



OPINION and ANALYSIS

Vol 1, Number 51: 23 January 2014

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. The Iraqi-Shi'ite challenge to Iran's mullahs
Nathaniel Rabkin, Middle East Quarterly, Winter 2014

Iranian governments have had a long history of involvement with Iraq's Shiite shrines. Successive Shiite dynasties in Iran donated extensively to them, helping to build the architectural structures themselves as well as related infrastructure. Then as now, promoting the pilgrimage was a way for Iranian rulers to portray themselves as upholders of Shiite Islam—the country's official religion since the sixteenth century.

<http://www.meforum.org/3682/iraqi-shiite-challenge-iran>

2. The Day After
Aryeh Tepper, The Weekly Standard, 20 January 2014

If Israel withdrew to the 1967 borders, what then?

<http://www.weeklystandard.com/author/aryeh-tepper#>

3. The last Christian in the Middle East?
Ali Salim, Gatestone Institute, 20 January 2014

The fact, like it or not, is that under the rule of the Jews in Israel, the Christian and Muslim communities live in complete security and have absolute freedom of worship. Churches are not burned. Mosques are not burned. In some places, such as Myanmar, Muslims are indeed being grievously victimized (by Buddhists), and these abuses should not be tolerated.

<http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/4136/last-christian-middle-east>

4. Is UNESCO the new address of the Arab narrative?
Lori Lowenthal Marcus, Writing the Wrongs, 19 January 2014

UNESCO shuttered an exhibition it agreed two years ago to co-sponsor with the Simon Wiesenthal Center just days before the grand opening in the UNESCO building in Paris because the Arab League directed UNESCO to do that.

<http://writingtw.blogspot.com/2014/01/is-unesco-new-address-of-arab-narrative.html>

5. There's reason for optimism on Arab-Israeli peace
Michael Cohen, The Guardian, 19 January 2014

Never before have the historical forces been so well-aligned for the achievement of a final deal. But, of course, we're not there yet.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/19/israel-palestine-peace-john-kerry-optimism>

6. How Israel went from a beacon of hope to a 'normal' outpost of reaction
Leonard Fein, *The Jewish Daily Forward*, 18 January 2014

For America's Jews, it is easier to live with the earlier myths, rich resources of vicarious pride. We prefer not to know the whole truth, and when the knowledge is unavoidable, we blame its messengers and do our best to dissemble, in no small measure because we fear the enemies of the Jews may otherwise overhear.

<http://forward.com/articles/191164/how-israel-went-from-beacon-of-hope-to-normal-outp/?p=all>

7. Stephen Harper's firsthand Israel
Rafi Barak, *The (Canadian) Globe and Mail*, 17 January 2014

On Sunday, Stephen Harper's plane will touch down at David Ben Gurion Airport. When the Prime Minister, a true friend and steadfast supporter, steps onto the tarmac, he will begin his first visit to the region and officially kick off the celebrations of 65 years of diplomatic relations between Israel and Canada. He will also find himself physically between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, the two cities that embody the richness of my country as a meeting point between old and new.

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/stephen-harpers-firsthand-israel/article16372532/>

8. Egypt is not a democracy: but it's not nothing either
Shoshana Bryen, *Jewish Policy Centre*, 17 January 2014

Between stability produced by the heavy hand of a secular government and the chaos that has attended the demise of such governments elsewhere, it won't be surprising if Egyptians vote for the constitution and support the al Sissi government.

<http://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/4981/egypt-is-not-a-democracy>

9. Of negotiations and high treason: Israel-Palestine 'peace'
Susan Abulhawa, *Al Jazeera*, 16 January 2014

No good for Palestinians will come of the current Middle East talks. Worse, harm seems likely. These negotiations threaten to undo years of work by Palestinian civil society and solidarity partners around the world who have been working tirelessly for a just peace. Their work has been done -principally- through global nonviolent resistance campaigns such as the Boycott Divestment & Sanctions campaign (BDS), the Russell Tribunal, and mounting popular local and international protests, among other tactics.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/01/negotiations-high-treason-israel-palestine-peace-201411273239332824.html>

10. Israel Palestine: Who's indigenous?
Ryan Bellerose, *Israellycool*, 9 January 2014

I founded Canadians For Accountability, a native rights advocacy group, and I am an organizer and participant in the Idle No More movement in Calgary. And I am a Zionist.

