

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>

**1. *Guy Bechor, Hezbollah is in trouble*
*YNet News, 27 February 2012***

With Iran and Assad sinking, the Lebanese terror group faces existential concerns over the fall of its allies, as well as the Hariri murder trial, while sustaining harsh criticism in Lebanon's public opinion and political establishment.

**2. *Ehud Yaari The agony of Hamas*
*The Times of Israel, 27 February 2012***

The movement is facing its most serious rift ever - it is severely divided on its future course as well as on the identity of its post-Syria sponsors

3. *Harold Rhode Is the Iranian regime rational?, Stonegate Institute, 27 February 2012*

The Iranian Regime is rational. It is rational....Absolutely! -- but within its own Iranian context of rational -- not that of the USA or the western world.

**4. *Eve Lifson On Israeli Apartheid Week*
*The Tufts Daily, 27 February 2012***

Being educated about the Palestinian struggle is the first, vital step in changing the Jewish American discourse about Israel.

Hezbollah is in trouble

Guy Bechor, YNet News, 27 February 2012

<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4195486,00.html>

With Iran plummeting and Assad sinking, Hezbollah is also going down. The days of its intoxication with power are gone. The Shiite axis is fighting for its life and Hezbollah has become the most hated organization in the Arab world. Those betting on the Syrian president, who butchers with no mercy, are crushing along with him.

One need not get excited about the speeches delivered by Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah; these are almost comic speeches, portraying the organization as stable and aggressive. Yet does he really think that Israel's public opinion buys into his statements as it did in the past?

The economic oxygen supply that arrived from Iran and kept Hezbollah alive is drying up. Iran faces the economic threat of paralyzing sanctions, its regime is on the defensive, and it has no money for adventures on the Lebanese front. This means that Hezbollah has no money to pay salaries and fund projects.

The group's stock is plummeting in Lebanon's Shiite community as well. The country's Shiite citizens are disturbed by the one-sided support Nasrallah grants Assad, knowing that the score with them may be settled later on. And what will happen to Hezbollah and to them should Iran's regime collapse?

Hezbollah faces existential concerns over the fall of its allies, as well as the Hariri murder trial, while sustaining harsh criticism in Lebanon's public opinion and political establishment. This is why Nasrallah declares that he is not obligated to follow Iran's directives. He seeks to display authenticity. "Iran doesn't command us," he said. "Even if a strike hits Tehran's nuclear sites, Iran will not ask us to do anything and it does not expect a thing. When the time comes, we shall decide on our own which steps to take."

2 headed creature

There's truth to these words. Hezbollah has always been a two-headed creature – an Iranian head and a domestic Lebanese head. In some cases, one head's interests clashed with the other. For example, in 2006, when Nasrallah dared to embark on a war with Israel without seeking Iran's permission. The Iranian's have not forgotten this.

As more people in Lebanon smell Hezbollah's weakness, more voices are calling for the organization to disarm. Hezbollah is the only militia permitted to operate in Lebanon, and the group tries to portray itself as a patriotic organization protecting Lebanon from Israel, rather than as an Iranian puppet.

However, this argument is also baseless, as there is no confrontation between Lebanon and Israel, and hence there is no need for an actual army, armed with tens of thousands of missiles, to seemingly defend Lebanon. The group that portrays itself as Lebanon's defender is in fact the main threat jeopardizing the country. Hezbollah itself is the cause of the conflict.

And what about striking Israel at this time? Hezbollah can do it, but realizes it would be suicide. Such move would not bring any benefits to itself, to Assad, or to Iran. The attention of the Syrian rebels or the world's attention to Iran would not be diverted as result of such Hezbollah strike. The opposite is true: The pressure on Syria and Iran will merely intensify.

Moreover, Israel is not expected to settle for merely weakening Hezbollah this time around, as was the case in 2006. This time, Israel may seek the group's destruction should Hezbollah attack.

And still, Nasrallah's and his army's control in southern Lebanon is convenient for Israel. The Shiite Hezbollah maintains the area's stability, prevents Sunni groups such as al-Qaeda and

Global Jihad from operating there, and also prevents Palestinian terror groups from reaching the border with Israel.

