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US condemns PA report that Western Wall is 'not Jewish'

Bicom, 2 December 2010

<http://www.bicom.org.uk/news/news-archive/us-condemns-pa-report-that-western-wall-is-not-jewish->

The US State Department yesterday condemned a Palestinian Authority report released last week that claims that the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem has no significance for Jews and is Muslim property. State Department Spokesperson Philip J Crowley said that these kind of reports damage US efforts to progress with direct peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians and called it "factually incorrect, insensitive and highly provocative."

Crowley added that the US repeatedly raised the issue with the Palestinian Authority not to delegitimise Israel or deny the history of the country. "As the United States has long maintained, the status of Jerusalem must be resolved in final status negotiations between the parties," Crowley said. "We recognise that Jerusalem is a deeply important

issue to Israelis and Palestinians, to Jews, to Muslims and to Christians everywhere," he added.

Efforts to revive peace talks are currently stalled, with the Palestinians refusing to return to the negotiating table unless Israel sets another West Bank settlement moratorium.

The great Princeton hummus debate will decide the future of Israel, more or less (probably less)

Jeff Edelstein, The Trentonian, 29 November 2010

<http://www.trentonian.com/articles/2010/11/29/news/doc4cf40847bb7aa970584038.txt?viewmode=fullstor>

Wednesday is the final day of voting on the Princeton University campus, where students there will decide if a second brand of hummus will hit university shelves in the coming months.

Yes. The students of Princeton University — the same students who will one day be Wall Street whizzes, world leaders, astronauts, what have you — are voting on whether or not to bring in choice in hummus.

And before you dismiss this as so much hummus hoo-ha humdingery, know this: The fella behind this movement has more than a smooth and creamy spread on his mind.

"When we first started the initiative, people dismissed it as silly and trivial," said Yoel Bitran, Princeton University student and president of the Princeton Committee on Palestine (PCP). "And hummus alternatives are trivial. But this is beyond that: This is to start a conversation on Israeli human rights violations."

See? Told you there was more to this chick pea chronicle.

Let's run it down, with help from www.universitypressclub.com, which has been on this story since the first dip: The hummus on campus is provided by Sabra, a company that is partially owned by the Strauss Group, which, according to Bitran, is an Israeli company that has, in the past, supported the Golan Brigade of the Israeli Defense Forces, and the Golan Brigade has been accused by various human rights organizations of human rights violations. As such, Bitran believes, students who like this traditionally Arab food can only buy it on campus from a company that may or may not be connected to human rights violations against Arabs.

This led to a Sabra boycott, which led to a second campus group, Tigers for Israel, to — wait for it — roar back in defense of Sabra, The Strauss Group and hummus. They also argued, in a Daily Princetonian editorial — and I'm not making this up — that voting for hummus choice is voting for a "clause that starts down the road of delegitimizing the State of Israel."

Can I get an "oy vey" up in here?

To further complicate matters on this appetizer plate, Bitran doesn't even have the decency to be an Arab guy and make this a black and white issue; he's Jewish, born here, raised in Chile, and is against Israel's current choices in dealing with the Palestinians.

"I've come to the conclusion the policies of Israel toward the Palestinians are wrong," Bitran said. "It's simply wrong on a basic human level. What I'm doing is motivated by human rights. One of the lessons we're taught as Jews is to stand against violations of human rights. The fact this is happening in Israel just means we have to stand up against it even more so."

And Bitran believes bringing this to vote will help demonstrate to students that choices they make locally can have an impact on happenings half a world away. Or, to look at it another way: The happenings of a half a world away are actually happening right here, on our shores, and we play a role whether we know it or not.

In this case, the role is hummus. Just to be clear.

So yes. As the voting winds down today, Princeton students will decide A) if there will be hummus choice on campus and B) the future direction of the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. Big decisions, to be sure.

And not that anyone asked my opinion, but everyone should just get their Princeton hummus at Olives on Witherspoon. It's delish.

Impeaching Ahmadinejad

Amir Taheri, Wall Street Journal, 30 November 2010

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704693104575638210916460270.html>

Is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a closet Persian nationalist trying to de-Islamize Iran? Is he part of a plot to send the mullahs back to the mosques to make way for an Islamist military regime?

These are some of the questions raised in the Majlis, Iran's ersatz parliament, by members who are trying to impeach the president. As astonishing as this might be for Western observers, Ahmadinejad is challenged by people who claim that he is not Muslim enough and that he harbors a hidden anti-clerical agenda to promote a mixture of messianism and chauvinism. His closest friend and aide, Esfandiar Rahim Masha'i, has even suggested that "within one year Ahmadinejad's enemies would declare him to be an infidel."

