

OPINION and ANALYSIS

Vol 1, Number 1: 20 January 2012

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local and international writings on the Middle East**

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

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No innocent abroad - Diplomacy, Romney style

Benni Avni, New York Post, 16 January 2012

http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/no_innocent_abroad_IXhY7eJ5GID8185wUhfkI

Mitt Romney is no amateur when it comes to foreign policy. At least, that's the opinion of Richard Williamson, the Romney adviser who's stepped into the role that Condoleezza Rice played for George W. Bush in 2000 and that Susan Rice (now UN ambassador) did for Barack Obama in 2008.

"Mitt Romney is a very sophisticated guy. This isn't his first rodeo," Williamson says.

Citing Romney's exposure to the "international dimension" of business, Williamson told me last week that Romney, unlike candidates Bush and Obama, "is not a guy who needs a tutor" on foreign policy.

(He added, "I could say something about good Rice and bad Rice, but I won't.")

At a debate last month, Romney raised eyebrows by promising that his first presidential trip abroad would be to Israel "to show we care about them."

It was the candidate's idea, says Williamson: "I was with him in the Green Room"; it was Romney who "said he wanted to talk about that."

The move plainly played on Obama's image as caring more about "reset" with adversaries than ties with allies. Romney "wants to be more engaged with friends — in Europe, in Taiwan, in Israel," says Williamson.

Even as the administration insists it's strongly committed to Israel's defense, tensions between Washington and Jerusalem are again rising over Iran. Williamson thinks Obama mishandled Iran from the start: "We sat on our hands after the June 2009 election," when Iranians rebelled. "The United States stayed quiet even as people began to get beaten."

Williamson believes the president assumed the Iranian quest for freedom was "not very deep" even as he was hoping for "quiet engagement" with the mullahs. So "Obama said he wouldn't tolerate a nuclear Iran, yet after three years, they are closer."

Yet even Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told The Australian newspaper over the weekend that Iran was starting to "wobble" under US-imposed sanctions. And Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner just went to Beijing in an (apparently unsuccessful) bid to get China to join a boycott of Iranian oil exports.

Not enough, says Williamson: "Obama has been naive about engagement and the value of multilateral institutions," and now we're "a day late and a dollar short" on Iran.

Similarly, he says, the president's signals were mixed at the start of the Arab Spring: Early on, Obama slashed budgets on State Department programs meant to promote democracy and human rights around the world, while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton downplayed her department's human-rights reports.

"So, by Dec. 18 [2010], when a young man set himself on fire in Tunisia, we have already sent two years of [wrong] signals," Williamson says.

Williamson says we still are. Last month, Cairo offices of US groups (sponsored by our government and the major political parties) that promote civil society came under attack.

"We've yet to have a statement" from the State Department or the White House, notes Williamson. (State has merely told reporters that it's "concerned" about the attacks.) "You think that wasn't noticed in Moscow, in Beijing, in Harare?"

Such signals add up to a "policy of weakness, of isolation." Obama, Williamson adds, is "accepting that America is in decline," while Romney "believes in American exceptionalism."

Yet Obama's approach is popular in some places, as is the even more isolationist stance of Romney's top rival, Rep. Ron Paul.

"There have been, for 200 years now, a thread in America of George McGovern [-style] come home America," Williamson says, "I think it's wrong." Government's "first obligation is to keep the people safe," he adds, and 9/11 proved that Paul's brand of isolationism is no longer feasible.

For those who argue that we can no longer afford engagement, Williamson has a question: "What would happen if the Straits of Hormuz were closed?" Will Obama's latest "secret messages" deter Iran's plans to close them in retaliation for sanctions, sending oil prices sky high?

Romney's foreign-policy fans, which now include such heavy hitters as Sen. John McCain and former UN Ambassador John Bolton, are skeptical — even now, after "three years of on-the-job training," as Bolton said Friday in South Carolina.

Our foes are "not waiting for us to get our economic house in order," Bolton told me yesterday. America "needs somebody who can explain to voters that international involvement is tied to our economic prosperity."

He believes Romney is that somebody — but it's a tough sell for an increasingly inward-looking America.