Israel has no interest in intervening in any way whatsoever, neither in Lebanon nor in Syria. Hezbollah's trouble vis-à-vis the Middle East's Sunnis and vis-à-vis Syria are its own business, and this is how it should be.

The agony of Hamas

Ehud Yaari, The Times of Israel, 27 February 2012

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/the-agony-of-hamas/>

Hamas's no longer undisputed leader Khaled Mashaal is now in deep trouble. He's having difficulty finding a new home after leaving Damascus, and during his travels across the Arab world, he's meeting with growing opposition to his policies from within his own movement.

This is the most serious rift ever within Hamas's ranks. It has already turned into a bitter public controversy between Mashaal and his few loyalist lieutenants, versus his own Deputy Head of the Political Bureau, Dr. Musa Abu-Marzuq, and the top leaders in Gaza.

A major effort is currently underway to resolve the crisis quietly and present a semblance of renewed unity amongst Hamas's top echelon. Too late! By now it has become obvious that Hamas is severely divided on its future course as well as on the identity of its post-Syria sponsors.

A few months into the uprising against Bashar Assad, Mashaal reached the conclusion that Hamas could no longer afford to appear as supporting and benefiting from the Syrian regime, which is butchering its own people. He understood that Hamas — the Palestinian wing of the Moslem Brotherhood — should not position itself against its colleagues in the Syrian Moslem Brotherhood, who are struggling to wrest control of the revolt — a revolt that has won the public blessing of the Brotherhood's Qatari-based spiritual guide Sheikh Yussef al-Qardawi and all other branches of the movement.

One by one, Hamas leaders sneaked out of Damascus — first sending away their families and then packing up the political and military offices. Assad refrained from any open criticism of Hamas's departure in return for Mashaal's promise to keep praising Syria's role in assisting the "resistance," while expressing only vague sympathy for the "aspirations of the people."

Different leaders of Hamas have found new homes for themselves: Abu-Marzuq in Cairo; Muhammad Nazzal in Amman; Imad al-Alami (the military supremo) went back to Gaza. But no country — except far-away Qatar — has so far agreed to accommodate the Hamas headquarters and allow it to operate out of its territory. Egypt, Jordan and even Sudan said no to Mashaal's request.

Mashaal has committed himself to retire from the top position, yet he has no intention of doing that.

Abandoning their secure base in Damascus without being able to obtain an alternative safe haven, the “External Leadership” of Hamas is fast losing ground in its ongoing rivalry with the “Internal Leadership” centered in the Gaza Strip. Mashaal is no longer in sole control of the movement’s purse strings, since contributions from Tehran were reduced. He no longer enjoys the recognition of Syria, Iran and Hezbollah in his supremacy within Hamas.

In short, Mashaal, whose claim to be number one was always contested by some in Gaza, reached a point where he felt that he should make an unprecedented public offer not to run again this summer for chairmanship of the Political Bureau. Soon enough it became quite evident that many of the Gaza leaders — and also Abu-Marzuq! — were not going to beg him to stay.

That has left Mashaal in a bind: He has committed himself to retire from the top position, yet he has no intention of doing that. He still expects to be “convinced” by his colleagues to remain in his seat.

And so, earlier this month, Mashaal resorted to a sudden dramatic exercise: On February 6 in Doha he signed — under the auspices (and financial incentives) of the Emir of Qatar — an agreement with the Palestinian Authority’s Mahmoud Abbas to form a “temporary” technocrats’ Unity Government, with Abu Mazen himself as prime minister. They also agreed to postpone general elections without fixing a specific date.

This was a bombshell! Mashaal has agreed, at least implicitly, to make a major concession: to dismantle Hamas’ own government in Gaza, which has ruled the Strip for the last five years, and to allow the PA administration (and security services?) to resume control over the different ministries. He seemed to be sacrificing Hamas’s autonomous enclave in the hope that, at an unspecified date, Hamas might win in the ballot boxes.

