

OPINION and ANALYSIS

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local and international writings on the Middle East**

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Syria between two massacres: Hama's memory endures

Wadah Khanfar, guardian.co.uk, 6 February 2012

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/feb/06/syria-massacres-hama?INTCMP=SRCH>

While Russia and China were using their veto to abort a UN security council resolution against the Syrian regime, the news of a massacre in Homs came thick and fast. In an unprecedented escalation, the Syrian regime sought to exploit the international hesitancy to have a bloody showdown with its opposition.

This came after Syrians had observed for the first time in 30 years the anniversary of the massacre carried out in Hama in February 1982. It is regarded as one of the most gruesome events in Syria's modern history. On that occasion, former president Hafiz al-Assad decimated most of the city of Hama with aerial bombings and tanks. About 30,000 inhabitants perished, while a similar number were detained, tortured and many killed in prisons. All this occurred in the shadow of the cold war and with the cover of the Soviet Union, which was then allied to Hafiz al-Assad's regime.

Last Friday, Syrian protesters rallied under the slogan "forgive us Hama, we apologise"; a clear reference to the abject silence that has overshadowed that massacre throughout the last three decades. Although Hama was an ever-present bleeding wound in the Syrian popular conscience, and a humiliating disgrace that shook their souls, people were prohibited from remembering or mentioning it throughout the entire period of Hafiz al-Assad's rule. When his son assumed power in 2000, many were optimistic that he would at least give some consideration to the victims or reveal the fate of the thousands who were swallowed up in the prisons. But the young president chose to follow in his father's footsteps; he perpetrated another massacre in Hama and many others in Homs and other Syrian cities and towns. However, this time Bashar al-Assad has miscalculated. The Syrian revolution, which has so far sacrificed more than 7,000 dead, will not end unless the regime is overthrown.

Hafiz al-Assad's regime managed to get away with the massacre of Hama in 1982 because of the international silence dictated by the balance of forces during the cold war and a media blackout, which denied the victims a voice and prevented them from presenting the images of their calamity.

It is true that the regional and international balance of power continues to play a negative role in ending the suffering of the Syrian people. But the Syrians – as other Arab people in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen – have now become the most important actors in the flow of events. This would enable them to overcome all external factors in their quest for freedom from tyranny and repression.

Regional and international hesitancy in dealing with Syria stems from two main factors. The first relates to the regional balance of power and what would happen if the regime collapsed. The second is linked to the alternatives that would replace the Ba'ath regime.

On a regional level, Syria represents the cornerstone of a strategic axis that extends from Tehran through Baghdad to Damascus and ends in Beirut. A change of regime in Syria would result in a fundamental change in this regional political configuration and alliances. In such a scenario, Iran would lose an important ally, which would affect its influence in Lebanon and Iraq. Therefore, Iran has a strong interest in defending the Syrian regime until the bitter end.

As for the possible alternatives to the regime, this is another problem confronting the main players in the region. Despite the theoretical state of "war" between Israel and Syria, the Assad regime has maintained quiet borders with Israel since 1967. Israel would face a new situation with unpredictable consequences if the Ba'ath regime collapsed, similar to the new relationship it faces with Egypt.

Analysts and politicians share a number of concerns about change in Syria; most importantly, the security of the religious minorities should the Sunnis become the majority in the new regime.

What would this mean for the Alawites, Druze and Christians? Others have raised the issue of Syria's territorial integrity if a civil war erupts. Still, others highlight the organisational weakness of the Syrian opposition and question whether the Syrian National Council is capable of representing the Syrian masses and speaking on their behalf.

All these fears seem legitimate on the surface, except that they ignore an important truth, which is that the Syrian street is astute and its revolution is well aware of the dangers that surround it. They are very careful not to fall foul of these. A close examination of the popular action in recent months shows that the street has succeeded to largely neutralise the spectre of sectarianism and the militarisation of their revolution.