On Israel: Name Calling Disguised as Analysis

Brent E Sasley, Huffington Post, 16 January 2012

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brent-sasley/israel-politics_b_1205066.html

It's very difficult to have a conversation about Israel these days, particularly if you're an analyst of the country or if you are involved in some way in the diasporic Jewish community. Individuals and institutions are tagged as being either of the left or of the right; and once that tag sticks, dialogue becomes possible only within each side, but not between them. Because every person or group is labeled as part of one "side" or the other, anything that individual writes or argues, or any idea an institution promotes, is presumed tainted and therefore illogical and ideological only.

This undermines necessary policy discussions. At a time when the Middle East is undergoing critical shifts, when Israeli politics and society is changing, and when American politics is buffeted by competing currents of thought, we need serious analysis, not name-calling; a serious exchange of ideas, not willful ignorance and intolerance.

The problem is most dramatically manifested in the penchant for assigning labels. One is either an anti-Semite because one criticizes Israel too much, or one is an Israel Firster because one doesn't criticize Israel enough. Of course, these descriptions are caricatures; but that's because the very division into groups like this is a caricature of serious discussion itself.

It comes down to how critical one should be of Israel. This is made more problematic because Israel itself is an in-between place. It has a democratic system that provides for a wildly free press, and voting and representation rights for all segments in society; yet there is widespread and in some cases institutionalized discrimination against Arabs, Ethiopians, Mizrahi, and others. It protects considerable personal freedoms for its citizens yet occupies and oppresses an entire other people. It is a more or less stable ally of the West, with shared political and economic systems, in a region dominated by authoritarian systems that have long promoted anti-Western

sentiments through official vehicles, and some of which have now collapsed leaving uncertainty in their wake. And Israel is engaged in geostrategic competition with regional states, some of whom are close allies of the West and the U.S.

Moreover, Israel itself is not an issue just for Israelis. It's an issue for the worldwide Jewish community, for Palestinians, and for Muslims. It's become a necessary element in political and ideological discourse in the United States as well, including in the non-Jewish communities.

It is hardly recognized anymore, but Zionism is a big tent. It always was, and includes a wide spectrum of interpretations. Even those who did not believe in a Jewish political entity saw Zionism as a vehicle for a Jewish cultural entity. The closing off of dialogue between various sides today would be unrecognizable to the Zionists of old. In Jewish communities around the world, in the World Zionist Organization, and in the political institutions of the Yishuv and then Israel, a multitude of Zionist parties and ideas interacted with each other on a regular basis.

Of course these discussions were not always easy, and sometimes were charged with virulence. There were powerful personal hostilities animating many of them: For a time David Ben-Gurion refused to speak the name of his political rival, Menachem Begin. He also opposed bringing the remains of Begin's predecessor as leader of the right, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, to Israel for burial as Jabotinsky had requested.

But even these personal views and widely-divergent priorities for Zionism never prevented cooperation if it was deemed necessary.

A real sorting out of contemporary issues is lost in these kinds of distractions today. Take, for example, discussion over Israel's opposition to an Iranian nuclear program. On the assumption that it is trying to develop nuclear weapons, Israel is anxious that a nuclear-armed Iran would tip the regional balance of power against it, and severely constrain Israel's ability to respond to smaller in-theater threats along the borders with Lebanon and Gaza.

The left seems to assume that Israel is on the verge of a conventional military attack on Iran, while the right seems to be encouraging just such an effort. And yet, the issue isn't -- and never has been -- so clear cut among Israeli decision-makers themselves (and here). These differing assessments are not themselves the problem, but the rhetorical arena in which it is taking place is. The tendency has become that those on one side accuse those on the other of promoting personal, political, or ideological agendas instead of genuine policy alternatives.

Take another example from another arena: the seeming surge of haredi efforts to force Israel into a Jewish theocracy. Instances of haredi bigotry and violence toward others have proliferated, at least publicly, in recent months. And yet, counter-vailing forces in Israel have prevented them from achieving any clear political, legal, or social victories. Yet again, the complexities get lost in what can only be described as increasingly shrill shouting matches between those who comment on such matters.

