

OPINION and ANALYSIS

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**A selection of some of the more challenging and thought-provoking
local and international writings on the Middle East**

<http://www.sazionfed.co.za>

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Arab Christians are fleeing all across the Middle East. This flight has been primarily due to local conflicts and the rise of Islamic militancy, and the Palestinian Christians are no exception to this trend. The lone exception however is the State of Israel, the only place in the entire region where the community of Arab Christians is growing and where Arab Christians are afforded their democratic rights.

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Hamas may face the worst possible combination of elements. It is not a government and does not govern a state. It faces a Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt that will have huge challenges meeting the needs of the Egyptian people; and it must also cope with the almost impossible problems of ruling Gaza.

The real root of the Christian Exodus

David Parsons, Jerusalem Post, 5 May 2012 (Parsons is media director for the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem)

<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-EdContributors/Articel.aspx?id=268926>

With his recent segment for *60 Minutes*, CBS News reporter Bob Simon has once again stoked the perennial debate over why so many native Palestinian Christians have been leaving the Holy Land in recent decades. Sadly, he addressed this important issue with a very superficial brand of journalism.

The report relied mainly on one local Palestinian cleric – notorious Israel-basher Rev. Mitri Raheb – to single out the “Israeli occupation” as the scapegoat for this Christian flight. There was no need to dig deeper, since Simon knew the report was sure to be a sensation from the moment Israeli ambassador Dr. Michael Oren caught wind of the production and intervened with his bosses at CBS News.

If Bob Simon had truly wanted to know why Arab Christians have been fleeing in droves from Palestinian areas, he should have asked those émigrés now living in Toronto, Sydney and Santiago. Because that is where the majority of Palestinian Christians now reside – in dispersed communities in Canada, Chile, Australia, Germany, the United States and elsewhere.

The disturbing truth is that more than 60 percent of the Arab Christians born in Palestinian areas over the past several generations now live abroad. Yet the same holds true for Lebanese Christians, as a similar 60% of their beleaguered community now live in foreign lands.

Indeed, there has been a widening Christian exodus from all the surrounding Arab countries, with Iraq’s ancient Assyrian Christian community collapsing from 1.5 million to as few as 250,000 since the Second Gulf War commenced in 2003. The Coptic Church in Egypt is also losing tens of thousands of parishioners in the wake of the Arab Spring.

So it is indisputable that Arab Christians are fleeing all across the Middle East, and surely the Israeli occupation is not to blame. Rather, this flight has been primarily due to local conflicts and the rise of Islamic militancy, as noted by Ambassador Oren, and the Palestinian Christians are no exception to this trend. The lone exception, in fact, happens to be the State of Israel, the only place in the entire region where the community of Arab Christians is growing and where Arab Christians are afforded their democratic rights.

Still, some Palestinian clerics insist that Muslims and Christians would co-exist in perfect harmony if not for the Jews and their settlements. That, sadly, is a living portrait of a people in denial. How else to explain that Palestinian Christian flight from the Holy Land predates the “occupation” by decades?

For instance, the last British census in 1948 recorded 29,000 Arab Christians living in Jerusalem, while the first Israeli census in eastern Jerusalem in 1967 found only 11,000. That means two-thirds of the Arab Christian population had fled during the 19 years of the Jordanian occupation of east Jerusalem.

The real root of the current exodus actually lies in the historic interplay between

Christians, Jews and Muslims in the Middle East ever since the Islamic conquests began in the seventh century. The region's Christians and Jews became dhimmis – suppressed minorities living under Muslim dominance. They could keep their faith but had to accept second-class status. To survive, both communities adopted a code of silence which dictated that they never challenge the system or say anything bad about Islam in public.

This system of dhimmitude basically held until modern times. The Crusades may have brought temporary relief for some Christians, but only terror for the Jews.

When Ottoman rule over the Middle East began to wane, the dynamic finally began to change. The Great Powers of Europe moved into the region, each concluding deals with the Sultanate in Istanbul to provide protection to various imperiled Christian denominations. Western missionaries also brought with them schools, hospitals and other modern institutions.

With their better education and job skills, Arab Christians became more mobile and many began to migrate to the West to escape the prison of Islam. Thus the modern-day Christian exodus began.

Meanwhile, the Zionist movement arose with a dream of restoring Jewish sovereignty back in their ancient homeland. Israel's emergence in 1948 challenged the system of Muslim dominance over Christians and Jews, an achievement the Arab world has never truly accepted.