Furthermore, Mashaal made a few statements recommending “popular struggle” — which is the code for unarmed confrontation — against Israel. This was perceived as meaning he was willing to suspend use of bullets and rockets, contrary to Hamas’s traditional devotion to the concept of “armed resistance.” He also expressed acceptance of a Palestinian state within 1967 boundaries, although he stressed that there would be no peace or recognition of The Zionist Entity and the goal will remain the destruction of Israel. To many in Hamas, Mashaal sounded as if he was diverting to a dangerous course in an effort to adjust to the Arab Spring, handing their Fatah rivals an easy victory.

A chorus of protests by the Gaza leaders — not to mention by the West Bankers — immediately erupted. Mashaal was accused of acting behind the back of the Hamas institutions and deviating from the adopted policies. Dr. Mahmoud al-Zahar, an old foe of Mashaal’s, took the lead in public, but many joined him during the closed doors sessions of Hamas meetings in Khartoum and then in Cairo. The plan to appoint Abbas as prime minister was described as “unconstitutional.”

Ismail Haniyeh, the prime minister of the Hamas government in Gaza, embarked on a tour of several Arab countries avoiding any hint of support for the Doha Agreement. Then he ignored warnings by the Gulf states and the Moslem Brotherhood and paid a widely publicized visit to Iran, kissing and hugging Supreme Leader Khamenei, and asking for direct financial assistance to Gaza. On his return to Cairo, incidentally, the crowd at al-Azhar mosque Friday prayer cheered him by shouting “Down with Iran, Down with Hezbollah!”.....

And so, right now, the ever-negotiated reconciliation process between Hamas and Fatah is again bogged down. Abbas insists on the implementation of the deal cut with Mashaal. The majority of Hamas leaders demand “amendments” to the Doha Agreement. Maintaining exclusive security control over the Strip is definitely a Hamas condition now, as is a demand for veto power over the appointment of all ministers.

The two parties keep conferring in Cairo but so far cannot agree on a visit of Abbas in Gaza. The internal debate within Hamas has been brought to the surface.

The movement has lost the pretense of cohesion. The battle over command and direction is on.

Is the Iranian regime rational?

Harold Rhode, Stonegate Institute, 27 February 2012

<http://www.stonegateinstitute.org/2883/iranian-regime-rational>

Recently, the American Chairman of the Joint Chief Chiefs of Staff, General Dempsey, said that the Iranian Regime is rational. It is rational....Absolutely! -- but within its own Iranian context of rational -- not ours.

The current leaders of Iran, according to the late Ayatollah Khomeini, are dangerous. When he ruled Iran, he did his best to keep them out of government: he knew Iran's current rulers believe that by provoking a conflagration, they would try to make their Mahdi -- their messiah - return.

Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), which worked against the Soviets, will not work here. Iran's current rulers --- most prominently the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Iran's fake "Grand Ayatollah" leader, Khamane'i, who has the formal rank of Hojat al-Islam -- a rank far below that of Grand Ayatollah, but he "crowned himself" Grand Ayatollah, like an African dictator, after he took over his country -- also adopted the title General, and believes that when their messiah arrives, this messiah will make clear that their form of Islam -- not Sunnism, or for that matter, any non-Muslim religion -- are all perversions of the one and only true faith -- theirs -- which itself is a perversion of mainline Shi'ism.

Destruction, for Iran's rulers, is an inducement, not a deterrent. From the point of view of Iran's rulers, provoking a conflagration is eminently rational. But it is somehow hard to believe that this is what General Dempsey had in mind when he said the Iranian regime is rational.

On Israeli Apartheid Week

Eve Lifson, The Tufts Daily, 27 February 2012

<http://www.tuftsdaily.com/on-israeli-apartheid-week-1.2707366#.T08Mr4eO3XI>

Israel: Apartheid week. The name begs the question: Is Israel actually an apartheid state? Apartheid, as defined by the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid, is racial segregation and discrimination with the intent "of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons." I am familiar with many of the crimes that the Israeli government commits against Palestinians living in the occupied territories, such as house demolitions and denied access to much needed resources. I am also familiar with many of the forms of institutionalized racism that discriminate against Arabs within Israel proper. I have read "Is Israel an Apartheid State?" a publication by the Israeli Committee Against Housing Demolitions. This publication summarizes the findings of a study conducted by the Human Sciences Research Center of South Africa. The study examines

Israeli laws and practices, listing the plethora of crimes that have been committed against the Palestinians, to determine whether Israel is in fact an apartheid state. Spoiler alert: Their conclusion is yes.

