e.g. Rajiv, 2009). Thus, far from being obvious, the decision to learn from Israel actually raises a number of very basic questions. Why did the government of Maharashtra look to Israeli security experts as a solution to 26/11? What specific needs did the Israeli's help to address? Why was Israel chosen as a source of expertise (as opposed to others) and how was its status as a best practice determined?

Unsurprisingly, when questioned, the interested parties invoked the common sense logic of best practice, claiming their deference to Israel was uncontroversial. As one former officer emphasized, "we thought they [the Israelis] are one of the best in combating urban terrorism and because of that we took the help of an Israeli company".⁴ Maharashtra's Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) chief Rakesh Maria similarly maintained that the impulse to source Israeli trainers for Maharashtra's newly created commando unit

⁴ Jayant Umranikar, Fmr. Director General of Police (Special Operations), Maharashtra State Police (Ret'd)

Force One was driven by the need to get the “best in the field”.⁵ Police officials further presented the impulse as a response to various unspecified needs, which could not be met by local expertise. For instance some told me that Israeli trainers were sought only in cases where “we have fallen short of skills”⁶ and because “this kind of training was not available [locally]”.⁷

In addition to seeking possible motivations of best practice learning, I asked officials what “best” or “good” actually signifies and how this quality might be ascertained. Just as the impetus for seeking Israeli expertise was presented as obvious, so, too, was the status of best. As Sivanandan told me, “Good means they [the Israelis] are the best in the world and there is a perception...Between you and me, Israelis are considered to be the best in security matters. That’s it”.⁸ Police officials thereby presented “best-ness” as a global professional consensus rather than a quality they ascertained for themselves.

Yet upon further interrogation official accounts became far less neat. For instance, in explaining how to assess best-ness, one former high-ranking IPS officer claimed that “All this is available today in the Internet world...there is nothing that you don’t know...you know who is the best...[and] who [the] second was”. When I asked him to elaborate, his account became far less definitive: “instead of trying to arrive at who’s the best and who’s not, you...[just] pick from here, pick from there and you’re getting each one”, insisting that “it’s not that only just one person is the best in the world only and has

⁵ Rakesh Maria, Anti Terrorist Squad chief, Maharashtra State Police

⁶ Dhanushyakodi (D.) Sivanandan, Fmr. Mumbai Commissioner of Police (Ret’d)

⁷ Umranikar

⁸ Sivanandan

to be brought”.⁹ So although best practice suggests competition between rivals, achieving a best designation did not seem to rule out their less-than-best peers.

Officials most frequently cited Israel as a leading source of urban security knowhow but I was told that other foreign experts from the US, the UK, Germany and Russia also provided various forms of assistance and training after 26/11. They further claimed that it was advantageous to get diverse foreign experts and trainers, each apparently offering slightly different (though never specified) attributes. Yet, there was no evidence to suggest that the attributes of these different foreign experts had been systematically compared with one another. So while designating something as “best” clearly implies some kind of calculation or comparison, my interviews revealed no evidence that any such procedures had been carried out.

Furthermore, while the impulse to seek Israeli expertise was presented as a direct response to certain gaps in local knowhow, as I probed which specific deficiencies it might have addressed, such narratives quickly changed course. For instance Maharashtra’s former Home Secretary Jayant Patil explained the decision to go to Israel as part of an impulse to develop a “scientific approach” to counter-terrorism, disaster management and coordination within the Mumbai police. Yet when I asked him if 26/11 had revealed a lack of expertise at the local level, he responded: “No, expertise is very much there in [the] Mumbai police; there is no doubt about expertise”.¹⁰ Another former senior IPS officer who had stressed the importance of sourcing the best, similarly qualified that it was not as though “you needed necessarily *only* external experts to create

⁹ Fmr. Senior IPS officer, Mumbai City and Maharashtra State Police (Ret’d)

¹⁰ Jayant Patil, Fmr. Home Minister, Government of Maharashtra

that specialization...that was not the case”.¹¹ In addition to raising questions about the basis for demand, officials suggested that the contributions of Israeli expertise could not be taken for granted. Even Sivanandan who had publicly advocated for the adoption of Israeli solutions expressed deep skepticism about its underlying relevance to Mumbai. As he bluntly put it, “Israel is only [a] 7 million population. We are talking about *1.2 billion* people! The Israeli model will [therefore] not be applicable to India”.¹²

