

OPINION and ANALYSIS

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local and international writings on the Middle East

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Toppled Palestinian ‘Landmark’ symbolised hate

Jonathan S Tobin, Commentary Magazine, 10 January 2011

<http://www.commentarymagazine.com/blogs/index.php/tobin/386124>

It says something about the way much of the world views the rights of Jews to live in Jerusalem that the erection of new homes in parts of that city is considered such a terrible provocation. Thus, the new housing project in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of the city is generally reported as an outrageous provocation, even though the only reason this area is usually described as “predominantly Arab” or, more outrageously, “traditionally Arab” is because from 1949 to 1967, when this location was illegally occupied by Jordan, Jews were prohibited from living there.

As to whether it is wise for Israel to allow Jews to live in all parts of their capital, that is something that Israelis can debate, though redividing Jerusalem and returning those parts handed over to the Palestinian Arabs to a Jew-free condition seems like a curious way to advance the cause of peace and mutual coexistence. But let’s leave aside the question of Jewish rights or even the strategic wisdom of putting more Jews in these neighborhoods. Let us instead examine the Palestinian claim and what it represents.

When the *New York Times* reported the fact that ground was being broken for the new housing in Sheikh Jarrah, what it did was to focus on the destruction of what it claimed was a Palestinian “landmark.” What landmark, you ask? Was it a medieval structure that in some way represents the longstanding Arab presence in the city or its culture? No. The building that was toppled to make way for some new apartment houses was just a large home that was built in the 1930s as a villa for one of the most notorious figures in 20th-century history: Haj Amin al-Husseini, the mufti of Jerusalem. Husseini may never have spent much time in what eventually was renamed the Shepherd Hotel, but he did make his mark on the region by inspiring bloody pogroms against the Jews then living in the country. After the outbreak of World War II, he joined forces with the Nazis, meeting with Hitler and then spending the war making Arabic propaganda broadcasts for the Axis and successfully recruiting Muslims (mostly Bosnians) to serve in a special SS brigade. He was promised that, in the event of a German victory, he would be made the puppet ruler of what is now Israel, where he would assist the Nazis in the massacre of the several hundred thousand Jews who lived there.

That a home that was in any way connected to Husseini or any other Nazi would be considered a landmark whose demolition inspired statements of sadness from contemporary Palestinian leaders like Saeb Erekat speaks volumes about the nature of Palestinian politics. That the intended home of the man who dreamed of wiping out every last Jew in Jerusalem is coming down to make room for Jewish homes is certainly ironic. One needn’t necessarily agree with the politics of Daniel Luria, a representative of Ateret Cohanim, the group that promotes Jewish building throughout Jerusalem, to appreciate what he termed the “beautiful poetic justice” of this event.

The real danger of delegitimizing Israel on campus

By David Bernstein, JTA, January 5, 2011

There is a serious threat facing Israel's long-term standing in this country resulting from a prolonged campaign to delegitimize the Jewish state on campus. But it's probably not what you think.

What commonly incurs Jewish indignation are the more blatant anti-Israel spectacles. They range from "apartheid walls" -- barriers erected by anti-Israel students to signify the Israeli security fence -- to mock security checkpoints, from boycotts and divestment initiatives aimed at impeding university investments in Israel to hostile anti-Israel protests such as last year's disruption orchestrated by students at the University of California, Irvine, of Israeli U.S. Ambassador Michael Oren's speech.

While these hostile activities unquestionably are meant to portray Israel as an oppressive and illegitimate state, such inflammatory acts do not resonate with the vast majority on campus. In recent focus groups conducted by The Israel Project, a diverse set of students was nearly unified in its opposition to boycotts and other such tactics, regardless of the students' feelings about the Jewish state.

The use of these tactics is certainly growing, but support for them is not.

In the fall semester of 2010, a watered-down resolution calling on Princeton University to sell non-Israeli hummus alongside the Sabra brand was defeated overwhelmingly because it smacked of a boycott. At Columbia, a mock checkpoint, where volunteers were blindfolded and forced to kneel at "gunpoint" in front of students dressed as barking Israeli soldiers, failed to resonate with more than the radical fringe of the student body.

The real danger is that the present campus environment in the United States may adversely affect the future of U.S. support for Israel. Americans may never become Israel haters, as we see in parts of Europe -- hostility has been mainstreamed there, potentially affecting diplomatic and economic ties with Israel, and London has been dubbed the "Mecca of de-legitimization" by the Israeli think tank Re'ut -- but they may cease to be Israel lovers.

