



OPINION and ANALYSIS

Vol 1, Number 37: 1 July 2013

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

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

(1) Jordan, the most logical Palestinian state
Earl Cox, Jerusalem post, 29 June 2013

There already is a Palestinian state so what the world is really talking about is a "three state solution." There is a country called Jordan bordering Israel on the east which is, in reality, a Palestinian state.

<http://blogs.jpost.com/content/jordan-most-logical-palestinian-state>

(2) Return of the yellow star
Steve Apfel, The Commentator, 28 June 2013

Regarding the character of the latter day yellow star, bearing instead of wearing it sets not only Jews apart but also products like Ahava cosmetics of Jewish origin. Boycotted by stores and shunned by shoppers, products must carry the warning label, 'Made in Israel' or 'Made in the Occupied West Bank.' Like tobacco products and alcohol, consumers are warned and weaned off the deleterious effects of Zionist-made products.

http://www.thecommentator.com/article/3873/return_of_the_yellow_star

(3) The two-state solution for Israel and the Palestinians needs a big boost
Nadine Epstein, Christian Science Monitor, 27 June 2013

Those on the extremes of the Palestinian and Israeli conflict don't see a two-state solution as viable – or preferable. Secretary of State John Kerry and those in the centre with practical ideas about how to achieve two peaceful states must strengthen their voices.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2013/0627/The-two-state-solution-for-Israel-and-Palestinians-needs-a-big-boost>

(4) Is Hamas losing power?
Khaled Abu Toameh, Gatestone Institute, 27 June 2013

The only way to undermine Hamas is by offering the Palestinians a better alternative to Hamas. Many Palestinians do not regard Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah as a better alternative to the radical Islamist movement.

<http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3791/hamas-losing-power>

(5) Economist warns Iran won't be stopped
Jonathan Tobin, Commentary Magazine, 27 June 2013

One of the most reliable indicators of establishment thinking in Europe with little sympathy for Israel is agreeing with those long deemed alarmists about Iran. In an eye-opening article published this week, the *Economist* dismisses the notion that anything the United States and its allies has been trying will work.

<http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2013/06/27/economist-warns-iran-wont-be-stopped-nuclear-netanyahu/>

(6) Is the Arab-Israeli conflict really about economics?
Alexander Joffe and Asaf Romirowsky, Forbes Magazine, 26 June 2013

Palestinians are by far the world's largest per capita recipients of international foreign aid, having received more than \$12 billion over the past 15 years. Through UNRWA the international community, meaning mostly the U.S. and the European Union, also provides another \$500 million a year to support Palestinian health, education and welfare services.

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2013/06/26/is-the-arab-israeli-conflict-really-about-economics/>

(7) John Kerry, Lone Ranger of the Middle East
Aaron David Miller, Foreign Affairs, 26 June 2013

Kerry surely knows that getting Israelis and Palestinians to the negotiating table is only the first step. The real challenge will be to get them to stay there. And in that endeavour, good will and persistence will only get him so far. In fact, in restarting talks right now, Kerry may be risking sowing the seeds of his own failure. And that raises the question of why he is so adamant about pushing for a quick renewal of peace talks in the first place.

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139532/aaron-david-miller/john-kerry-lone-ranger-of-the-middle-east?cid=nlc-this-week-on-foreignaffairs-co-062713-john-kerry-lone-ranger-of-the-3-062713>

(8) Working with Bibi
Brent Sasley, The Daily Beast, 25 June 2013

As the linchpin for progress on the peace front right now - no proposal, no matter how creative and different, will go anywhere without him - the good news is that, as a pragmatist and opportunist, Bibi seems willing to play the role of facilitator, however reluctantly.

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/06/25/working-with-bibi.html>

JORDAN THE MOST LOGICAL PALESTINIAN STATE

However, there is another important factor that always seems to get left out of all "two state solution" discussions. It is the fact that there already is a Palestinian state so what they are really talking about is a "three state solution." There is a country called Jordan bordering Israel on the east which is, in reality, a Palestinian state.

Remember the history after World War I, when the land area of what is now both Israel and Jordan was designated as a "British mandate" controlled by England. England originally decided to give all of this land to the Jewish people for the establishment of a Jewish state and a restored homeland for the Jews. But then England changed their plans and decided to

give all the land east of the Jordan River to the Arabs and only the one-fourth of the land west of the river to the Jews.

Then, somehow, the Saudi Arabians talked England into giving the Saudi Hashemite Arabs control over the Arab area, and they installed a Hashemite king. They gave the land the name of Trans-Jordan, but later changed it to Jordan. Now, of course, the Hashemites and their king are still in control of Jordan, but they are only a small part of the population. The largest ethnic group of the country is the so-called Palestinian Arabs, who are also the original occupiers of the land. King Abdullah claims that the Palestinians make up only 43 percent of the population, but a 2007 United Nations report stated that at least two-thirds of Jordan's people were of Palestinian origin.

So far, obviously, the Hashemite kingdom has weathered the storm that has swept across much of the Middle East, but it is also obvious that the relative calm is only on the surface. There have been a few suppressed, small scale anti-government uprisings recently, when the Palestinians expressed a profound hatred for the Hashemites. They definitely view them as intruders rather than as legitimate rulers. This makes a regime change in Jordan quite likely, and with the atmosphere in the Middle East what it is, it may possibly happen sooner rather than later. Such a regime change would not only topple another Muslim Arab autocrat, but it would also open the door to a viable "two state solution," with the Palestinian state of Jordan.

In most countries with human rights violations, vulnerable minorities are the typical victims. But we have learned that this is not the case in Jordan, where the Palestinian majority is discriminated against by the ruling Hashemite dynasty. The Jordanian Palestinians are encumbered by high taxes, and they get passed over for the better government jobs as well as for military and police service positions.