Thus far from presenting a coherent account of why seeking expertise from Israel emerged as a policy prerogative, official accounts muddied the waters in many ways. While invoking the intuitive logic of best practice to explain the impulse to seek Israeli expertise, they also frequently contradicted the basic tenets of this mode of reasoning, referring to local needs as the reason for seeking Israeli expertise but failing to provide a coherent answer to why Israel might be considered best practice. Although claiming that Israel was best, they insisted that seeking a range of other less-than-best practices was also somehow necessary. Most surprisingly, the applicability of Israeli security solutions to Mumbai - the essential premise of learning from Israel - was put into question by the very officials who had publicly advocated their adoption. Official accounts thus ultimately failed to really explain why learning from others was so essential and what Israel specifically contributed.

These rationalizations might seem to suggest a lack of knowledge on the part of policymakers. Yet such a position would unduly imply that officials were somehow blind to the practical limitations of the policy measures that they put into place. Officials did seem dogmatically committed to the value of best practice learning. This was not because

¹¹ Fmr. Senior IPS officer, Mumbai City and Maharashtra State Police (Ret'd)

¹² Sivanandan

they were somehow oblivious to its practical limitations. In fact, they were well aware that engagement with Israeli security experts was unlikely to bring about a radical overhaul of local security approaches, with some going as far as to claim that knowledge transfer was never exactly their ambition to begin with.

Making sense of the decision to learn from Israel takes us back to the government's handling of the Pradhan Committee. As I have noted above, the Committee's findings did not serve as the basis of post-26/11 policy developments in Maharashtra. The Report, therefore, had little direct effect on the nature of the policy response to 26/11, including the decision to learn from Israel. The story, however, is somewhat more complicated. Maharashtra politicians did not simply refuse to implement the Committee's recommendations but actively fought to suppress its findings. At this same time, they undertook costly policy decisions that did not reflect the Report's suggestions. So while the Committee clearly took its mandate very seriously, it is quite clear that leading state politicians employed it to control public discourse and to pre-empt further political fallout.

More specifically, the handling of the Report can be better understood as an attempt to take the conversation about the lessons of 26/11 elsewhere. Whereas the document focuses on a wide range of lapses and problems such as the duplication of duties, a lack of basic police firearm training and a failure to follow existing SOPs, learning from Israel gave the impression that alleged (local) deficiencies could be easily solved by seeking the best in training and expertise from the global leader in counter-terrorism and homeland security. As I argue next, making sense of the decision to learn

from Israel requires contending with the fact that this move had specifically *nothing to do with* the Pradhan Committee's findings.

3. Changing the conversation

Interested parties actively leveraged the deference to Israel as a marker of post-26/11 progress. In fact, certain officials brought up recourse to foreign expertise as proof that their newly created commando units can be considered world class. This suggested that the value of the delegation to Israel had something to do with the political optics of associating the Mumbai police with Israel. Indeed, a number of police officials spoke of the roles of foreign trainers in terms of inspiring public “confidence”. In this light, deference to Israel can be seen as an effort to “arm” the Mumbai police against charges of weakness and incompetence by way of association with an allegedly proven case of policy success. For instance, when I asked one senior IPS officer what Israeli trainers brought to the table that was not available locally, he responded that you want someone with real-world “experience”. As he explained, the Israelis have demonstrated credentials of having faced terrorism on a routine rather than merely sporadic basis, making Israeli police trainers an obvious choice.¹³ Thus Israel's status as a source of “combat proven” urban security knowledge (Graham, 2010) clearly made it attractive to police officials. Rather than approaching the appeal of Israeli security solutions in some general abstract way, however, I want to situate it politically within the Indian context.