For many Christians in the Middle East, the rebirth of Israel actually stands as a light and model of freedom from Muslim tyranny. But for Palestinian Christians, the conflict that seeks to destroy the Jewish state has been too close for comfort. They are powerless to end it and struggling to survive.

Thus many Palestinian Christian leaders have taken to patriotically waving the flag of Palestinian nationalism higher than even their Muslim neighbors, in the hope such loyalty to the cause will safeguard their flocks. They rail against the Israeli occupation and the settlements as the reason for their dwindling presence. The checkpoints and security barrier may create hardships for them, but they are not the core reason why proud Christian families who have weathered many turbulent centuries here are now pulling up roots.

We must all understand that they are employing an ancient survival mechanism ingrained through centuries of Muslim oppression. Unable to name the real culprit, Palestinian Christians often deflect Muslim anger away from themselves by directing it at the Jews. Meantime, Ambassador Oren is giving voice to the things they cannot say.

Egypt's misplaced fury

Sam Ser, The Times of Israel, 27 April 2012

<http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/egypts-misplaced-fury/>

Israel's ties with Egypt went up in flames this week, like so much natural gas burning in a sabotaged pipeline. Indeed, Egypt has sabotaged its ties with Israel – and the blowback will leave scars.

The sudden announcement of the cancellation of the deal to supply Israel with Egyptian natural gas had officials in both Jerusalem and Cairo rushing to “explain” away the thing as just some ho-hum business dispute. But the political implications quickly became glaringly apparent.

On the face of it, the Egyptians were merely frustrated by the economic conditions of the deal, as rising prices in the natural gas market have made the 2005 contract look more and more like a bargain for Israel and, therefore, an embarrassment for Egypt.

It was convenient, also, for Egyptians to blame their frustrations on the toppled government of Hosni Mubarak. After all, corruption seems likely in a pact that created instant fortunes for Mubarak's sons and cronies. (For the record, the folks on our side of the deal don't look like boy scouts, either.)

But even a bad deal can still be good in the end. This one brought Egypt billions of dollars from a dependable client on its own back porch. And the “losses” that Cairo politicians had originally bemoaned were soon mitigated when the Egyptians strong-armed Israel into a nearly 50% price hike.

It would be reasonable to assume, then, that Egypt could have worked out a compromise with Israel, if only a modicum of diplomatic good will were flowing together with all those billions of cubic meters of natural gas through the Arish-Ashkelon pipeline.

Alas, there wasn't.

If a long list of slights and insults – inaction in the face of Hamas arming itself through tunnels in Sinai, officially endorsed blood libels against Israel, public disdain for a peace partner that selflessly helped Egypt save water, grow more crops and lose less livestock to disease, etc. – were not enough to prove that point, then perhaps another incident this week will.

During a presidential election campaign already marked, in part, by candidates who use their anti-Israel stances to gain the public's trust, Egypt's military leader Muhammad Hussein Tantawi unleashed a threat to “break the leg” of anyone (read, “Israeli”) who approaches Egypt's northern border.

Field Marshall Tantawi, the head of Egypt's Supreme Council of Armed Forces and the country's de facto leader, was enraged that Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman had had the audacity to suggest, in a letter to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, that the escalating lawlessness in Sinai and chaos in Cairo posed a threat to Israel “much more disturbing than the Iranian problem.”

Tantawi's bluster, like the fury that Egyptian politicians displayed against Israel this week, is misplaced.

Egypt should be rallying against the threat posed by armed Bedouin gangs that sabotage the natural gas pipeline, demand protection money from Sinai businesses and carry out bombings of tourist sites along the Red Sea. Egypt should rise up to thwart the incursion of Islamist terrorist groups into Sinai, whose attacks against Israel threaten the stability of the peace treaty. Egypt should marshal its forces to seal off the southern border – across which have poured not only the tens of thousands of African migrants who have flooded Cairo and snuck into Israel, but teams of Sudanese assassins sent by the government to kill Mubarak. Egypt should be vigilant about the flow of weapons and drugs from Libya, to the west.

It isn't, though. Instead, Egypt treats as an enemy the country that buys its natural gas, patronizes its resorts, improves its farms and establishes factories in its employment-starved towns. Egyptians regularly burn Israeli flags in the streets, so setting fire to a lucrative energy deal this week must have seemed just a minor step. But now it will have to sit in the ashes.

Is a Palestinian revolt against Mahmoud Abbas brewing?