The Hashemite discriminatory practices against the Palestinians have been largely overlooked by the West. Perhaps the West fears that if the Hashemites are toppled, Jordan might be taken over by more jihadist minded Muslims, who might turn Jordan into a springboard for terrorist attacks against Israel. It is also possible that the oppressive Muslim Brotherhood might become rulers of Jordan, as they are now in Egypt.

It seems that both Israel and the United States have chosen to accept the Hashemite regime as it is preferring the "devil they know to the devil they don't know." The current picture, however, suggests that the devil they think they know is in deep trouble.

So it seems that the Palestinians in Jordan might be a bomb waiting to explode, especially as they watch their fellow Arabs rebelling against other autocratic leaders. And if the Palestinians do successfully rise up against the Hashemite Jordanian government, we will probably see a Palestinian state of Jordan and doesn't this seem to be a more logical location for a Palestinian state than on Israel's soil?

RETURN OF THE YELLOW STAR

Nothing is new beneath the sun. King Solomon the wise discerned that everything existed from the beginning, so that 'new' things are really very old things, manifestations of eternal concepts; like the badge of shame that Jews have been made to wear.

To many the yellow star, inset with *Jude*, *Juif*, or *Jood*, brings to mind the Holocaust. Yet the idea and its applications predate Hitler's Third Reich by a millennium or two. Already in medieval times Jews were compelled to identify themselves by wearing badges of sorts. That opened up all kinds of possibilities, beginning with treating Jews like the pestilence. Isolate them, concentrate, deprive and deport them, or kill Jews on demand, as the need might be.

Now that society bends over backwards to absorb religious minorities, surely the yellow star is a curiosity to ogle at behind glass in a cold exhibition hall.

If only that were true. Some technical or tactical adjustments may alter the substance or appearance or method, but never the essence of an eternal obsession to quarantine Jews. It squats in our global village as it squatted in the medieval hamlet, though not nakedly. The Jew badge system of the new millennium lives behind a veil, a light one to penetrate, luckily. To see through it simply ignore the meaning of words and focus on what words mean.

Two great linguists harped on the idea that words may serve a tactical purpose. One was the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre who wrote that anti-Semites like to devalue words. By making absurd remarks they intimidate and disconcert adversaries, which is both quicker than persuading by rational argument, and easier. Indeed, the more absurd the remark, the wilder the fib, the bigger the advantage gained.

The other linguist is Noam Chomsky. His focus is not anti-Semites but "manipulative totalitarian regimes." Totalitarians use words not to communicate but to provoke an effect.

Chomsky's own trademark style is to do exactly that: be provocative. His statements are so provocative and improbable that adversaries are at a loss whether he wants to be taken seriously or not. He calls the United States one of the leading terrorist nations in the world, and opines that George Bush's crimes vastly exceeded Bin Laden's. Are we meant to take Chomsky at face value? Or are we being disconcerted and intimidated for a brilliant man's delight and purpose?

Back to the yellow star; what is the tactical word for Jude? What caricature now gets up everyone's nose? In the post Holocaust era it is infra dig to hate Jews, publicly at least. So the Jude that everyone loved to hate has transmogrified into a Zionist. Nowadays people don't hate Jews, they hate Zionists.

Often when their guard is down they'll admit that one means the other. Be careful to say Zionist, warned Azzam Al-Tamimi, Director of London-based Institute of Islamic Political Thought, believing he was out of earshot. "There is an organization called MEMRI, and it monitors your channel, as well as Al-Jazeera TV, Al-Hiwar TV, Al-Quds TV... all the channels.... Therefore, my advice to my brothers in Al-Aqsa TV and the other Arab channels is that we must be very careful when we use the term 'Jews'."

Iran's Supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, dropped his guard differently. "The Zionists have been inflicting very heavy damage and suffering on the whole of humanity for over 2,000 years, especially over the last four centuries." Of course 2,000 years ago, or even four centuries ago, there were no Zionists to inflict damage and suffering. There were only Jews, and it was them Iran's Ayatollah meant.

But there is yet a second euphemism for 'Jew'. Thanks to Anis Mansur, one of Egypt's top journalists, and confidant of the late president Anwar Sadat, we know that word: 'Israeli'. "There is no such thing in the world as Jew and Israeli. Every Jew is an Israeli. No doubt about that."

Tuvia Tenenbo wrote a book on rampant anti-Semitism in modern Germany. The head of the publishing company, from one of Germany's top families, went into a rage. "He told me I couldn't write and that the book needed serious editing. I asked him to show me what good writing was. He did. If there was a line in the book about people not liking Jews he demanded that I change the word to Israel."

Hence to the formula: Zionist = Jew = Israeli. The book I wrote in 2012, Hadrian's Echo, provides at least half a dozen more proofs that the terrible twins are the Jew of old.

Now to the second of the tactical words: 'Anti-Semite.' Expelled from one fortress the anti-Zionist will hurry to the next. Heavy with ridicule he'll decry that no one can be critical of Israel without being called anti-Semitic. How that shot brings adversaries up short. Yet how flimsy the fortress from where it is fired.

Two quick questions and the game's over for the protesting critic: 1) Why would a critic want Israel destroyed? And, 2) Why would a critic want Jews killed?

For wanting both those things a boycott supporter could not be anything but a deadly enemy of Israel – of the Jews. "Implementing the right of return means eradicating Israel," said Amos Oz, the author and left wing peace advocate. "It will make the Jewish people a minor ethnic group at the mercy of Muslims, a protected minority, just as fundamentalist Islam would have it."

Nevertheless Oz (being politically correct?) stops mid way through. What some Muslim groups have done, and are doing to minor ethnic groups, on three continents, means that the right of return would eradicate more than Israel, it would eradicate Jews. Dismantling the security barrier would act likewise, though at a slower rate.