Indian media commentaries on the handling of 26/11 referenced to India's alleged “envy” of Israel, for the perceived impunity with which Israel is able to strike “terrorists” in enemy territory. One article immediately following 26/11 suggested that Israel was

¹³ Deven Bharti, Special Inspector General (Law and Order), Maharashtra State Police

looked to by Indian security agencies with a sense of admiration, claiming “Israeli expertise in striking at its enemies across borders and continents was widely envied [by Indian security authorities]” (Bedi and McElroy, 2008). In a later article, an Indian politician argued: “Whereas many regard Israel’s toughness as its principal characteristic, India’s own citizens view their country as a soft state, its underbelly easily penetrated by determined terrorists [...] Terrorism has taken more lives in India than in any country in the world after Iraq, and yet, unlike Israel, India has seemed unable to do anything about it” (Tharoor, 2009). Clearly, then, Sivanandan’s praise of Israel’s “killer instinct” resonates within these wider discussions over India’s “soft” approach to security. Indeed, India’s perceived unwillingness to take retaliatory military action against Pakistan following terrorist attacks represents a source of frustration among Indian security commentators. Accordingly, at least part of the appeal of traveling to Israel for Indian officials was to fulfill the fantasy of becoming a “hard”, militarist state and in doing so consolidating the idea of a common Islamist other (see Oza, 2007).

In the remainder of this paper, I place the decision to learn from Israel in relation to the local political context of post-26/11 Mumbai, focusing on what Clarke (2012: 34) calls the “local politics of fast policy” – i.e. the ways in which forms of policy mobility are used by local actors to negotiate conflicts and struggles. Here Mountz and Curran’s (2009) account of former New York City mayor Rudolf Giuliani’s visit to Mexico City to unveil “Plan Giuliani” as a masculinized *performance* is instructive. The popularity of Giuliani’s proposals, they argue, does not reflect their capacity to reduce crime. Rather the Plan “worked”, they argue, by “produc[ing] a ‘cult of personality’” that leveraged Giuliani’s reputation as a “tough guy” (Mountz and Curran, 2009: 1034). As such, Plan

Giuliani essentially amounted to a strategy to enhance the standing of the Mexico City police.

Sivanandan's endorsement of an Israeli approach to counter-terrorism similarly worked by leveraging Israeli's status as a global security leader to bolster the authority of the Mumbai police. As one newspaper article claimed: "Post the November 26, 2008 attack, Israel seems to have become the answer to most of Mumbai police's problems" (Tiwary, 2009b). This statement is correct, albeit with one important caveat, which is that the problem being solved was a matter of the Mumbai police's institutional credibility. This is not to underplay the very real problems within the Mumbai police. It is simply to say that the use of Israeli security experts was never intended to bring about a radical overhaul of the city's counter-terror approaches. The target of this measure was something else entirely.

In addition to playing a role as performative demonstration of security competence, learning from Israel also helped Indian authorities to negotiate a number of controversies to which the handling of 26/11 had given rise. First, politicians from the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) tried to make political gains from the perceived mishandling of the attacks by the ruling Congress government. An advertisement taken out by the BJP in major Indian dailies featured the slogan "Brutal Terror Strikes at Will. Weak Government, Unwilling and Incapable", as well as "Fight Terror. Vote BJP" (cited in Kolås, 2010: 89). Second, there were a number of rumors surrounding the deaths of three senior police officers (including sitting ATS chief Hemant Karkare) who were killed during the attacks under mysterious circumstances. These questions re-emerged with the publication of books by Vinita Kamte, the wife of one of the slain officers

(Kamte and Deshmukh, 2009) and a bestseller by a retired Indian police officer (Mushrif, 2009).¹⁴ While the substance of such allegations is not relevant here, the point is that 26/11 remained a site of controversy and source of pressure on the government of Maharashtra and the Mumbai police throughout 2009.¹⁵ Third, while the Committee's recommendations clearly did not inform the decision to learn from Israel, it was shortly after the decision to withhold the Report that the government sent its delegation to Israel to seek expertise on combating terrorism. The press reports on the visit to Israel came only a month after the government had announced its partial rejection of the document.

In the context of ongoing calls from the BJP and the Bombay High Court for the Report's release, the decision to send the delegation to Israel thus can be seen to have offered a temporary distraction. As Vappala Balachandran the Report's co-author emphasized to me, it was curious that "before...[the] Maharashtra government even digested our report, the first action that they took was to send a delegation to Israel". He noted that he and Ram Pradhan "did not want these people [the delegation] to go and get lessons from Israel because what they're practicing is not applicable here at all. We have a different type of public [in India]".¹⁶ In a 2011 op-ed, Balachandran went on to challenge the premise of these excursions, arguing that such "[f]oreign jaunts [...] will not improve our counter-terrorist methodology" (Balachandran, 2011), insinuating that

¹⁴ Karkare's death was deeply significant symbolically. In addition to being one of the most senior IPS officers in the Maharashtra Police at the time of his death, he was leading an extremely controversial case against instigators of Hindutva terror groups surrounding the 2006 Malegaon blasts. Mushrif's account as well as others have suggested that 26/11 may have been engineered as a conspiracy to kill Karkare and thereby prevent his cases from proceeding against a number of high profile figures in the RSS from going forward.