The anti-Ahmadinejad coalition within the Khomeinist establishment is a curious coterie that includes hard-line Islamists, mullahs clinging to their wealth and power, rival politicians, and crypto-Communists posing as Muslims. Because they have to claim to

be more militant than Ahmadinejad, the victory of these groups could produce an even more unpredictable and dangerous Iran.

The campaign to impeach Ahmadinejad started last June when Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani claimed that the parliament had the right to pass laws without the president's consent. He then tested his claim by pushing through a \$2 billion (€1.51 billion) appropriation to Tehran's subway company, despite a presidential veto.

Larijani formed an alliance with another of Ahmadinejad's bitter foes, former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Ahmadinejad had defeated both men in the presidential election of 2005. One of Rafsanjani's sons heads the subway company that benefited from the parliamentary largesse. Ahmadinejad retaliated by asserting that the president, and not the Majlis speaker, was the country's second highest authority after the "Supreme Guide."

To calm things down, the "Supreme Guide," Ali Khamenei, ordered the creation of a commission to arbitrate the dispute. By last September it had become clear that there could be no compromise, as Ahmadinejad's foes within the establishment were united for the first time and saw him as a threat to their hard-won privileges.

Starting the impeachment process requires a petition signed by at least a quarter of the 290 members of the Majlis. This week the number of signatures reached 178. But grilling the president in an open session of the Majlis is only the first step. The next step would be to secure the signature of two-thirds of the Majlis for a petition to Khamenei to dismiss the president.

So far, the Larijani-Rafsanjani tandem has failed to make the numbers needed. More importantly, there is no sign that the "Supreme Guide" is prepared to dump Ahmadinejad. Last month, talking to some 30 leading members of the Majlis, Khamenei admitted that Ahmadinejad might have "made some mistakes" but insisted that the president was "doing a good job and should be supported."

This backing comes despite accusations that the president has signed 110 unconstitutional edicts since his re-election last year. Some of these deal with a privatization scheme that has transferred large chunks of the public sector to companies owned by members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the president's staunch supporters.

Ahmadinejad is also criticized for being too liberal on women's issues. His Majlis critics attack his decision to allow women to attend sporting events and an order to the religious police not to harass women for minor infringement of the hijab. Newspapers supporting the impeachment lobby have published pictures of Ahmadinejad shaking hands with foreign women during his trips abroad. Since Islam bans physical contact between the sexes outside marriage, the implication is that Ahmadinejad is not a good Muslim.

The campaign to impeach Ahmadinejad is being orchestrated by Ali Motahari, brother-in-law of Larijani and a member of the Majlis. Ali Motahari is the son of the late Morteza Motahari, a Khomeinist mullah assassinated by Forqan, a terrorist group of which

Ahmadinejad has been accused of being a member. Forqan was inspired by the ideas of Ali Shariati, a Shiite propagandist who preached an Islam without the clergy.

The charge that Ahmadinejad is trying to push the mullahs out of power is based on his own claim that he has a direct line of communication with the Hidden Imam, a Messiah-like figure in Shiite Islam who is supposed to emerge at the end of time to install eternal justice.

Ahmadinejad constantly talks of the Hidden Imam but almost never mentions Ruhollah Khomeini, the mullah who created the present regime. Nor is Ahmadinejad keen to pay tribute to Khamenei. A man who talks to God wouldn't bother with mere saints.

Several times a year, Ahmadinejad takes his entire cabinet to Jamkaran, a suburb of the "holy" city of Qom south of Tehran, to report to the Hidden Imam. In Jamkaran there is a well that is supposed to lead to the place where the Hidden Imam is in hiding. In a solemn ceremony, Ahmadinejad throws copies of his government's budget and other edicts into the well for consideration by the Hidden Imam.

The message is clear: A government that is preparing for the end of times, under the command of the Hidden Imam, does not need the mullahs.

At the same time, Ahmadinejad's foes in the Majlis suspect that the president is a secret Persian nationalist, a grave sin under Islam, which bans nationalism. Their suspicions were first raised when Ahmadinejad's friend, Masha'i, told a public meeting in June that it was time to promote "the Iranian school" rather than Islam as such. Pressed to disown Masha'i, regarded by many as his philosophical guru, Ahmadinejad did the opposite by endorsing the idea of an "Iranian school" as the only valid version of Islam in the modern world.