Every boycott supporter – Christian, Jew, Muslim or secularist – fully understands that his demands amount to the shedding of Jewish blood. And if he calls that a lie, or tut tuts, or coughs disdainfully, remind him to address the two questions. And while he's thinking up a diversion, ask him why he never protested when Palestinians bombed, shot, and knifed Jews to death.

So to the character of the latter day yellow star. Borne instead of worn it sets not only Jews apart but products like Ahava cosmetics of Jewish origin. Boycotted by stores and shunned by shoppers, products must carry the warning label, 'Made in Israel' or 'Made in the Occupied West Bank.' Like tobacco products and alcohol, consumers are warned and weaned off the deleterious effects of Zionist-made products.

Along with Jewish products Israeli academia finds itself shunned like the devil: "All Israeli academic institutions, unless proven otherwise", the manifesto of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel reads, echoing Hitler's Nuremberg Decrees to strip Jews of their basic rights and begin the process of separating them from the population. A professor at the University of Manchester wrote to her Israeli colleagues: "I will always regard and treat you both as friends, on a personal level, but I do not wish to continue an official association with any Israeli."

As it was dangerous in Nazi Europe to associate with Jews, today it's ill-advised to associate with Zionists. Israel's deputy ambassador in London noted, "The last time that Jews were boycotted in universities was in 1930s Germany."

Academies, in the words of French author Julian Benda, have become

“an arena for the intellectual organization of political hatreds’. He wrote this in 1927, but how presciently. Rhodes University, South Africa, is a living model of the intellectual organization of Zionist hatred. Fear-ridden pockets of Jews who came out in support of Israel were branded racists, Islamophobic, apartheid supporters, problems to be gotten rid of, disgraceful.

To be sure the new model yellow star exempts, for now, ‘good Jews.’ They are Jews canny enough to set themselves free by excoriating Zionism or Israel or still better, both. Effectively they sell their Jewish identity and reap a decent return, both in kind and in cash.

The boycott movement is flush with funds, though it keeps who the funders are close to the chest. ‘Israel-bashing is the contemporary key to acceptance,’ observed Professor Robert Wistrich. How right. Even a humble saxophone player may aspire to minor celebrity status. “It is Gilad Atzmon’s blunt anti-Zionism rather than his music that has given him an international profile,” wrote the Guardian.

Anti-Zionist Jews are nothing if not materialistic. They never sell themselves short, but think nothing of selling out the rights of their Jewish brethren – rights to freedom of speech and association. At the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, a concert with an Israeli-born pianist was invaded when boycotters burst onto the stage blowing vuvuzelas and forcing the event to be abandoned.

Even then, we have not touched the limit of yellow star-exempt Jews. If motivated at bottom by human rights, one might overlook their failings. But that’s the problem: boycotters have no concern for Palestinian rights. Or they have, when Israel is in the equation, but take Israel out of the equation and boycotters dissolve to nowhere. If they had a credo it would be the following: What Muslims do to Palestinians is Muslim business; what Palestinians do to Jews is no one’s business; what Jews do to Palestinians is criminal.

But let the idol of Israel-bashers, Noam Chomsky, put it for us squarely: “The current BDS movement’s hypocrisy rises to heaven.” And let them deny it: Boycotters are not concerned with Palestinian rights; they are concerned with trashing Jews – sorry, Israel, where the tribe lives, and thrives.

THE TWO-STATE SOLUTION FOR ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIANS NEEDS A BIG BOOST

Secretary of State John Kerry arrives in Jerusalem this evening, trying again to restart negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. It’s his fifth trip to the region in recent months, and this question remains unanswered: Is the two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians still alive and kicking?

This question has been in play since the British Peel Commission proposed separating Palestine into Jewish and Arab states in 1937. Then, most Jews in Palestine supported the plan, while Arab leaders rejected it, leading the British to withdraw their support when a new commission declared the idea un-implementable. In the ensuing decades, the partition plan, renamed the two-state solution, remained on the negotiating table, and even came to be considered the region’s only hope for peaceful coexistence.

In the run up to Mr. Kerry’s last visit to the region, in May, the viability of the two-state solution was a question of great interest to my staff at Moment Magazine – an independent North American magazine of Jewish politics, culture, and religion. We asked a range of

Middle East policymakers, scholars, and activists – all across the spectrum, from the far right to the far left – to share their thoughts on the feasibility of side-by-side states. A rare, nuanced and often surprising discussion took form, transcending the clichéd categorizations we have come to expect on the Israeli-Palestinian question. These responses provide crucial clues as to what peace talk negotiators are up against, and what Kerry and the Obama administration must do to help bring about two states.

The issues remain much the same as they have for the decades-long, on-again off-again peace negotiations. The status of Jerusalem, Palestinian “right of return” (whether Palestinian refugees can return to their forbears’ land now in Israeli-held territory), Israeli settlements in the West Bank – all remain points of contention. What is different now is a mood that has settled over many of the parties involved and those watching from afar: a sense that the window of time in which a robust two-state solution was achievable may have closed.

One of the most striking aspects in the discussion is the mirror viewpoints of Palestinians and Israelis on the far left and right. Indeed, the similarity is uncanny. Spokespersons of both extremes argue that the two-state solution is nothing more than a carefully constructed illusion with no possibility of real-world application.

Dani Dayan, a leading advocate of right-wing Israeli settlers, contends that the concept has always been a farce. “The two-state formula never really existed,” he says. “Like a kind of diplomatic ‘Truman Show,’ it existed only in an imaginary world.” He condemns what he calls the “two-state industry,” which has “fed itself with optimistic narratives and crises to be defused in order to keep itself alive.” He says that “in the real world, it was a mirage, looking tempting from afar but revealed to be hot air when approached.”

In Mr. Dayan’s view, the best possible solution at the moment is to “do the most beneficial things you can under this circumstance” – including “removal of checkpoints and a potential dismantling of the security fence, joint large-scale industrial projects, renovation of refugee camps.” This “will not mean peace,” he says. It will be “at most a peaceful non-reconciliation. It will not be the final status; it will be temporary until new options arise.”