Last fall, the student Democrats at a prominent university wrote to the pro-Israel student leadership of the university that they had adopted "a policy of non-endorsement on Israel-Palestine issues." The student Democrats explained that there was too much division in their own ranks to continue to co-sponsor pro-Israel student activities.

Such a letter may not make your blood boil like an apartheid wall, but it is far more ominous.

For decades the pro-Israel community has enjoyed bipartisan support for Israel in the USA. Congress members from both parties typically vote overwhelmingly in Israel's favor. This support influences the actions of the White House, which in turn acts to protect Israel from the scourge of hostility it faces elsewhere in the international community. The US provides billions of dollars each year to Israel in security assistance, which gives Israel a qualitative security advantage over its enemies.

If, however, the student Democrats at this particular school reflect a larger trend, it is quite possible that Democratic support in the next generation is facing serious erosion. Worrisome signs already are afoot.

While young people and particularly mainstream Democrats exposed to hostility on campus may not now or ever join the movement to boycott Israel, over time they may feel less sympathetic toward the Jewish state and more ambivalent about the special relationship between the U.S. and Israel. When these young leaders become the next generation of Democratic Party representatives, it may become much tougher to garner those large bipartisan majorities.

Israel depends on support from both parties, especially considering the rapid political cycling giving each party short-lived turns at power. Israel can ill afford to become a one-party cause.

The struggle on campus, then, is to assure that the next generation of American political leadership is as supportive of Israel as the last one. In a world turning ever more unfriendly to Israel, it is more important than ever that we do all that we can now to ensure that American support, at least, remains strong into the future.

While it is important to oppose walls and boycotts, it is far more critical that we create the kind of environment on campus that will sustain two-party support into the future. We have our work cut out for us.

Gabrielle Giffords, the American Congresswoman who was shot on January 8th, was the first American Jewish congresswoman.

She wrote this in 2006 in the Arizona Jewish Post on 27 October 2006:

My grandfather, Akiba Hornstein, was the son of a Lithuanian rabbi. My grandfather changed his name to Giff Giffords for reasons of anti-Semitism and moved to Southern Arizona from New York more than a half century ago. In the 1940s, he founded my family's tire and automotive business, El Campo Tire, which grew into a successful and thriving business for 50 years, which I ran for several years before serving in the Arizona Legislature.

Growing up, my family's Jewish roots and tradition played an important role in shaping my values. The women in my family served as strong role models for me as a girl. In my family, if you want to get something done, you take it to the women relatives! Like my grandmother, I am a lifetime member of Hadassah and now a member of Congregation Chaverim.

When I served in the State Senate in Arizona, I had the opportunity to visit Jerusalem. It was one of the most memorable experiences of my life. I had the opportunity to meet with the then-mayor of Jerusalem,, Ehud Olmert, and I got to see firsthand the sacrifices that Israelis make in the name of security because of the dangerous state of affairs there.

I will always be a strong supporter of Israel. As the only functioning democracy in the Middle East, Israel is a vital strategic ally of the United States. I believe the United States must do everything possible to secure Israel's long-term security and achieve a lasting peace in the region. The failure of the current administration to continue the peace process has been a loss to America and Israel. That is why we need a new direction in Washington.

Peace between Israel and her neighbours can only be achieved by direct talks between the parties. Until the Palestinian leadership and other hostile regimes are willing to accept Israel's right to exist, it will be impossible to achieve peace. I believe that the United States can help by providing a mediator who can be trusted by both sides, like former President Bill Clinton. It's an approach that worked in achieving a peaceful settlement to the violence in Northern Ireland. People in the Middle East need to know that the U.S. is serious about the peace process.

We cannot forget our past. I have worked to protect the rights of Holocaust survivors in our state. In 2002, I sponsored legislation that was signed into law by Governor Jane Hull, and unanimously approved by the Senate, to allow victims of the Holocaust, or their heirs, to collect insurance claims. It re-opened the statute of limitations for these claims. My opponent, Randy Graf, was one of only 13 legislators to oppose this bill.

As a woman and as a Jew, I will always work to insure that the United States stands with Israel to jointly ensure our mutual safety, security, and prosperity. I invite you to visit www.giffordsforcongress.com

Arabs Need to Talk to the Israelis

By Shaikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, Washington Post, 16 July 2009

(Old article but very relevant)

We need fresh thinking if the Arab Peace Initiative is to have the impact it deserves on the crisis that needlessly impoverishes Palestinians and endangers Israel's security.

This crisis is not a zero-sum game. For one side to win, the other does not have to lose.

The peace dividend for the entire Middle East is potentially immense. So why have we not gotten anywhere?