¹⁵ Newly appointed ATS chief Rakesh Maria threatened to resign in protest over questions raised about his activities during 26/11 by Vinita Kamte and others around the first anniversary of the attack.

¹⁶ Fmr. Special Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat (Ret'd), co-author of the HLEC Report

the impulse to send its officials abroad was designed as a diversion from the Report's findings.

The delegation to Israel did more than simply divert attention from the Report: it helped to frame the understanding of the problem of Mumbai's security preparedness in a particular way. Walters' (2008) approach to "anti-policy" provides a useful vantage point from which to analyze the impulse to learn from Israel. As he argues, it is tempting to see what he calls "anti-policy" (such as anti-terrorism, anti-racism, etc.) as a kind of policy that emerges to prohibit, limit or prevent things from occurring. Yet he presents an alternative position by suggesting that anti-policy is not, in fact, a particular variety of policy. It can be better understood, he argues, "as an analytic" or a kind of "sensitizing device" (269). In making this argument, Walters asserts that it is important to draw attention to the "positivity of anti-policy" in the sense that "the objective of negating things frequently goes hand-in-hand with calling something new into existence" (275). In other words, rather than simply "responding" to a set of pre-existing policy problems, anti-policy plays a key role in their very constitution as such.

We can see this performative tendency in the deference to Israeli security experts following 26/11. Enrolling Israeli security experts became *generative* of the policy problem by helping to promote notion that the failure of 26/11 was attributable to a lack of modern counter-terror expertise within the Mumbai police. We can see that sending officials to Israel helped to *diagnose* Mumbai's security problems, thereby offering the potential to (re)make the issues at hand. Whereas the Report focused on deep institutional and coordination problems within the Mumbai police, a lack of basic police training, political interference and red tape in the police's procurement process, recourse to Israeli

expertise gave the impression that problems were attributable to a lack of specialized knowhow, which could be easily remedied by learning from Israel. This move allowed the government of Maharashtra to frame the policy problem on its own terms. In other words, deferring to Israel helped the to define 26/11's security lapses as a narrow "technical" matter, ignoring the Report's findings.

This diagnosis further helped to police the very terms of failure by "patrolling the facts" (Ericson 1989) about how the events of 26/11 unfolded and the specific lapses they may have revealed. As the handling of the Report suggests, Maharashtra politicians were far less interested in finding out about the existence of potential security lapses and how they could be remedied than they were in looking for ways they could "solve" the issue of terrorism on their own terms. The efforts by governmental authorities to suppress the Report's findings have thus given rise to a situation where, although there is virtual consensus that the handling of 26/11 represents a failure of local capacity, an understanding of *what* exactly failed remains far less clear. Indeed, the policy response has worked to obfuscate important details about how the attack actually unfolded and who or what might be responsible for alleged security lapses.

So far we have seen that deference to Israeli security experts was used to performatively demonstrate a claim to authority by way of association with the "killer instinct" of Israel. As I further emphasized above, official accounts of best practices were hardly smooth or straightforward. While their accounts of learning were incoherent and contradictory and did not readily explain anything, what my conversations with officials did quite clearly reveal was that best practice claims were self-affirming. Embedded in the best designation is a not so subtle normative judgment that effectively justified the

impulse to seek Israeli expertise. Indeed, throughout my encounters with officials, the premise of learning served as an end in itself. As Maharashtra's former ATS chief emphasized to me: "There is no point in reinventing the wheel again when there is something better already available in the market. So if they're having some capability [elsewhere]...why *not* know from them?"¹⁷ Thus the very opportunity to learn from elsewhere became its own justification where the mere existence of allegedly superior expertise was presented as the chief reason to seek it out.