Adrian Blomfield, The Telegraph (UK), 4 May 2012

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/palestinianauthority/9244982/Analysis-Is-a-Palestinian-revolt-against-Mahmoud-Abbas-brewing.html>

It was meant to be a day of catharsis and rejoicing, marking the fulfilment of a visionary government strategy to end years of debilitating political cleavage and create a formidable platform to challenge Israel's occupation.

But instead of going to the polls as they were promised this Friday, Palestinians are remaining at home, betrayed once again by bickering leaders whose quarrels have contributed to an increasingly dangerous sense of malaise across the West Bank and Gaza.

For many ordinary Palestinians, the failure to hold legislative elections as promised represents the culmination of a deeply disappointing year in which politicians had sharply heightened their expectations only repeatedly to dash them.

Last September, ecstatic crowds gathered in the centre of Ramallah, the West Bank's de-facto capital, to celebrate the submission of a formal Palestinian application for statehood before the United Nations.

The request was seen as a moment of glorious defiance, the belated repudiation of the Middle East peace process that, for Palestinians, had been bankrupted by Israel's persistent refusal to halt Jewish settlement construction on their land.

But an even more important moment had come some months earlier when the two main Palestinian factions, Fatah and Hamas, confounded expectations by announcing that they would end their differences and reconcile.

The two movements had fought a short but brutal civil war in 2007 that had left the Palestinians geographically and politically riven. Gaza fell under the control of the Islamists of Hamas while the West Bank remained in the hands of their secular rivals Fatah, led by Mahmoud Abbas, the moderate president of the Palestinian Authority.

The schism was a scar on the Palestinian consciousness, with many in both territories arguing that a people so divided could never hope to confront Israel or lay the ground for the creation of a viable Palestinian state.

Fatah-Hamas reconciliation, polls showed, was the single most important issue for most Palestinians, outstripping even peace talks with Israel and the many perceived injustices of the occupation.

By presenting the rapprochement between the two factions, which was supposed to culminate in elections on Friday, as an integral part of his statehood bid, Mr Abbas appeared finally to have convinced his people that he had a grand design to fulfil their aspirations.

Instead, both initiatives have floundered. Faced with muted international support and outright hostility from the United States and Israel, Mr Abbas has essentially shelved his UN bid and no movement is likely until after the American elections in November, observers believe.

Political reconciliation has likewise stalled. Neither Hamas nor Fatah can agree how to share power in an interim government or to merge their respective security forces.

With Friday's election deadline passing, Palestinians are growing increasingly disillusioned. An opinion poll published last month indicated that support for Hamas and Fatah has fallen to historic lows, with 50 per cent of respondents saying they would vote for neither party were an election actually to be held.

Their frustration has only been compounded by the Arab Spring, which has left many Palestinians feeling they have been left behind by the democratising tide washing across the region.

Palestinians are keenly aware that while Egypt and others have discovered that real elections are chaotic and often violent affairs, they are being given a genuine choice at the ballot box for the first time.

Not only have Palestinians had that option ripped away from them, they also have a leader who has essentially been in power unconstitutionally for more than three years. Mr Abbas's term officially expired in January, 2009.

Fatah and Hamas have both blamed Israel for their woes but for many Palestinians such protests have a hint of hollowness about them -- and their leaders are aware that popular resentment towards them is reaching potentially dangerous levels.

"The embers of discontent are there and the authorities in the West Bank and Gaza are aware of this, but their reaction has been one of repression," said George Giacaman, a prominent Palestinian political analyst.

Fearful of the precedent set by the Arab Spring, Mr Abbas has been accused of responding to public frustration by becoming increasingly authoritarian.

In the past six weeks, according to the Palestinian human rights network Al Haq, nine bloggers and journalists have been slung into prison on charges of offending public officials, often Mr Abbas himself.

Ismat Abdul-Khaleq, a university lecturer in the West Bank, spent a fortnight in jail last month accused of defaming Mr Abbas by allegedly describing him as a "traitor" on her Facebook page. She has since been released on bail.

Jamal Abu Rihan, a blogger, has been in prison for the past month after he created a Facebook page with the title "The People want an end to Corruption", a slogan that echoed the rallying cry of the Arab Spring: "The People want the downfall of the regime".

In another sign of intolerance towards press freedoms, nine news websites supporting one of Mr Abbas's rivals in Fatah have been blocked in the West Bank on the orders of the Palestinian Authority's attorney general.

The policy has caused disquiet among more progressive politicians in the West Bank. Hanan Ashrawi, the veteran Palestinian leader, took the rare step of making her opposition known to the public.

"Palestine should not promote censorship, whether on the internet or in other forms of communication," she said in a statement.