On the other side of the spectrum, American political science professor Virginia Tilley – a well-known critic of partition – agrees wholeheartedly. “Of course the two-state solution is dead,” she says. “It’s been dead for a long time. I don’t think it was ever alive... The British clarified formally in the 1930s that partition was never intended, and certainly the situation is far more impossible now.” Ms. Tilley argues that the continued belief in the two-state solution allows Israel to accrue territory. “The longer everybody keeps going along with the idea of a two-state solution, the longer Israel can keep building settlements, which is a full-fledged state project to effectively annex the entire country.”

Tilley sees only one path forward to resolution: a rejection of the premise that ethnicity or religion should make up a nation – a Jewish state and a Palestinian-Arab state. “A mass, nonviolent movement, with 300,000 Palestinians coming over that racist wall with signs saying, ‘equal rights, democracy and freedom,’ would transform this entire conflict in a day,” she says.

“When people realize what’s going on,” Tilley explains, “realize that the two-state solution was never viable, and finally accept that the only solution is giving equal rights to everybody and giving up the idea of an ethnic democracy – which has been given up everywhere else in the world – then there will be peace.”

It is in the center that a divergence of opinion can be seen: Here thinkers envision slightly different practical paths to achieving a two-state solution, and there is beauty – and hope – in the nuance. Leading Israeli negotiator Shaul Arieli says that Israeli settlements aren't the insurmountable obstacle some make them out to be.

"Inside the [main Jewish settlement] blocs we have relative Jewish dominance, but outside, complete Palestinian dominance," he says. It is possible, he continues, to create borders that connect the major Israeli settlement blocs in the West Bank as well as East Jerusalem neighborhoods to Israel by annexing "around 6 percent of the West Bank, which can be compensated with one-to-one land swaps, thereby reaching a two-state solution."

Israeli cinematographer Dror Moreh, director of the Academy Award-nominated documentary "The Gatekeepers," thinks it's worth spending Israel's political capital to convince settlers, especially those who would need to be evacuated, that in leaving the settlements they would be doing what is in the best interest of Israel. "We need to be clear and say, 'Yes, we sent you and you served and did your job, but we need you to do something else and come back now,'" he says. "This needs to be done seriously."

Efraim Halevy, former head of Mossad (the Israeli national intelligence agency), believes that the best way to achieve two states is through low-profile negotiations. "We have to seek a practical understanding that will serve the interest of both sides without the other side having to renounce its devotion to its basic ideology," he says. "An example of this is what happened recently in Gaza: When the people from Gaza began shooting rockets, Israel resorted to a weeklong operation, and out of the blue, on the eighth day of the conflict, a ceasefire suddenly emerged."

He explains: "Nothing is known in public about this ceasefire, no documents have been published and there is no official information on who actually negotiated the ceasefire agreements. In practical terms, somehow ways are being found to do things that have not been done for several years, such as opening up the fishing area for Gazans. I think that similar things can be done with the Palestinians in the West Bank through negotiations with lower visibility."

David Makovsky, director of the Washington Institute's Project on the Middle East Peace Process, argues that tunnel vision is best when it comes to negotiations. The disputed territory of Jerusalem and whether Palestinian refugees can return to their homes "are two narrative issues that cut to the self-definition of the parties," he says. "They deal with very explosive issues like religion and nationalism. It seems to me you're better off dealing with the practical issues of borders and security, creating the two states, and deferring these other two questions of Jerusalem and refugees."

These "can-do" suggestions aside, those in the center or moderate position on this issue are not dictating policy or public sentiment. This poses a challenge for Kerry and the many others who still think two states are the best or only option. Rather, the "can't dos" and "we shouldn't dos" dominate the public forum, fueling suspicion.

Kerry and those in the center with practical ideas about how to proceed on the ground must strengthen their voices or risk continuing to be unheard. Already public support for two states is ebbing: "Today, after almost two decades of the Israeli left and outside 'mediators' pushing a so-called two-state solution on us, I believe that it is clear to the vast majority of Israelis that this fallacy will not lead toward peace and coexistence in our region," says Likud party (far right) Knesset member Danny Danon.

Palestinian journalist Daoud Kuttub finds the same thing to be true among Palestinians. "More and more Palestinians are abandoning the two-state solution for the one-state solution, even while knowing that most Israelis still hold onto their desire for a majority Jewish state," he says.

Is this yet another swing of the two-state pendulum, or is it the end? That public sentiment truly marks the end of the two-state solution is doubtful. But until a leader appears with a vision to mobilize the center, the saga of the two-state solution will continue unresolved.

IS HAMAS LOSING POWER?

Recent developments on a number of fronts in the Middle East suggest that Hamas is beginning to lose both power and popularity among Arabs and Muslims.

Of course this is good news for moderate Arabs and Muslims, as well as for stability in the region.

This change does not, however, mean that Hamas will vanish sometime in the near future. Nor does it mean that peace will prevail tomorrow between Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and Israel.

The only way to undermine Hamas is by offering the Palestinians a better alternative to Hamas. Many Palestinians still do not regard Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah faction as a better alternative to the radical Islamist movement.

In recent weeks and months, Hamas has found itself embroiled in a number of local and regional disputes that seem to have had a negative impact on its standing among Palestinians and Arabs.

After losing the backing of Iran and Syria because of its support for the rebels fighting against the regime of Bashar Assad, Hamas has now lost its key supporter and financier in the Arab world, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani of Qatar.

Khalifa's decision to hand powers to his son, Sheikh Tamim, has left many Hamas leaders worried about the future relations between their movement and Qatar.

Noting that Qatar had long embraced and supported Hamas, leaders of the movement voiced hope that Sheikh Tamim would follow in the footsteps of his father.