There are good, serious analyses of the issues, but they are often drowned in the sea of louder and more boisterous polemics. Analysis is subsumed within tweets, blog posts, and longer articles that are in effect a litany of accusations of the other side's mental deficiencies and preconceived preferences.

There are acute issues that need analysis, discussion, and resolution regarding Israel and its security and safety; about the welfare of its people; about its Jewishness; as well as about the safety, security, and welfare of Palestinians and others in the Middle East.

There is of course nothing wrong with holding different interpretations of events, and making arguments on that basis. There might even be an objective truth to one argument or the other. But this is precisely how a conversation should begin and end.

LSE Nazi Games in Context

Tanya Gold, The Guardian, 16 January 2012

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jan/16/lse-nazi-games-antisemitic-acceptable?INTCMP=SRCH>

It has emerged that students from the London School of Economics, while on a skiing trip last December, played a Nazi-themed party game. It was the same game that, when promoted on Facebook by students from Huddersfield University in 2009, won 12,000 followers. And it was similar in theme to the game that eventually lost the Tory MP Aidan Burley his job last year. Anyway, a Jew who was present objected and his nose, a significant organ under the circumstances, was broken.

We do not know what nationality the nose breaker was, so I cannot suggest it was British Tories enjoying a transgressive sexual thrill by pretending to be Nazis – although the joy young Conservatives, particularly in Oxford, take in these games has always amazed me. I am sad the nerdy Jew lost the fight with the fake Nazi, but successful Jewish violence usually creates nastier headlines than more usual Jewish passivity. Some would say this is no big deal. Who wouldn't prefer a Nazi-themed party game to a Nazi-themed genocide? Some people (some Jews) are just no fun at all. Let the swastikas flap. We be Vikings.

Non-murderous antisemitism usually does not bother me, and I merely giggled when a drunk John Galliano was exposed for shouting "I love Hitler", and wearing a pirate hat. It feels essential, however, to place this game in context because Jews are becoming afraid. We sniff the air and feel a change because antisemitic discourse is more acceptable now than at any time since the 1930s.

I would love to dismiss this incident as high jinks with a genocidal motif, but paranoia and Judaism walk together; our history demands it, and no people is as conscious of its history as the Jews. The word antisemitism is newish, with the first known usage occurring in 1879, but the violence is old. The general ignorance of the history of the Jews in Europe is also amazing – a vague, fuzzy mistrust of the other is what we ordinarily have – so I will briefly reiterate it.

This tribe, exiled from what is now called Israel/Palestine by the Romans in 70AD, has been chased from country to country in the millennia since, longing for what we call the return to Zion, saying every Passover "next year in Jerusalem", or – if I am allowed a gag under the circumstances – "but please God, Miami". The harassment and murder of Jews is a constant in European history – born, if you seek a simple answer, from Christianity's deicide myth, and always exploited by those who needed a scapegoat.

It is a sickness that emerges from generation to generation, always with a new resentment to prosecute – the murder of the Christ, well poisoning, usury, the Jewish invention of communism or its opposite libel, Jewish world domination through capitalism, and now a Jewish state that defends itself, kills Palestinians, and is corrupted. The crimes are different, but the criminal is

always the same. It is just a shame the Jew from the LSE didn't have bigger fists, but I would always suggest that Jews avoid the Alps.

Antisemitic discourse is now mainstream and to say it all comes from the crimes of the Jewish state feels disingenuous and a denial of the past. Antisemitism is too old to sprout anew from nothing. Leftwing antisemites despise Israel, but are less vocal on the crimes of other oppressive states (China, Russia, Saudi Arabia). They call it "whataboutery", and say that any defence of Israel is propaganda.

The incidents mount up – the heckling of an Israeli orchestra, the graffiti on university walls, the demand that Jews denounce Israel if they wish to be accepted in polite society, the plays and TV films written without context, the violence against Orthodox Jews (visible Jews), the sale of antisemitic toys in Poland, the terrible fact that 12,000 Facebook users think to mock the Holocaust, not lament it.

The broken nose of the boy from the LSE is, in the end, a tiny act of violence on top of an enormous cultural inheritance. A cynic would say that we know what Europe thinks of the Jews, and if you believe that, a party game does not surprise.