Our biggest mistake has been to assume that you can simply switch peace on like a light bulb. The reality is that peace is a process, contingent on a good idea but also requiring a great deal of campaigning -- patiently and repeatedly targeting all relevant parties. This is where we as Arabs have not done enough to communicate directly with the people of Israel.

An Israeli might be forgiven for thinking that every Muslim voice is raised in hatred, because that is usually the only one he hears. Just as an Arab might be forgiven for thinking every Israeli wants the destruction of every Palestinian.

Essentially, we have not done a good enough job demonstrating to Israelis how our initiative can form part of a peace between equals in a troubled land holy to three great faiths. Others have been less reticent, recognizing that our success would threaten their vested interest in keeping Palestinians and Israelis at each other's throats. They want victims to stay victims so they can be manipulated as proxies in a wider game for power. The rest of us -- the overwhelming majority -- have the opposite interest.

It is in our interest to speak up now for two reasons. First, we will all be safer once we drain the pool of antipathy in which hatemongers from both sides swim.

Second, peace will bring prosperity. Already, the six oil and gas nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council have grown into a powerful trillion-dollar market. Removing the ongoing threat of death and destruction would open the road to an era of enterprise, partnership and development on an even greater scale for the region at large.

That is the glittering prize for resolving the dilemma of justice for Palestine without injustice to Israel. Effectively, this is the meta-issue that defines and distorts the self-image of Arabs and diverts too much of our energies away from the political and economic development the region needs.

The wasted years of deadlock have conditioned Israelis to take on a fortress mentality that automatically casts all Palestinians as the enemy -- and not as the ordinary, decent human beings they are.

Speaking out matters, but it is not enough. Our governments and all stakeholders also must be ready to carry out practical measures to help ease the day-to-day hardship of Palestinian lives.

The two communities in the Holy Land are not fated to be enemies. What can unite them tomorrow is potentially bigger than what divides them today.

Both sides need help from their friends, in the form of constructive engagement, to reach a just settlement.

What we don't need is the continued reflexive rejection of any initiative that seeks to melt the ice. Consider the response so far to the Arab peace plan, pioneered by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. This initiative is a genuine effort to normalize relations between the entire Arab region and Israel, in return for Israel's withdrawal from occupied territory and a fair resolution of the plight of the Palestinians, far too many of whom live in refugee camps in deplorable conditions.

We must stop the small-minded waiting game in which each side refuses to budge until the other side makes the first move. We've got to be bigger than that. All sides need to take simultaneous, good-faith action if peace is to have a chance. A real, lasting peace requires comprehensive engagement and reconciliation at the human level. This will happen only if we address and settle the core issues dividing the Arab and the Israeli peoples, the first being the question of Palestine and occupied Arab lands. The fact that this has not yet happened helps to explain why the Jordanian and Egyptian peace accords with Israel are cold. They have not been comprehensive.

We should move toward real peace now by consulting and educating our people and by

reaching out to the Israeli public to highlight the benefits of a genuine peace.

To be effective, we must acknowledge that, like people everywhere, the average Israeli's primary window on the world is his or her local and national media. Our job, therefore, is to tell our story more directly to the Israeli people by getting the message out to their media, a message reflecting the hopes of the Arab mainstream that confirms peace as a strategic option and advocates the Arab Peace Initiative as a means to this end. Some conciliatory voices in reply from Israel would help speed the process.

Some Arabs, simplistically equating communication with normalization, may think we are moving too fast toward normalization. But we all know that dialogue must be enhanced for genuine progress. We all, together, need to take the first crucial step to lay the groundwork to effectively achieve peace. So we must all invest more in communication.

Once we achieve peace, trade will follow. We can then create a "virtuous circle," because trade will create its own momentum. By putting real money into people's hands and giving them real power over their lives, trade will help ensure the durability of peace. The day-to-day experience would move minds and gradually build a relationship of trust and mutual interest, without which long-term peacemaking is impossible.

When stability pays, conflict becomes too costly. We must do more, now, to achieve peace.

WikiLeaks Cables vindicate Israel

Ryan Mauro, Pyjamas Media, 18 December 2010

<http://pajamasmedia.com/blog/wikileaks-cables-vindicate-israel/>

The U.S. and its allies are struggling to contain the damage caused by WikiLeaks, but there's one country that needn't worry much and can actually look at the disclosures as positive publicity: Israel. The documents show that the threat from Iran is not an illusion conjured up by the Zionist lobby and that Israel is not the imperialistic aggressor seeking to dominate and brutalize Palestinians as the country is so often characterized.