Under Hamad bin Khalifa, Qatar was the first Arab country to receive Hamas leaders after they were expelled from Jordan by the late King Hussein in the late 1990's.

Khalifa was also the first Arab ruler to visit the Gaza Strip earlier this year and offer hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to the Hamas government.

Hamas leaders said this week that they are now not sure whether the new ruler of Qatar will fulfill his father's financial pledges.

Meanwhile, Hamas seems to have gotten itself into trouble with many Egyptians, who accuse the movement of meddling in their internal affairs.

Egyptian media reports and politicians say Hamas has been dispatching weapons and gunmen to Egypt to support Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi, who is facing growing discontent at home.

When Hamas leaders visited Cairo last week, they were forced to flee the hotel where they were staying after hundreds of angry Egyptian demonstrators protested their presence on Egyptian soil.

Hamas's support for the anti-Assad rebels in Syria has also resulted in a crisis between the movement and the Iranian-backed terror group Hizbullah in Lebanon.

Some Lebanese have accused Hamas of arming anti-Assad radical Islamists and setting up terror cells in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

Unconfirmed reports said that Hizbullah has asked Hamas leaders based in Beirut to leave the country.

Musa Abu Marzouk, a senior Hamas official, this week made a secret visit to Beirut in a bid to defuse tensions between his movement and Hizbullah.

Hamas is also facing many problems at home.

Hamas's relations with other terror groups in the Gaza Strip have also recently witnessed a serious deterioration.

The Islamic Jihad organization decided this week to sever ties with Hamas over the death of a top Jihad operative, Raed Jundiye.

Jundiye was killed when Hamas policemen tried to arrest him last weekend, sparking a sharp crisis between the two parties.

In addition, Hamas has been forced to deal with Al-Qaeda-affiliated Salafi followers who think that the Hamas leadership is not radical enough, especially with regards to imposing strict Islamic laws and fighting the "Zionist enemy."

Hamas officials admit that all these developments have had a negative impact on their movement's standing among Palestinians and Arabs.

Hamas's failure to improve the living conditions of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip has also driven away an increased number of Palestinians -- in addition to reports about fierce internal squabbling among Hamas's top brass and the absence of a unified policy toward many controversial issues plaguing the Palestinians and the Arab world.

In a move reflecting Hamas's growing predicament, the movement was forced this week to welcome Palestinian singer Mohamed Assaf, who won the popular Arab Idol contest held by Saudi Arabia's MBC TV station.

Although Hamas leaders have condemned the contest as "anti-Islamic" and "morally corrupt," they were forced to voice their support for the 23-year-old Assaf in the wake of the overwhelming and unprecedented support he received from Palestinians.

When Hamas leaders begin to "sweat," it should be seen as a positive development in the Palestinian arena. It now remains to be seen whether Palestinians will take advantage of the situation and turn against Hamas.

ECONOMISTS WARN IRAN WON'T BE STOPPED

For years, we've been told that there's plenty of time to stop Iran from gaining a nuclear weapon. The world laughed when Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu drew a red line across a cartoon bomb at the United Nations last fall to demonstrate the need to act before it was too late. President Obama, who has vociferously pledged that Tehran will never gain such a weapon on his watch, tried engagement and then a mix of sanctions and diplomacy to try and make good on his promise. He still insists that this policy will eventually work and with the election of a new supposedly more moderate Iranian president, virtually everyone in the chattering classes and the foreign policy establishment has seemed content to allow the administration to keep talking about talking with the Islamist regime even if there's no sign that it will ever work. This complacency has been criticized by American conservatives and some Israelis to little effect, but now one of the most reliable indicators of establishment thinking in Europe with little sympathy for Israel is agreeing with those long deemed alarmists about Iran.

In an eye-opening article published this week, the *Economist* dismisses the notion that anything the United States and its allies has been trying will work:

British and American intelligence sources think Iran is about a year away from having enough highly enriched uranium to make a bomb, and rather further from mastering the technologies to make a nuclear warhead small enough to fit into a missile. But David Albright, a former UN weapons inspector who is president of the Institute for Science and International Security, thinks that by mid-2014 Iran will have the capacity to produce enough fissile material for a single bomb in one or two weeks, should it choose to do so. It seems unlikely that Iran could be forced to change course on this matter by foreigners. The best that can be hoped for is that it decides that it does not want or need a nuclear weapon.

But given that, as the magazine stated in the opening sentence of the piece, "Iran is putting up with sanctions that damage its economy rather than accept a deal limiting its nuclear programme," what possible reason is there to believe that the ayatollahs would simply give up what the regime has worked so long and hard to achieve? The obvious answer is none at all. Which means that the assurances we have been getting from Washington about having all the time in the world to let diplomacy work—in spite of repeated failures—was pure bunk. While I wouldn't expect those who have been working diligently to switch American policy from one aimed at stopping Iran to one of containment (something Obama has disavowed) to draw any conclusions from this, it should be noted that this turn of events has led a leading columnist at Israel's left-wing *Haaretz* newspaper to make a startling concession: Netanyahu was right all along.

As Ari Shavit notes in today's *Haaretz*:

While Israel was busy with light entertainment in the form of political reality shows, *The Economist* informed it this week that a difficult strategic reality is taking shape around it. What the world promised would never happen is happening at this very moment. What the top ranks of Israel's defense establishment promised would never happen is in fact happening. Iran is becoming a nuclear power, while Israel (which is sunk in summer daydreams) stands alone.

From 2009 to 2012, a vigorous debate over Iran took place here. On one side were the optimists: President Shimon Peres, then-Mossad chief Meir Dagan, then-Shin Bet security service chief Yuval Diskin, then-Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi, the defense establishment, the media establishment and the refreshing spirit of hoping for the best. On the other side was a gloomy, besmirched pessimist: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The mention of Dagan and Diskin is important here. The former spooks were two of the stars of *The Gatekeepers*, a film in which former security chiefs flayed Netanyahu's government for its policies and have been lionized in the West as the sane, smart Israelis who should be listened to instead of the dumbbells that were elected by the Israeli people. Yet, as one of their cheerleaders now attests, they were wrong about the most important defense issue faced by the country.