The Syrian popular consciousness has been able to protect the revolution from the virus of sectarianism and ethnicity by preserving its national character. From day one, the ranks of the opposition included Alawites, Christians, Druze and Sunni Arabs and Kurds. They all stood as one front, demanding freedom and dignity. Despite severe repression, the revolution managed to preserve its predominantly peaceful nature except in the context of defending civilians; this is a role now mainly carried out by the Free Syrian Army. This army consists of individuals and experienced officers who defected from the regime's army. They resolutely preserve the national discourse, and have not resorted to sectarian rhetoric. The Syrian street knows that the language of sectarianism will only serve the interest of the regime and it will divert the revolution from the path of democracy to that of an internal conflict that would end all hopes of living in freedom and dignity.

As for the supposed weakness and organisational ability of the Syrian opposition, there is in fact a huge capacity to organise and instil discipline. The people's co-ordinating committees administer to the people's needs efficiently. They communicate between themselves in all parts of Syria, assigning duties and dealing with logistics in a manner that is now much better than it was in the early days of the revolution. At the same time, the Syrian National Council has begun to organise its ranks abroad, agreeing on a political discourse that is more coherent and co-ordinated. True, the Syrian opposition is less well organised than their counterparts in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen because of the extreme brutality of the Syrian regime, but an acceptable measure of maturity and commitment has been achieved. The street, with its civil and political forces, is able to guide the process of transition to democracy with no less proficiency than the other peoples in the region who have already got rid of their regimes.

The demonstrations that Syria witnessed last Friday ("forgive us Hama, we apologise") show that the Syrian people have resolved to overthrow the regime. It is now for the international community, especially Russia and China, to ask for forgiveness from Hama, Homs, Idlib and the Syrian people. They should also make their choices, because this time the Syrian people have a voice, and it is being heard, with photos of their daily suffering being widely circulated, and memories that never die.

Why whitewashing Hamas is a mistake

Ed Husain, The Arab Street, 11 January 2012

<http://blogs.cfr.org/husain/2012/01/11/whitewashing-hamas-is-a-mistake/>

Last night, I attended an Intelligence Squared Debate in New York. As expected, the debate was spirited and lively. How could it not be? The motion was "The UN Should Admit Palestine as a Full Member State."

As is the norm with almost all debates on the Arab-Israeli conflict, emotions were high and sparks flew. Daniel Levy, an Israeli citizen with a British background, abandoned proverbial British reserve and stiff-upper-lip culture. Levy was impressive, his arguments coherent, and his presentation was passionate, to put it mildly. You can view the full video [here](#).

While I was pleased that Levy and Mustafa Barghouti, a prominent Palestinian politician and peace activist, won the debate, their whitewashing of Hamas left me deeply disturbed. Barghouti cited a recent statement from Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal that allegedly commits to nonviolence. Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniyeh, the Qassam Brigades, and other Hamas leadership figures clearly did not get the memo. They are yet to confirm that Hamas will adopt nonviolence.

Levy was right to highlight that the United States engaged with terrorists during the Sunni awakening in Anbar, and now is in discussions with segments of the Taliban. But to suggest that this means Israel should now engage with Hamas without preconditions is dishonest and insensitive to realities on the ground. Problematic though they are, neither the Taliban nor the Sunni awakening are lobbing rockets into the United States, as Hamas is with Israel. Granted, one way of disarming Hamas is to bring it into the political process. But to do so with eyes closed, to deny Hamas' militant nature, undermines the credibility and honesty of Barghouti and Levy. Worse, it gives the signal to other terrorist organizations that while they conduct a campaign of violence, they can rely on left-leaning opponents (Levy) and peace activists (Barghouti) to advance their political cause by using a single statement disavowing violence (Meshaal) as a fig leaf to obscure Hamas' continued commitment to violence.

Hamas is a terrorist organization. It remains so. It actively seeks Israel's destruction. These facts must be accepted, not ignored, while attempting to disengage Hamas from violence and move it closer, where possible, to other Islamist movements in the region that have opted for nonviolence. Ending Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories and admitting it to the UN can be one way of attempting to end the current cycle of violence.

The Palestinian narrative of Victimhood

Professor Michael Curtis, American Thinker, 29 January 2012

http://www.americanthinker.com/printpage/?url=http://www.americanthinker.com/articles/..../2012/01/the_palestinian_narrative_of_victimhood.html

A debatable aspect of modern thought is the thesis that the full truth is unknowable and that the interpretation of historical events and present behavior is a "narrative" reflecting the interests of the group that creates it. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the narrative created by the Palestinians and their supporters -- a narrative which is used as the basis of an ideological campaign aimed at condemning the State of Israel and undermining its moral fabric.