Officials also sought to present the issue of superiority as a closed matter of professional consensus, which defied the need for any kind of analysis or discussion. In fact, my search for the reasons behind the impulse to seek best practices was effectively rebuffed by officials, who claimed that their decisions were so obviously beneficial as to actually preclude the need for any explanation. During these conversations I was frequently challenged about my apparent skepticism regarding best practices, with officials stressing that they could see no downsides of learning from others. They effectively inverted my question of "why learn?" into "why *not* learn?". Best practices are best, they claimed, *because* they are best, and therefore inherently good, irrespective of any other consideration. These elusive, even evasive dimensions of best practice claims point to the need to address questions about the depoliticizing consequences of policy mobility more closely.

4. Best practice as depoliticization?

As we have seen, officials used a language of best practice to suggest that the impulse to learn from Israel was effectively beyond question. Embedded within the logic

¹⁷ Fmr. Anti-Terrorism Squad chief, Maharashtra State Police

of best practice there is also a decidedly anti-political tendency in the sense that it substitutes a communicative rationality of politics with a “one-sided” form of technocratic rationality (Schedler, 1997). The language of best practice works to “‘predetermine’ decisions and/or social and public outcomes” (Büsher, 2010: 34) as somehow natural or preordained. As Morell and Lucas (2012: 187) point out, calls to adopt ‘best practices’ in policy discussions represent “an attempt to depoliticize (rhetorically) and strip away ideological aspects to activities and practices that are inherently political and ideological”. Given that the core logic of best practice is a technocratic one, it also has an obvious resonance with debates about the privatization and depoliticization of security. A number of Foucaudian-inspired studies have argued that the use of private actors can be used by states to actively manipulate, suppress or sidestep deliberative debate and evade democratic accountability (e.g. Abrahamsen and Williams, 2007a, 2007b; Leander and van Munster, 2007). Drawing on Rose and Miller’s (1992) notion of “governmental technologies”, such account suggest that the rise of private actors has served to depoliticize security questions by rendering them as technical matters in need of management.

These approaches are helpful to a degree. As illustrated above, the use of Israeli experts has worked to diagnose the policy problem of urban security preparedness in a narrow technical way. Yet thinking about best practice as a technology of governing, which offers a clean alternative to politics, is neither terribly helpful in understanding the case at hand nor does it provide a fruitful way to approach the anti-political dimensions of security policymaking in general. While sharing many of the same concerns as Rose and Miller, Barry (2002) has critiqued their approach for framing politics as excessively

technical. This, he argues, has the problematic tendency to render strategies of governing as purely instrumental activities or techniques. As he reminds us: “Politics, after all, is both about contestation, and the containment of contestation [...] It is about conflict, negotiation and the resolution of conflict” (270). So while acknowledging that politics can assume a technical quality, it is critical to resist the impulse to frame politics as a smooth (and purely technical) matter. As he further points out, “what is commonly termed politics is not necessarily – or generally – political in its consequences” [...] Indeed, one might say that one of the core functions of politics has been, and should be, to place limits on the political” (270). Seen in this light the depoliticizing implications of best practice learning clearly do not signify an end of politics, even though the deference to Israel clearly helped to delimit space for disagreement about what took place on 26/11, who or what was responsible for alleged failures and what might help to resolve them.

Although best practice learning offered local officials a convenient technocratic language to explain their activities, this should not be seen as evidence that they were implementing some predefined (technical) policy regime. They were clearly not. What is quite striking about the process of learning from Israel is the absence of engagement with systematic comparisons of any kind. Determining Mumbai’s security needs or Israel’s status as a best practice did not take place through some process of ranking or benchmarking. While the delegation to Israel was legitimated on the basis of a need to seek various technical fixes, there is nothing particularly technical about this entire episode. This raises questions about *how* learning from Israel actually worked anti-politically.

Walters' approach to anti-policy offers some useful insights here. As he points out, it is tempting to suggest that anti-policy goes hand-in-hand with processes of depoliticization because anti-policy schemes take place through the imposition of technocratic expertise onto a field that might ordinarily be understood as a site of political controversy. Yet, as Walters points out, this is the case in all governmental schemes rather than something specific to anti-policy regimes. In this sense reading anti-politics in terms of the imposition of a technical rationality is too general to do much explanatory work. Walters therefore argues that two additional criteria are necessary to forge a more robust connection between anti-politics and anti-policy. The first is what he calls the "externalization effect," whereby the state is positioned as a source of protection and security rather than as the source of the problems that anti-policy schemes claim to address. Second, and more pertinent here, is what Walters (2008: 281) calls the "black mail of security", which sets up anti-policy regimes as something which one cannot possibly be against.