But as Shavit writes, it was the famous gatekeepers and other liberal Israelis who were listened to by the West:

America is there, said the optimists. No, it isn't, said the pessimist. There's a hidden hand, said the optimists. No, there isn't, said the pessimist. There's time, said the optimists. No, there isn't, said the pessimist. Iran's nuclear program must be stopped by the fall of 2012, the pessimist said. It's not Iran's nuclear program that's the problem, but the prime minister, the optimists said.

For three and a half years, the optimists went from one journalist to another and from one American to another and said that the pessimist is a dangerous purveyor of doom and gloom who sees molehills as mountains and doesn't understand that the world won't let Iran go nuclear. For three and a half years, the optimists tied the pessimist's hands on the basis of the threefold promise of America, the hidden hand and time.

Just as Israel's left-wingers have done much to poison the minds of Western journalists and opinion-makers about the standoff with the Palestinians, the willingness of so many top Jerusalem figures to align themselves against Netanyahu on Iran had serious consequences. The optimists, as Shavit calls them, refused to help the prime minister to ratchet up the pressure on Obama to act before Iran had amassed the huge store of enriched uranium that it now possesses or it had stored much of its nuclear infrastructure in hardened, mountainside bunkers that would be difficult even for the United States to destroy. Instead, they helped hamstringing the efforts of Netanyahu and former Minister of Defense Ehud Barak in their efforts to mobilize the West to act or to get a green light from Washington for Israel to strike on its own.

After repeatedly accusing Netanyahu of crying "wolf" about Iran, as Shavit puts it, Israel must now deal with the fact that "a strategic wolf with nuclear teeth is now at the gate."

But, as he notes, as dangerous as the situation has become, it is not too late for it to be corrected. A decision by the West to enact a total economic blockade and boycott of Iran—with no exceptions for China to buy their oil—could bring an already shaky Iranian economy to its knees in a manner than even the ayatollahs would have to notice. A credible threat of force rather than the amorphous language used by a president who is clearly determined to do anything but use force to stop Iran might also get their attention.

But with the U.S. seemingly ready to waste another year on a diplomatic track that is designed merely to give Iran more time to develop their nukes, there seems little chance of either of those things happening.

The result is the situation the *Economist* describes in which Iran is certain to get a nuclear weapon sometime before the midterm elections next year. At that point, apologies to Netanyahu from his detractors in both the U.S. and Israel will be both too late and of no use to a Jewish state confronted by a nuclear Iran that wants to wipe it off the map.

IS THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT REALLY ABOUT ECONOMICS?

Is the Arab-Israeli conflict really about economics? U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry recently claimed "People in Israel aren't waking up every day and wondering if tomorrow there will be peace because there is a sense of security and a sense of accomplishment and of prosperity."

This was echoed by *New York Times* reporter Ethan Bronner, who recently took Israelis to task for their economic success; they have "moved on" from the conflict with the Palestinians which still looms like an "iceberg" in front of their "Titanic."

Presumably the flip side to Israeli prosperity is Palestinian poverty. But this is a harder claim to make. After all, Palestinians are by far the world's largest per capita recipients of international foreign aid, having received more than \$12 billion over the past 15 years. Through UNRWA the international community, meaning mostly the U.S. and the European Union, also provides another \$500 million a year to support Palestinian health, education and welfare services.

But, as a new report from the World Bank notes, Western largesse has predictably bred Palestinian dependence and under-development rather than prosperity. For example, there is a huge construction and services bubble in Ramallah, the seat of the Palestinian Authority, but the rest of the West Bank economy remains under-developed. The public sector is the largest employer, and it includes Palestinian terrorists in Israeli jails. Vast amounts of money continue to disappear into the bank accounts of the Palestinian Authority leadership and their cronies. How much of the over \$12 billion has actually reached Palestinians is unknown, since Western donors prefer not to know.

Rising Palestinian unemployment and food costs are likely to have motivated Kerry's latest plan, announced at the World Economic Forum "to mobilize \$4 billion of investment" in the West Bank, in areas including tourism, construction, light manufacturing, building materials and information technology. Unnamed experts predict the West Bank's GDP will rise by 50% in three years and unemployment will drop dramatically.

Who would invest \$4 billion in the West Bank economy is a mystery. Arab states have bigger problems like fighting a proxy war with Iran in Syria and propping up the collapsing Egyptian economy, which has received grants and loans from Gulf states like Qatar totaling \$5 billion. A measure of Arab interest in the Palestinians is shown by the recent Saudi Arabian donation of \$86 million to UNRWA for projects in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon.

But the Palestinians also made their opinion clear. Mohammad Mustafa, economic advisor to Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas's said "The Palestinian leadership will not offer political concessions in exchange for economic benefits." The Palestinians reject economic investment and possibility of self-reliance because it would require a negotiated settlement. Instead they demand welfare.

UNRWA is particularly content to play along. Recently, Ann Dismorr, the director of the UNRWA in Lebanon, posed during a launch of German-funded projects in Lebanon with a map in which Israel did not exist and the entire area from Jordan to the Mediterranean was titled "Arab Palestine."

When criticized for this blatant endorsement of Palestinian rejectionism, UNRWA spokesman Christopher Gunness indignantly stated "UNRWA categorically rejects accusations in the media that the Agency is 'erasing Israel from the map' because its officials and stakeholders stood next to a map which does not show Israel... The map in question is an embroidery depicting a pre-1948 map and therefore ante-dates the creation of the state of Israel." The presence of the Palestine Liberation Organization flag – both invented during the 1960s, suggests Gunness misunderstands the history of the region, or at least its flags.