The building blocks of this narrative are the "original sin" of the creation of Israel, the Nakba (catastrophe) of 1948; the belief in Israeli responsibility for violence and the various wars in the Middle East; the conviction that Israel deliberately created the Palestinian refugee situation by preventing their return to the homeland; and the supposed indignities and injustices done to Palestinians who have become victims of Israeli aggression and colonialism.

All of the elements in this false narrative have become instrumental in the campaign to challenge the legitimacy of the State of Israel, and even to call for its elimination. But it is the last point, the concept of Palestinian victimhood, which has fueled international support for the Palestinian cause. It accounts for the obsessive concentration on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by so many

who view it as the world's most important and dangerous encounter, disregarding the millions killed or oppressed in other countries today.

The narrative of victimhood uses myths and symbols as well as a controversial interpretation of events and actions. Its language at times becomes wildly extreme. Palestinians are termed the "new Jews" suffering a "new Holocaust." Jews are the new Nazis. Excessive rhetoric and idiosyncratic judgments of this kind are rarely, if ever, applied to the truly despotic and authoritarian regimes in the world that commit crimes against humanity and violations of human rights that are not censured.

The narrative denies Jewish historic national identity. The Palestinians have gone so far in efforts to bolster the argument against Jewish connection to the land as to destroy the archeological evidence of the ancient kingdom of Judea. Nor do they accept the Western Wall in Jerusalem as a Jewish historic site.

The formulation of the Palestinian narrative of victimhood is pernicious in a double-sense. It poisons the attitude to Israel and prevents any kind of accommodation or possible negotiation between Israel and the Palestinians to reach a peaceful settlement of the long conflict. It also reinforces the Palestinians' rejection to take positive action to help resolve their problems and becomes an excuse for the failure to develop an infrastructure for their own society or to take advantage of opportunities to found a sovereign state of their own -- opportunities going back as far as the Peel Commission of 1937.

Equally important is the fact that Israel is the political canary warning of the presence of poisonous political traits that intimate impending danger to the world, particularly to the United States and Western democracies. When Western critics concur in the validity of the Palestinian narrative, they take on the stance of moral relativism. They become appeasers with a mindset that has as its outcome an inability or refusal to defend the West against contemporary threats and the clear and present danger to its culture and way of life. At its worst, this leads to the view that the West is in decline, that the "war on terror" is unwinnable or should not be fought, or that the West is to be eternally found guilty for its past colonial empires and activity.

The world has been through this before. Those who ardently accept the Palestinian narrative of victimhood are like the people who willingly believed the Nazi and Stalinist narratives, equally blind to the realities of those horrific totalitarian regimes. Some of those people were well-meaning, but they were of the kind that Lenin once called "political idiots."

To gain a sense of how events are manipulated to create the Palestinian narrative, it's useful to look at some particular examples. Rachel Corrie, who worked with the International Solidarity Movement, was accidentally killed in Gaza in 2003 by an Israeli bulldozer that she was deliberately trying to block. She quickly became a symbol of heroic defiance against Israel. The narrative has penetrated the literary, artistic, and theatrical worlds. In her eight-minute play, "Seven Jewish Children," produced in London in 2009, Caryl Churchill builds the plot around the alleged bad treatment by Israelis of Palestinian babies, evoking the historic blood libel charge against Jews.

The Palestinian narrative has benefited from a fanciful, romantic presentation of the superior virtue of Palestinians, regardless of their actual behavior. In this fairy tale, the Palestinians are seen as the embodiment of "the wretched of the earth," the phrase used by Franz Fanon to justify the Algerian struggle against France.

By proclaiming their lack of human rights and their victimhood, the Palestinians have been able to enlist political, economic, military, diplomatic, and propaganda support from individuals and groups who are sympathetic to those they see as subjugated. They have become the main symbol of the oppressed of the world, to the misfortune of Israel.

Using Jews as scapegoats supposedly responsible for most of the problems of the world is a trope of traditional anti-Semitism. By tortuous logic, Israel has become the scapegoat for racism, oppression, and colonialism in the contemporary world. Jewish nationalism is identified as imperialist and racist, while Palestinian nationalism is the nationalism of "the oppressed."