Tense triangle: Iran, Israel and the USA

By Elise Labott and Jill Dougherty, CNN Security Clearance, 16 January 2012

<http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/01/16/tense-triangle-iran-israel-and-us/>

In seeking to avoid a military confrontation with Iran, the United States is navigating a myriad of potential landmines that has created a tense triangle between Iran, Israel and the U.S.

Most immediately, the United States is trying to make clear to Iran the consequences of closing the Strait of Hormuz, a key transit point for one-fifth of the world's oil.

Washington is doing everything to get its message across but send up smoke signals to warn Iran. In the absence of relations, the United States has used a variety of public statements and secret diplomatic backchannels to send a message to Iran that closing the Strait would be a red-line.

Even after Defense Secretary Leon Panetta publicly warned Tehran against such a move last Thursday, threatening to "respond" if Iran attempts to shut down traffic, the U.S. also sent diplomatic messages through Switzerland - its protecting power in Iran - and through Iraqi President Jalal Talibani.

And just in case Iran was unclear, Washington has sent a rare letter to the Iranian government, delivered by U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice to Ambassador Mohammad Khazayee, Iran's permanent representative at the U.N., according to a U.S. official who would only speak on the condition of anonymity.

But sending a message to Iran is not so simple, admit administration officials who note there are many power centers in Iran, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadienijad, and the country's influential clergy. It remains unclear just who these missives should be directed to and who is making the decisions that matter.

The main question is, will U.S. warnings get through to Iran's influential Revolutionary Guard, whose heavily armed boats last week streaked close to the amphibious transport ship, the USS New Orleans? The Pentagon publicly released video of the boats, a warning to the Iranian forces that the United States is closely monitoring them.

Even with clear red-lines, miscalculation could lead to confrontation. In a recent interview with CNN's Barbara Starr, Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the top U.S. military commander, was frank about his concerns that Iran would miscalculate American resolve and draw the U.S. into a conflict.

Michael Rubin, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute who worked on Iran at the Pentagon during the Bush administration, believes it's possible. Rubin notes that an Iranian leadership which grew up on the front-line of the Iran-Iraq war or in some theological center is not versed in the ways of the west.

"Wars in the Middle East aren't caused by oil, they are caused fundamentally by one side's overconfidence. When it comes to the Iranians, we have to remember, they are not international diplomats," he warns. "They don't know how the West operates and they may be convinced that the West is a paper tiger."

Even as the United States holds its fire and tries to convince Iran to hold its own, Israel's intentions remain even more of a wild card.

Last week's news that Iran has started to enrich uranium at its underground Fordow facility near Qom has increased U.S. concerns, not just about Iran's nuclear capability but about the possibility of Israel trying to stop it.

Israel has called a nuclear-armed Iran a threat to its survival and has hinted it could take military action to take out its nuclear program if international sanctions fail to stop Iran from building a nuclear weapon. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta hinted earlier this month that Iranian moves to build a nuclear bomb would be the ultimate red-line of a military strike, while Israel has indicated it has a much lower bar.

And the recent assassination of an Iranian nuclear scientist, which Tehran claims was the work of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency, has further raised tensions to a fever pitch.

The United States and Israel have canceled planned large-scale military exercises in the region, which were designed to test their joint air defense systems against incoming missiles, in particular from Iran.

This could lower tensions in the region, albeit probably only temporarily, although U.S. officials insist that was not the reason for the cancellation. Even Gen. Dempsey, who is expected to visit Israel later this week, admitted to CNN's Starr in that same interview that Washington has no guarantees that Israel will give the United States ample warning if it decides to attack Iran.

This high-stakes triangle only includes the immediate dangers of escalation; it doesn't even take into account the likely arms race that would draw in Iran's neighbors, such as Saudi Arabia, if Iran gets the bomb.

It's all a heavy burden for a country that doesn't even talk with Iran— which is why with tensions so high, the United States has suggested to Iran that the two sides establish a channel of direct communication to ensure miscalculations don't escalate.

Such contacts could be helpful, but likely not enough. If Iran believes its own rhetoric and will not budge on international red-lines, it may be headed toward an unavoidable collision course with the West— one that, as Dempsey warned, would be a "tragedy for the region and the world."

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