As if that were not enough, Masha'i recently managed to persuade the British Museum to bring the famous Cyrus Cylinder to Tehran for an exhibition. On the clay cylinder is inscribed an edict by Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian Empire 2,569 years ago, declaring a number of rights, including freedom of worship. Many Iranians regard this edict as the first declaration of human rights. To underline the importance of the cylinder's return, Ahmadinejad headed an honor guard, whose members were dressed in the uniforms of Cyrus's army. In a speech, Ahmadinejad paid tribute to Cyrus while Masha'i claimed that the Persian King of Kings should be regarded as "equal to prophets." This was too much for the mullahs, who remember that Cyrus freed the Jews from bondage in Babylon.

Since Islam claims that everything and everyone before and outside Islam is nothing but "darkness and sin," the public tribute to Cyrus even sparked criticism from one of Ahmadinejad's closest clerical allies, Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi.

Behind all this is the struggle for power between the mullahs and the rising generation of the military and their technocratic allies. An Islamist regime controlled by a military-technocratic elite rather than the clergy is not inconceivable. One example was Pakistan under General Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s. Another is Sudan today under General Omar al-Bashir.

Whatever the outcome, we are sure to witness a long and bitter fight within the ruling establishment. Because neither Ahmadinejad nor his rivals within the regime have anything positive to offer Iranians, both have to maintain the country's state of permanent crisis. And because both seek support from the ever narrowing Khomeinist base, they are almost obliged to pursue a policy of growing confrontation with Western democracies.

WikiLeaks fiasco doesn't embarrass Israel one bit

By Aluf Benn, Haaretz, 1 December 2010

The "Israeli portion" of the US government dispatches that were revealed by the WikiLeaks website revealed almost no new details regarding the exchange of messages between Jerusalem and Washington.

The secret documents sent by the US Embassy in Tel Aviv show that the heads of the Israeli intelligence apparatus and the defense establishment refer to the same talking points when briefing US bureaucrats and congressional delegations as they do when speaking to journalists and Knesset members.

There is no significant discrepancy among the statements made by Defence Minister Ehud Barak, Mossad director Meir Dagan and former Military Intelligence chief Amos Yadlin in speeches, before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, in background talks with media commentators and the diplomatic conversations they held.

Thus Israel has no reason to be embarrassed by the leak, because there are no large gaps between what it said domestically and what it said for public consumption.

Dagan, Yadlin, and Defense Ministry official Amos Gilad are portrayed in the US diplomatic cables as being at the vanguard of Israel's public relations efforts, as trying to convince the Americans that Iran is dangerous and that it does not behoove Washington to supply weapons to Arab states.

US officials are not convinced by these arguments, and as a result they repeat their oft-stated stance.

There are no revelations that proved embarrassing, such as American acquiescence to settlement expansion, which would be antithetical to Washington's official position, or an Israeli statement of support for American dialogue with Hamas.

WikiLeaks did not succeed in penetrating the most sensitive channels of U.S.-Israel relations.

Even after yesterday's revelations, we still do not know what was really said in the meetings between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. President Barack Obama, or between former prime ministers Ehud Olmert and Ariel Sharon during their

talks with former US President George W. Bush, or between Dagan and his counterparts at US intelligence agencies.

Either all concerned read from their talking points during these meetings, or the US-Israel relationship is really handled through avenues that have yet to be revealed.

The low level of classification and the lack of importance that is to be attached to these documents find expression in a conversation between Dagan and a White House aide, as cited in a cable of July 26, 2007.

Seven weeks before the Israel Air Force reportedly destroyed a Syrian nuclear reactor, the US guest broaches the subject of Damascus' claims that Israel is on the verge of attacking Syria. Dagan lies to him.

"Despite the fact that Israel has no intention of attacking, said Dagan, the Syrians are likely to retaliate over even the smallest incident, which could lead to quick escalation," the cable read.

Shin Bet's security methods reminiscent of third-world country

Haaretz Editorial, 25 November 2010

<http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/shin-bet-s-security-methods-reminiscent-of-third-world-country-1.326669>

The Shin Bet security service has come up with a plan, as reported by Zafir Rinat in Haaretz last week, to pave a special road to connect Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's home in Caesarea with Route 2, the coastal highway. The road is supposed to pass through a nature reserve. The plan is an infuriating absurdity.