The Palestinians face real problems, as does Israel. It is time to state forthrightly that the Palestinian narrative as presently conceived, with its inherent anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, does not lead to equity for the Palestinians or to steps towards peace. Peace between Israel and the Palestinians can be achieved only when the Palestinians abandon their fallacious narrative and are willing to accept the existence and legitimacy of a Jewish state.

America's red lines in the sand on Iran

Richard Cohen, the Washington Post, 7 February 2012

http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/americas-red-lines-in-the-sand-on-iran/2012/02/06/gIQA6W5uQ_story.html

There are three red lines when it comes to Iran's nuclear program. The first is the moment when Iran tunnels so deeply underground that Israeli bombs will be incapable of doing real damage. The second is when the tunneling goes even deeper, and the United States' "bunker buster" bombs will be insufficient. And the third — well, that has already passed. It is the conviction that the current Iranian regime will never let Israel live in peace.

That third red line is of utmost importance. It explains why Israel is more likely than not to strike Iran, even if it triggers a conflagration that involves U.S. as well as Israeli targets — and shoots the price of oil through the ceiling. That last may cause even steadfast supporters of Israel to wonder if a little Jewish state is worth \$15-a-gallon gas. For Israel, that's a small price to pay.

The fact is that the Iranian regime is doubly unstable. It faces considerable domestic opposition, but it also can be astonishingly violent. In addition to the attempt on the life of the Saudi ambassador to Washington, Iran had its own former prime minister stabbed to death in a Paris hotel room, allegedly was behind the bombing of a Buenos Aires Jewish center (85 dead) and is blamed for the bombing of Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in which 19 U.S. airmen were killed. This is a dangerous regime.

The Obama administration operates as if these incidents are departures from the norm. The Israelis see them as the norm — and more to come. President Obama wants the Iranian regime to turn its nuclear sword into a plowshare. The Israelis would welcome such a development, but they would not trust it. The regime they know will, sooner or later, revert to its nuclear weapons program. It's in its DNA.

In his State of the Union address, Obama was pretty clear about U.S. intentions: "Let there be no doubt: America is determined to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, and I will take no options off the table to achieve that goal." The next sentence had a different, more forgiving, tone: "But a peaceful resolution of this issue is still possible, and far better, and if Iran changes course and meets its obligations, it can rejoin the community of nations."

This — the vaunted carrot — is startlingly naive. Where is the evidence to suggest that the men who now run Iran will slap their foreheads, say *zowie* (in Farsi) and conclude that they were wrong to pursue a nuclear weapons program? More likely, they will conclude that North Korea survives because it defied the United States and continued to develop nuclear weapons. And Iran will further conclude that if it had had a nuke in 1980, Saddam Hussein would never have invaded

— leading to a war that lasted eight years and cost Iran as many as 1 million lives. Israelis are not the only ones who say, “Never again.”

The Obama administration announced the Iranian attempt on a Saudi diplomat in Washington — and then did nothing about it. Washington seems neither angry nor the least bit annoyed. This is a serious miscalculation — reasonableness gone amok. The lesson for Iran is stall and prevaricate, because Washington lacks the stomach to be ugly. In the view of the Saudis, it even abandoned Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a dictator but more pro-American than the authoritarian regime that's likely going to replace him.

The real danger for Israel and the Middle East in general is not an Iranian nuclear attack on Israel — although the use of a proxy to do something like that cannot be ruled out. (How to retaliate against a terrorist organization?) Instead, the danger is that Israel will lose its nuclear monopoly, and Iran can loose Hezbollah (50,000 or so rockets) from the north and Hamas (even more rockets) from the south on Israel. A nuclear Iran would probably mean a nuclear Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia as well. An increasingly unstable Middle East would become even more so. There's no sleep here for anyone.

The ultimate remedy is Iranian regime change. This is not as improbable as it sounds. The Tehran regime is hardly popular and will become even less so as economic sanctions bite even harder. In the meantime, Obama must ensure that Iran perceives no daylight between the United States and Israel, and no chance that Washington will become naive about Iran's intentions. This looming crisis is not only about Israel. It's about America, too. There are more red lines coming.

NOTE: The views expressed in certain articles are not necessarily those of the SAZF

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