No reasonable person would argue that Israeli society does not discriminate against Palestinians. But are these oppressive acts committed with the intent of "establishing and maintaining domination" of the Jewish population of Israel? Perhaps. I believe there is some truth to this statement, but this view also oversimplifies the conflict, presenting it solely as a racial one. Israel's victimization complex plays a strong hand in many policies that demean and oppress Palestinians. Whether real or imagined, many Israelis believe that their nation still faces an existential threat. Israel feels threatened by the Arab world and the Palestinians suffer from this fear. So is Israel an apartheid state? I don't think it's that simple, but what's in a name? Would systematic oppression by any other name smell as putrid?

By creating the first annual Tufts Israeli Apartheid Week, the Tufts chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) aligns itself with many other SJP chapters. The aims of Israeli Apartheid Week are "to educate people about the nature of Israel as an apartheid system and to build Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaigns." Showing solidarity with an international movement that condemns Israel's discriminatory practices is a crucial aspect of bringing voice to the Palestinian struggle for justice and human rights. I understand the importance of this event. I am not condemning SJP for using Israeli Apartheid Week as a means for spreading awareness of Palestinian oppression. However, I think it is also important to consider how this event affects the dialogue surrounding the conflict at Tufts.

Creating an Israeli Apartheid Week alienates a large segment of the Tufts Jewish community. Some of us are ignorant of the injustices committed against Palestinians. Some of us don't want to hear an ill word uttered about our beloved Israel. And there are also those of us who feel heartbreak every time we read about the conflict in Haaretz, because the Jewish state should not exist at the expense of Palestinian rights. Many of these same people who support both the right of Palestinian self-determination as well as just and equal treatment for all Israeli citizens immediately disengage from a conversation upon hearing the words "Israel" and "apartheid" in the same sentence. I am not justifying this reaction. The Tufts Jewish community needs to engage critically with Israel, even when it pains us. One way for us to challenge our beliefs about Israel is through participating in SJP events and discussions. I believe that many more of us would want to work with SJP if we did not feel alienated by the language SJP uses.

SJP has no obligation to have a productive relationship with the Jewish community. Being a part of an international BDS movement may very well be a more important goal than engaging with supporters of Israel at Tufts. However, I am of the opinion that discussion and dialogue amongst SJP and the Jewish community is very important to the future of Israel and Palestine. The United States' influence in Israeli affairs is immense, and American Jews have a large voice in shaping that influence.

We, the Tufts Jewish community, are part of that voice. Being educated about the Palestinian struggle is the first, vital step in changing the Jewish American discourse about Israel. For those of us who are ignorant of the many injustices that Palestinians face, interacting with SJP through attending events and participating in discussions, could have a formative role in how we conceptualize Israel, and more importantly, what we want Israel to be. But we may not show up because we feel alienated. For those of us who already are committed to human rights and justice for Jews and Arabs living in Israel and Palestine, participating in SJP events and activism would bring more voices to the cause. But we may not show up because we feel alienated. There is a huge potential for partnership amongst Israel supporters and JSP in fighting for justice for Palestinians, and by using alienating language, SJP is missing out on the opportunity to work with numerous potential partners.

Does SJP need to abandon Israeli Apartheid Week to engage in meaningful dialogue with the pro-Israel community at Tufts? Well, that would help, but this is not a fair request. SJP, like many other pro-Palestinian groups, believes that Israel is an apartheid state and uses this rhetoric to bring attention to the cause. They are calling it how they see it, and I will not ask SJP to compromise who they are and what they believe. However, if Israeli Apartheid Week is here to stay, we need to start thinking of other ways to bridge the gap between the pro-Israel crowd and SJP. We need speakers, events and discussions that are accessible to all Tufts students who are committed to justice and human rights and to bringing about change in Israel.

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

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