Gunness's disingenuous answer is standard for UNRWA, which claims to support peace even as it is part of the Palestinian welfare system that supports rejectionism and encourages dependency. In another published response to recent criticism Gunness repeated yet again UNRWA's talking points on its mission. After denying that UNRWA personnel have been involved with terrorism, and that its facilities have been used by terrorists, Gunness states that "UNRWA will continue to advocate for the full protection of the human rights of Palestine refugees as required by UN resolutions and international law. We will continue to advocate for a resolution of their plight in the context of a just and lasting peace, agreed by the parties in consultation with the refugees, whose freely exercised and informed choices must be respected. It is the failure of the parties to reach such a peace that has led to the perpetuation of the refugee question, not UNRWA's continued service provision, without which hundreds of thousands of the most disadvantaged people in the Middle East would be deprived of essential services – a situation that would hardly advance regional stability. Meanwhile, we will continue with our empowering human development work in education, health, relief and social services, thus contributing to calm in the communities in which refugees live"

None of the missions UNRWA now claims for itself are found in UNRWA's original charter, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 393 (V) of December 2, 1950. This mandate stated simply "without prejudice to the provisions of paragraph 11 of General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948, the reintegration of the refugees into the economic life of the Near East, either by repatriation or resettlement, is essential in preparation for the time when international assistance is no longer available, and for the realization of conditions of peace and stability in the area."

There was nothing about UNRWA 'advocating' for Palestinian refugees, who, according to the United Nations, have their own 'state' called Palestine. There was nothing about 'advocating' for any sort of resolution to the conflict, much less about UNRWA being part of a mechanism that solicits the refugees' agreement for a peace deal. And there is nothing about "empowering human development work." All these are mandates that UNRWA has assumed for itself. And by demanding that it have a part in 'consulting' with refugees about a settlement, UNRWA explicitly aligns itself with the rejectionist mainstream in Palestinian society.

Why UNRWA does this is obvious: its continued existence is at risk. Its almost 30,000 Palestinian employees, who perform tasks that rightfully belong to the Palestinian Authority, are paid for by the West. It has every incentive to enmesh itself deeper and deeper into Palestinian society and to become more of an obstacle to a negotiated settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. Why the West continues to pay for this, instead of turning the money over to the Palestinian Authority with the demand that they step up to their responsibilities, is another problem.

JOHN KERRY, LONE RANGER OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Having worked for half a dozen U.S. secretaries of state, I have never seen one as self-assured as John Kerry when it comes to pursuing the Middle East peace process. Forget envoys and experts: Kerry is committed to pursuing Lone Ranger diplomacy.

This week, the Lone Ranger is making his fifth official visit to the Middle East as U.S. secretary of state, with the stated goal of finding some way to resuscitate peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. And, on those terms, there is a good chance that he will succeed. Diplomacy is a get-along business. Nobody wants to be blamed for the collapse of the Kerry effort or to say no to a likeable and persistent secretary of state.

But Kerry surely knows that getting Israelis and Palestinians to the negotiating table is only the first step. The real challenge will be to get them to stay there. And in that endeavor, good will and persistence will only get him so far. In fact, in restarting talks right now, Kerry may be risking sowing the seeds of his own failure. And that raises the question of why he is so adamant about pushing for a quick renewal of peace talks in the first place.

First, it is worth considering whether Kerry has an endgame in mind, particularly given the reality that a conflict-ending agreement on the core issues is almost certainly not possible now. It is likely that Kerry will try to focus negotiations in such a way as to give the two sides maximum cover, which means starting with territory and security, where the gaps are considerable but still narrower than they are on fraught issues like Jerusalem's final status. Much of this conflict is about land, and if you could find a mutually agreeable border -- which would inevitably be based on the June 1967 lines, with adjustments and land swaps -- you might also be able to deal with other nagging questions.

But that strategy is not at all guaranteed to work. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu will not accept Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' demands that Israel accept from the outset that any deal will be based on the June 1967 borders with only minor adjustments. Netanyahu's coalition wouldn't survive such a concession -- and the prime minister's view on the amount of territory Israel must retain is more expansive, in any case. Moreover, Netanyahu will demand security arrangements, such as the demilitarization of a future Palestinian state and Israeli control of the Jordan Valley, that will likely not be compatible with any meaningful definition of Palestinian sovereignty; he is also sure to press Abbas to abandon the Palestinian refugees' right of return and to accept Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people in exchange for any return to the 1967 lines. But having returned to the negotiating table without a freeze in Israeli settlement construction (Netanyahu has made clear that he won't accept that as a precondition), Abbas will be under great pressure from his own public (and from Hamas) not to make additional concessions.

Kerry will try to buffer the discomfort on both sides with promises of economic aid for the Palestinians, the Israeli release of Palestinian prisoners, and security assurances for Israel. But this will not likely be enough. And no American guarantee can smooth over the bitter squabbles when it comes to the final status of Jerusalem.

Moreover, the regional environment has rarely been less conducive to peacemaking. Many commentators still reference the 2002 Arab League initiative that promised recognition of Israel in exchange for delivery on a two-state solution. But that plan was always long on symbolism and short on substance, and, given the current state of uncertainty in the Arab world, it's no longer clear whether all the Arab states can deliver.

Hamas is ensconced in Gaza with a formidable stockpile of high trajectory weapons. The Egyptian-Israeli relationship is cold, and the Muslim Brotherhood-led government is unlikely to strongly support a two-state solution or Palestinian concessions on Jerusalem. Syria is imploding, drawing in Iran and Hezbollah ever closer to defend the Assad regime.

None of this augurs well for making big decisions, particularly for an Israeli prime minister deeply suspicious of the Arabs and focused much more on Iran and its nuclear program. To be sure, a breakthrough on the Palestinian issue would help isolate Iran. Still, it's hard to see Netanyahu making big moves on the Palestinian issue until it's much clearer where Iran stands on the nuclear issue following the recent presidential elections. This chicken-and-egg dynamic is likely to constrain what can be done on the peace process until the Iranian file becomes clearer.