Out of all the cables released, none reflect negatively upon Israel, perhaps with the single exception of one where a diplomat says Prime Minister Netanyahu is "charming" but doesn't keep promises. The documents actually show an Israel that is determined to safely give the Palestinians statehood and that has absolutely no desire to rule over the Gaza Strip and West Bank. One file from June 2009 shows that Israel asked Egypt and the Palestinian Authority to take control of Gaza after Operation Cast Lead would break Hamas' grip on the territory. As Israel expected, neither one wanted to take on the task. Instead, the Arab world and even the Palestinians' own representatives chose to sit on the sidelines and condemn Israel in the harshest of terms.

Another cable from February 26, 2009, shows Israel's commitment to building the infrastructure for a viable Palestinian state in the West Bank. Netanyahu is recorded as talking about "economic peace" through a "bottom up" approach. He explained how he'd bypass the bureaucracy to allow for direct investment to stimulate economic progress so

the people of the West Bank could “be offered real alternatives.” He remarked that there was larger anti-Israel protests during Operation Cast Lead in Western Europe than in the West Bank because of the latter’s exposure to the “violent, crazy” Hamas. These aren’t just words. Israelis are working in the West Bank to create a Palestinian state today. An example is how Palestinian farmers are being trained by Israeli agricultural experts. Israelis are also involved in various other Palestinian civic projects.

The WikiLeaks documents also debunk the notion that the dreaded “Israel lobby” is dragging us into war with Iran. The documents show that the Arab world, just as much if not more so than Israel, is shaking in their boots at the prospect of a nuclear Iran and is as equally convinced that their nuclear program is for making bombs, not energy.

Netanyahu articulately explained how these revelations show the reality behind the scenes that vindicates Israel by saying.

Our region has been hostage to a narrative that is the result of 60 years of propaganda, which paints Israel as the greatest threat. In reality, leaders understand that that view is bankrupt. For the first time in history, there is agreement that Iran is the threat.

Either the “Israel lobby” is so cunning that it has seduced the Arab world or Israel is right about Iran and the countries in the region agree about the threat.

The documents also show the Arab hypocrisy on the 2006 Lebanon War. When Israel invaded Lebanon in response to Hezbollah provocations, there was international outcry, especially from the Arab world. Only two years later in 2008, Saudi Arabia, which so ferociously condemned the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, called for an Arab invasion of Lebanon. The Saudi foreign minister told the U.S. that he sought to assemble a NATO-backed Arab League force to enter the country which “would keep out Hezbollah forever.” The Lebanese prime minister endorsed the plan and it was proposed to the Egyptians and Jordanians but the cable didn’t reveal their thoughts on it. The U.S. opposed it because it wasn’t seen as feasible. At least some Arab countries wanted to do exactly what Israel did but simply didn’t have the means.

Another cable also justifies some of Israel’s conduct during the 2006 war. Israel was widely condemned for attacks on ambulances that their intelligence indicated were being used as part of the enemy’s war effort. Most of the world chose to believe that Israel would target civilian ambulances because of its evil nature and rejected the justification. Now, it is revealed that an Iranian source confirmed to the U.S. that Iran was using the Iranian Red Crescent ambulances to ship weapons and personnel into Lebanon and also used the organization as a cover to infiltrate Iraq. The source said that he witnessed how one “humanitarian” plane was half-full of weapons before medical supplies were added as a cover.

WikiLeaks may be trying to expose alleged corruption and abuses by the West, but in the case of Israel, WikiLeaks has served more like an unwitting publicist.

ICEJ News, 12 January 2011: A brutal crackdown on Christians is currently underway in the Islamic Republic of Iran, with at least 70 people including several pastors having been arrested since Christmas. Although the Iranian government has made much of its official tolerance of traditional Christian denominations as well as Jews and Zoroastrians, this crackdown has targeted Evangelical "house churches" which the government describes as "hard-liners" who pose a threat to the Islamic state, accusing them of trying to convert Muslims (a crime which carries the death penalty) and being agents of foreign governments.

ICEJ News, 12 January 2011: The Egyptian government recently broadcast a stern warning to the Hamas terror militia which rules the Gaza Strip, saying that continued rocket and mortar attacks into Israel could spark a larger war that would be devastating to the people of the Strip and create unrest in the entire region.

Imra.org, 14 January 2011: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman met with Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou. During the meeting, the two discussed regional issues, and FM Lieberman said that the significant improvement in the Israel-Greek bilateral relationship in the last two years should encourage coordination between the two countries in their activities with international organizations and the Balkan bloc countries.