We can see that the anti-politics of best practice learning works in a similar way. By naming Israeli expertise best practice, Mumbai officials were able to set it up as a policy measure to which could not reasonably be opposed. What gives best practice its rhetorical force, then, is not simply its capacity to render erstwhile political issues as technical matters but rather because it makes a move that is, by its own tautological definition, *good*. Asking why something that has already been normatively anointed as best is worthwhile pursuing simply does not get very far. As I quickly found out, claims to best-ness proved to be slippery and even resistant to interrogation. Official accounts of best practice effectively foreclosed the very premise of inquiry by presenting the efficacy

of certain practices as self-evident and immune from analysis – a foregone conclusion no longer amenable to reevaluation or debate. For instance, when I asked Sivanandan about how the decision to seek lessons from Israel emerged, he responded that “It was a need, it was [decided] with the best of intentions and the best of knowledge...done”.¹⁸ In this way the self-referential logic of best practice provided officials with a façade of intuitiveness behind which they could quite readily hide. The loose qualities of best practice learning are not incidental; they are a central part of its work as an elusive strategy of governing. Though official rationalizations were inconsistent and incoherent, the various contradictions embedded in them proved to be a convenient way to reassemble the “facts” of 26/11 into a new narrative of learning and modernization which highlights certain developments while making other dimensions disappear. Specifically, learning from Israel was used to simultaneously respond to public misgivings over Mumbai’s security preparedness, yet to do so in a way that is somehow *not* an indictment of local incompetence.

This seems to be one of the most important features of transnational policy schemes that operate without any discernible standard: they can claim to improve security preparedness in ways that do not displace pre-existing local approaches. Though this clearly defies the basic functionalist logic that serves as the underlying premise of best practice learning, it has an element of expediency to it. The visit to Israel can be portrayed as straightforward, functionally driven, and beyond the realm of debate. And because no Israeli standard is ever defined, there are no specific grounds on which to even assess, let alone contest, the claims to efficacy. All of this suggests the need for

¹⁸ Sivanandan

greater care and precision in the way we think about how security policymaking relates to questions of politics and the political. Simply saying that the rendering of security issues as objects of techno-managerial strategies depoliticizes them is simply too easy. Nor is such a move terribly productive analytically. It tells us precious little about how these schemes actually function and how regimes of security governance might differ in character from others.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that issues of politics and anti-politics should be placed front and center in understanding why transnational policy learning has become increasingly salient as strategies of contemporary urban security governance. In doing so, it makes three contributions. First, it shows precisely *how* the decision to learn from Israel was used circumscribe the space of debate on matters of security preparedness in the city. Here I have contested the widespread claim among critical security scholars and other theorists that depoliticization takes place by rendering erstwhile political issues as technical ones. I have argued that anti-political implications of best practice learning should be conceptualized as part of the operation of politics rather than an alternative to it, further challenging the notion that best practice learning is, in fact, really very *technical* all. Second, by situating policy responses to terroristic events as forms of performative politics, I have shown how counter-terror policy decisions become *generative* of policy problems. In this sense, policies should not be understood as a resolution to a pre-given set of problems (technical, political or otherwise) but rather as a kind of policy diagnostic, which enacts realities it claims to only describe and respond to. Third, in bringing debates about “urban geopolitics” (Graham 2004) into conversation

with those about the local politics and anti-politics of policy mobility, I have helped to correct the prevailing Western bias in debates about transnational security governance (Hönke and Müller 2012). This is crucial in two senses: it locates policy actors in the global south as part of rather than external to the global politics of security and shows how actors re-appropriate and thereby reinvent transnational policy regimes (Amar 2013). In representing Israeli urban security knowhow as a best practice, then, it is not that Maharashtra officials misread its true character. Instead, we can say that they took something already there – Israel’s status as a global leader in matters of security – and *remade* this image in relation to their own local circumstances. Learning from Israel notably “worked” as a signifier of rapid and totalizing policy transformation, whilst paradoxically giving rise to very few (if any) tangible results. These findings further trouble the idea that the Israeli “model” of homeland security exists as a fixed body of knowledge with a set of necessary practical outcomes. This model is an elusive construct, which *exists* only to the extent to which “it” is enrolled by others and becomes relationally defined through these encounters.

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