The nature reserve, a strip of sand dunes between Caesarea and the coastal highway, is one of the last vestiges of the region's dunes. These natural resources have already been gradually destroyed in recent years by massive construction, road paving, the creation of water, sewage and electricity infrastructure for villa neighborhoods, and the building of an earthen embankment to separate Caesarea from the Arab community of Jisr al-Zarqa.

These activities are no different from irreversible planning distortions in other places, but the idea of paving a private road for the prime minister in a nature reserve is particularly scandalous. It's inconceivable for the Shin Bet's security division to exploit its power and present planning groups and the Nature and Parks Authority with a demand based on vague security reasons, which in Israel are very hard to object to.

Since the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, the Shin Bet has adopted sweeping and exaggerated security methods that convey belligerence and decisions known as "covering your ass." Closing transportation routes, removing vehicles to the shoulders of the road when a VIP's car passes, overusing security guards around VIPs' homes in a manner that makes the neighbors' lives miserable - all these

are trappings of a third-world country. It's not clear whether these methods are effective, but it's doubtful whether a properly administered society can accept them.

It's far more absurd when at issue is a private residence that serves only the current prime minister, and even then only on weekends. It's inconceivable that public areas, particularly green ones, will be abandoned to unbridled aggression by the security services. The prime minister, who is in charge of the Shin Bet, must instruct the authors of this dubious idea to shelve it immediately.

Gaza's women: who is defending their rights?

Khaled Abu Toameh, Hudson New York, 23 November 2010

<http://www.hudson-ny.org/1677/gaza-women-rights>

It is not easy to be a woman living under a fundamentalist Islamic regime like the one in the Gaza Strip. Over the past three years, women in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip have been facing a campaign of intimidation and terror that has forced many of them to sit at home and do nothing.

The fact that women are oppressed under radical Islamic regimes is of course very disturbing. But what is even more disturbing is the silence over abuse of women's rights in the Gaza Strip.

Has anyone heard prominent Palestinian spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi come out in public against Hamas's repressive measures against Palestinian women? Where are local and international human rights organizations, especially those that claim to defend rights of women in the Arab and Islamic world?

Has any major media outlet in the West thought of making a documentary about the suffering of women under Hamas?

Or are they so obsessed with everything that Israel does [or does not do] that they prefer to turn a blind eye to what is happening in the Gaza Strip?

Has anyone dared to ask Hamas why sending women to carry out suicide bombings is all right, while it is not ok for them to walk alone on the beach or be seen in public with a man? Have "pro-Palestinian" groups in North America and Europe ever thought of endorsing the case of these women by raising awareness to their plight?

Since Hamas seized full control over the Gaza Strip in 2007, Palestinian women have been deprived of many of basic rights, such as strolling along the beach alone or smoking in public. Under Hamas, female lawyers are not allowed to appear in court unless they are wearing the hijab.

They are also barred from going to male hairdressers. A woman who is seen in public with a man is often stopped by Hamas policemen and questioned about the nature of the relationship between them.

Women in the Gaza Strip who have dared to participate in public political and social events have been repeatedly harassed by the Hamas government. As a result, many of them have been forced to stay at home out of fear for their lives.

Even Palestinian women's groups in the West Bank do not seem to care much about the conditions of women under Hamas. Have any of them thought of organizing demonstrations or campaigns in protest against abuse of women's rights under Hamas?

***Bits and Pieces* Clips from various media in the Middle East and elsewhere**

Imra.org, 1 December 2010: During the third week of November 2010, a total of 1,040 truckloads crossed into Gaza from Israel, carrying 25,303 tons of goods, humanitarian aid and development assistance for Gaza's civilian population. In addition, 1,165,438 liters of Heavy-Duty Diesel fuel were transferred to the Gaza Power Plant, as well as 546 tons of cooking gas and 36,500 liters of gasoline transferred into the Strip. 293 patients and accompanying individuals exited Gaza for medical treatment and 290 international organization staff members entered the Strip.

Imra.org, 1 December 2010: The Lebanese government is increasingly "subordinate" to Iran and Syria, who have been helping Hizbullah rearm, Republican Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, told U.N. special envoy Terje Roed-Larsen.

She was "concerned" U.S. and U.N. efforts in Lebanon were failing to counter Hizbullah's growing power. "Hizbullah, with the help of Iran and Syria, is massively rearming, the Lebanese government is becoming more and more subordinate to Iran and Syria, and the line between the Lebanese Armed Forces and Hizbullah is gradually being erased," she said.