Then there is the question of whether the Israelis and the Palestinians feel a real sense of urgency, which is the prerequisite to their taking the negotiations seriously. Right now, the answer is absolutely not. Neither Netanyahu nor Abbas is desperate enough yet; nor do they see sufficient incentives to justify the risk of changing the status quo. In short, neither Abbas nor Netanyahu is prepared to pay the price of what a conflict-ending accord would cost.

That also raises the question of the United States' sense of urgency. We know that John Kerry is determined to get an Israeli-Palestinian agreement and to spend as much time and capital as it takes. The same cannot be said for President Barack Obama. As a second term president focused largely on a domestic agenda and keeping the economy afloat through the 2014 midterm elections, Obama prefers to avoid a messy peace process that could draw him into another fight with Netanyahu. The president didn't reset his relations with Israel earlier this year only to have them come apart over an unproductive fight with Israel over a peace process that is likely to fail anyway.

And that's the key point. Bill Clinton, the only second term president who pushed heavily for a peace deal, did not rush ahead because he didn't have to worry about re-election. Clinton engaged because he thought there was a real chance to get an agreement. And so will Obama if there's really an opportunity. But until then, the White House is unlikely to get involved.

Right now, Kerry may be on the verge of getting something he really wants: getting both sides back to the table. And he is sure to receive glowing press coverage if that comes to pass. But it may also represent the premature pinnacle of his Middle East diplomacy. Simply telling both sides that time is running out won't have much effect. Nor will putting a plan on the table and saying "Take it or leave it." The United States simply does not have the nerve or the muscle to force an agreement, and it couldn't make one stick even if it were ready to try.

Kerry surely has advisers around him warning him about the long odds he is facing. So why is he ignoring them -- and voluntarily risking his prestige -- for the chance to get something done on the Israeli-Palestinian issue?

In part, the answer has to do with the fact that Kerry clearly believes that peace in the region is a paramount U.S. interest. But there is something else, too. Unlike Hillary Clinton, whose political career is ascending, Kerry's time at the State Department likely represents the end of his political career. If Kerry wants entry to the Washington's unofficial hall of fame, it will likely have to be as a diplomat, alongside Henry Kissinger and James Baker. And Kerry knows that diplomats earn reputations for greatness by tackling tough problems. So if President Obama lets him, Kerry will be more than willing to take risks.

And there are few riskier initiatives than this one. Nobody ever lost money betting against Arab-Israeli peace. But John Kerry has staked his personal credibility -- and America's -- on the possibility that he can beat the odds. And if Netanyahu and Abbas are prepared to help him, he just might.

WORKING WITH BIBI

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has long been, for many, both a convenient target and a caricature. He is held up as the representative of all that is wrong with Israeli policy: intransigence, arrogance, occupation. There are many reasons to criticize his tenure. He continues the settlement enterprise with gusto; he believes he can only survive politically by playing to what he thinks is his base (*haredim*, settlers, secular nationalists); he made one semi-serious effort for peace (the 10 month highly qualified settlement “freeze”) but since then has made no real effort to offer incentives to Mahmoud Abbas; he tolerates bigots and belligerents in his party and government.

But perhaps the time has come to recognize that while Bibi isn't Abba Eban, Moshe Sharett, Ehud Barak, or the reimagined version of Ehud Olmert, neither is he Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir, or Naftali Bennett.

As the linchpin for progress on the peace front right now—no proposal, no matter how creative and different, will go anywhere without him—the good news is that, as a pragmatist and opportunist, Bibi seems willing to play the role of facilitator, however reluctantly. He may not be willing to sign on to a final peace agreement that includes withdrawal from all of the West Bank, but he seems open to managing a genuine process leading to that outcome. (The end stages will have to come under different leadership in Israel, and probably also in Palestine.)

If it seems counter-intuitive to think working with Bibi is the way to go, compare what he's done and said in his third term to his first two terms. His language on Palestinians, Palestine, and peace negotiations has changed dramatically. In his first term he indicated he'd do whatever he could to prevent a Palestinian state; in his second term he started off recognizing “two states for two peoples,” focusing most of the rest of his time on “economic peace”; in his third term, he's repeatedly said—in contrast to statements by others in his government and in his party—that he's committed to a Palestinian state. He still puts most of the onus on the Palestinians, but he doesn't close the door to genuine movement anymore.

His actions are equally important. He still thinks Israel is a nation that dwells alone, and remains suspicious of the outside world. But he's less interested in always confronting it and more willing to work with it. What were once public and hostile confrontations with the U.S. over settlements and Iran have become quiet, almost (but not quite) friendly disagreements. Where in the past he's been reluctant to put his trust in regional states, today's he's prepared to work with Turkey, despite his misgivings. Compared to his previous inability to consider the consequences of policies regarding sensitive areas, today he tries to manage armed conflicts and avoid full-scale wars.

The only way to get real traction on the peace process is to recognize reality, and not complain about what we wish could happen. That includes recognizing Bibi is the prime minister right now, and working within those constraints. It also entails understanding that while he may be willing to facilitate two states, he won't leap at the opportunity without being prompted and pushed.

In Israel that means building up a grassroots, organized leftist opposition that is sustainable and able to seriously challenge the right's dominance in politics. In the United States that means constructing a set of firm incentives and disincentives. Both are difficult to do, but not impossible. In Israel there are several existing and newly-established NGOs, research institutions, and movements that can be utilized toward broader political mobilization. In the U.S. Barack Obama is a second term president who has built up some political capital both within the pro-Israel Jewish community and in Israel.

To repeat, progress won't come easily. Bibi's no dove. But if advocates for peace and for two states prefer to spend their energy wishing Bibi wasn't in charge, or hoping for others to come to power on their own, they'll be waiting a long time.

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