"The blocking of Palestinian news websites and other measures that prevent access to information and curb freedom of expression are in complete contradiction to the principles enshrined in the Basic Law."

Palestinians may complain that such warnings are not being heeded, but there are doubts that they are ready to take to the streets in the same way as their Egyptian brethren.

Even so, an increasing number of observers are asking how long their patience can last. Apathy and indifference may remain the prevailing mood among the majority, but faced with a government whose legitimacy is being steadily eroded by inaction and division Palestinians are quite possibly closer to erupting against their own leadership than ever before.

Why this round of Iran nuclear talks is different

David Patrikarakos, Haaretz, 4 May 2012

<http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/why-this-round-of-iran-nuclear-talks-is-different-1.428167>

Several years ago in Paris, a French diplomat told me what he believed to be the secret of effective diplomacy. The crux of the matter, it seemed, was neither tact nor strategy, but stamina. "You just push the same message repeatedly in the hope that it eventually gets through," he said. "It's not scientific, but then, neither is politics."

Negotiations with Iran have thus far severely tested the maxim of that most urbane of Frenchmen. On August 14, it will be 10 years to the day that the slippery opposition group the People's Mujahedin of Iran publicly revealed full details about an unfinished uranium enrichment plant at Natanz and an unfinished heavy water reactor at Arak, thus beginning the Iranian nuclear crisis. (Though, as several diplomats confided to me, "everyone" knew that the real source of the information was Israel's Mossad).

Despite endless international calls to halt uranium enrichment, Iran has spent the past decade pressing on. In 2002 Iran could not enrich uranium. It can now do so to a level of at least 20 percent, which involves most of the energy required to enrich uranium to weapons-grade levels - 80 percent or above (weapons manufacturers consider 93 percent ideal). The hard work has been done. As a senior Iranian diplomat told me in Vienna a while back: "Iran is now the master of enrichment, the West will just have to accept it."

So the omens for the talks between Iran and the P5 +1 (France, Russia, China, Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom) in Istanbul on April 14 weren't good. Iran's conservatives argued that the West was in terminal decline and incapable of imposing its will on their country.

In an April 8 editorial titled "Lessons from the past for the April talks," the conservative Iranian newspaper Kayhan claimed Washington had backed down from every "red line" it had drawn since 2002. Highlighting the admittedly very real problems - both logistically and politically - that military action would entail, it declared Washington "completely out of options." There was, it concluded, no need to compromise.

But the trouble with confronting the world's remaining superpower is that it can have consequences. From 2006 to 2010, Russia and China, both eager to safeguard their own commercial interests, diluted four rounds of UN sanctions on Iran. Enraged, Washington decided to unilaterally target Iran's energy sector (which provides about 80 percent of the government's revenues) and to isolate the country from the international financial system. Banking sanctions in particular have made it difficult for Tehran to do business in dollars, forcing it to rely on third-party institutions of varying reliability to undertake transactions on its behalf. Meanwhile, European Union moves to stop buying Iranian oil (to be offset by increased oil production from Saudi Arabia and the UAE) will also hit hard. Now throw in 30 years of domestic financial incompetence, and it is easy to see why Iran's economy is facing a slow strangulation.

For years, Tehran was able to sell its nuclear program to the Iranian people as a totem of national achievement under threat from the "imperialist" West. "Our people want nuclear power," said Iran's former chief nuclear negotiator, Hassan Rowhani, in 2004, "even more so because the United States says we can't have it." President Bush's constant talk of regime change did more to solidify support for the mullahs than anything since the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. "I don't like the mullahs, but I'll fight to protect my country," was a refrain I heard again and again in Tehran and Isfahan and Shiraz.

But those days are gone. Iranians now care less about nuclear centrifuges than they do about jobs. Ahmadinejad came to power in 2005 promising to end corruption and put Iran's oil money on people's dinner tables. He did neither. His fraudulent 2009 election "win" only further damaged his credibility and shattered Tehran's already faction-ridden elite. Several of his numerous political opponents, notably former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, now routinely use the nuclear issue to attack Ahmadinejad, blaming his diplomatic crassness for Iran's increasing isolation and suffering. "Wherever Iran finds a loophole [around the sanctions]," Rafsanjani exasperatedly told Iran's Assembly of Experts last year, "the Western powers block it." The nuclear program has transformed from a national rallying cry to a political hand grenade; what was once the regime's strength has become its weakness.

The price Iran is now paying for its program threatens to destabilize or even destroy the regime - the one thing the mullahs fear above all else. So while Iran's journalists busy themselves with hubris, its politicians now worry about nemesis. When Iran and the P5 +1 met last month, the talks, while yielding nothing substantial, were universally hailed as positive. Iran's chief negotiator, Saeed Jalili, uncharacteristically described the discussions as "very successful."

It was a signal. The last time the Iranians were this scared was shortly after Washington had conquered Baghdad, in mid-2003. Four months later Iran agreed to suspend uranium enrichment while it waited for promised talks to "resolve all outstanding issues" with the Europeans. Those talks never came (without U.S. involvement, I was told, there was simply nothing of substance they could offer Iran).

Ten years on, the P5 +1's stamina is not in doubt; its message remains the same: The nuclear program in its current form is unacceptable; and now, as in 2003, Iran needs to compromise, and may be ready to. With a round of talks in Baghdad scheduled for next month, an opportunity has arisen once again and it must be grasped - from both sides. We cannot wait another 10 years for the next one.

Hamas and the Arab Spring

Elliott Abrams, Council on Foreign Relations, 2 May 2012

<http://blogs.cfr.org/abrams/2012/05/02/hamas-and-the-arab-spring/>

It would be logical to assess that Hamas (a part of the Muslim Brotherhood) must be a winner from the "Arab Spring." The various revolts have brought Islamists into power in several Arab countries, and most importantly the Muslim Brotherhood has attained a predominant position in Egypt's parliament and may win the presidency in the forthcoming election.

But that assessment would be premature. For one thing, Hamas has lost its long-time headquarters in Damascus due to the revolt in Syria. Those who worked there have scattered: Khaled Meshal (head of the Hamas politburo) to Doha, Qatar, and others to Cairo, Istanbul, and elsewhere. As a result, more power is centered in Gaza. An Israeli newspaper story this week carried this headline: "Meshal loses control of Hamas military

wing as authority moves to Gaza.” Hamas is obviously undergoing significant internal strains. Moreover, to the extent that all of its key leaders are in Gaza they are all vulnerable to Israeli retaliation for any acts of terror they authorize.

This also means that the key leaders will be involved in governing Gaza, rather than sitting comfortably in exile plotting. Polls taken earlier this year found “a significant decline in the popularity of Hamas in the Gaza Strip and a decrease in the positive evaluation of the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip....” and there is little reason to think this will change. Why? The same poll found that “73% say there is corruption in the PA institutions in the West Bank while only 62% say there is corruption in the institutions of the dismissed government in the Gaza Strip.” One of the reasons Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections was the reputation of Fatah for corruption. Now Hamas is seen as almost equally corrupt.

Another news item reminds us that governing is difficult: “Blame game defers solution to Gaza’s energy crisis,” the *Ma’an* story says. The difficult relationship between Hamas and Egypt is the culprit, and Egyptian authorities are more concerned about law and order in the Sinai, their own relations with Sinai Bedouin smugglers, and the lawlessness of smuggling through Hamas’s tunnels, than with energy supplies to Gaza.

Perhaps this will change once a new president is elected, but I doubt that Egyptian nationalism and Egypt’s concern about the Sinai will disappear. According to the *New York Times*, the Egyptian Brotherhood is pressuring Hamas to moderate its extremist views and cooperate with Fatah, which rules in the West Bank. While Hamas might have expected warm support once the Brotherhood came to power in Egypt, the *Times* story suggests it may not be forthcoming:

“Now we have to deal with the Palestinian parties as an umbrella for both of them, and we have to stand at an equal distance from each,” said Reda Fahmy, a Brotherhood leader who oversees its Palestinian relations and is now chairman of the Arab affairs committee in Egypt’s upper house of Parliament. “Any movement of the size of the Muslim Brotherhood, when it is in the opposition it is one thing and then when it comes to power it is something completely different.”

What has changed is clear: once upon a time all the branches of the Brotherhood were in opposition to regimes in power, supporting each other’s struggles materially, politically, and rhetorically. Now some govern states, as is the case in Tunisia and Egypt, and a gap may grow between them and those whose main concern is fighting Israel. Hamas may face the worst possible combination of elements: it is not a government and does not govern a state, it faces a Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt that will have huge challenges meeting the needs of the Egyptian people, and it must at the same time cope with the almost impossible problems of ruling Gaza. The poll mentioned above says that only 31 percent of Palestinians living in Gaza give their Hamas rulers a positive evaluation. That number is more likely to decline than to rise. Hamas is one of the losers from the Arab Spring.

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