<http://www.israellycool.com/2014/01/09/israel-palestine-whos-indigenous/>

11. Canada's important support for Israel

David Weinberg, *Jerusalem Post*, 9 January 2014

Prime Minister Harper and his team should be warmly welcomed in Jerusalem this month as super-valuable allies and trusted friends.

<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Canadas-important-support-for-Israel-337711>

12. Obama and the Sunni-Shi'ite War

Fouad Ajami, *Hoover Institution (Stanford Uni)*, 9 January 2014

It is the struggle for Syria, and the Iranian bid for primacy in the Fertile Crescent, that engage the Arabs. This "shuttle diplomacy" of our secretary of state, if anything, is evidence of the retreat of American power.

<http://www.hoover.org/news/daily-report/165426>

1. The Iraqi-Shi'ite challenge to Iran's mullahs

Nearly two million Shiite pilgrims passed from Iran to Iraq between March 2009 and February 2010 through the Mehran land border crossing. Thousands more entered Iraq through other land border crossings or by air travel. These pilgrims came from countries the world over to visit the tombs of the Shiite imams in Najaf, Karbala, and Baghdad. By way of comparison, 1.6 million Muslims travelled to Saudi Arabia for the 2009 *hajj* (an additional 700,000 Muslims from within Saudi Arabia also participated) while some 700,000 religious pilgrims visited Christian and Jewish holy sites in Israel in the same year. Clearly, the pilgrimage to Iraq is a major religious phenomenon.

Iranians are the largest group of foreign pilgrims to Iraq, and the Iranian government has shown great interest in promoting the trip. American journalists and policy analysts frequently describe the pilgrimage as a tool of political and economic influence, but Iran's policy seems to be dictated more by domestic concerns than by regional ambitions. Pilgrimage to Iraq is an important religious rite for Iranian Shiites, and the government prizes the prestige attending its sponsorship.

The post-2003 revival of the pilgrimage has also contributed to the growing clout of Iraqi-based Shiite religious leaders, first and foremost Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, whose political independence and growing popularity among Iranian Shiites present a serious challenge to the legitimacy of Iran's state-sponsored religious establishment. The Iranian authorities are aware of this threat, but their efforts to counter it have so far been hampered by political and religious sensitivities. In the years to come, the political impact of the pilgrimage to Iraq may do much to shape the future of both countries as well as that of the Shiite world.

Islamic Iran and Revival of the Pilgrimage

Journeying to the tombs of imams in Iraq's shrine cities is a time-honoured Shiite practice that has recently emerged from a long hiatus. For most of the twentieth century, a variety of political circumstances kept the holy sites of Iraq out of reach for most Shiites.

Iranian governments have had a long history of involvement with Iraq's Shiite shrines. Successive Shiite dynasties in Iran donated extensively to them, helping to build the architectural structures themselves as well as related infrastructure. Then as now, promoting the pilgrimage was a way for Iranian rulers to portray themselves as upholders of Shiite Islam—the country's official religion since the sixteenth century.

The pilgrimage was disrupted for most of the twentieth century by feuding regimes in Tehran and Baghdad, which gives its recent revival special significance. Following World War I, Reza Shah Pahlavi rose to power in Iran and sought to modernize the country by promoting secular nationalism. He also endeavoured to uproot customs seen as backward or superstitious, which to his mind included the pilgrimage to ancient tombs in neighbouring Iraq. Reza Shah's government instituted a series of measures that drastically cut the number of pilgrims and kept it low for decades. After his son Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was overthrown and replaced by the Islamic Republic in 1979, a new obstacle to the pilgrimage arose in the form of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, who invaded Iran, ending bilateral religious ties and instituting harsh measures against Iraqi Shiites, including tight pilgrimage restrictions.

Saddam's toppling in 2003 paved the way for a restoration of the pilgrimage tradition to Iraq. The return of Iranian pilgrims was a long-awaited event, rich with political and religious symbolism. For the Iranian government, which made the liberation of Karbala a propaganda motif during the Iran-Iraq war, the revived pilgrimage represented the triumph of Shiite Islam over secular, Westernizing rulers. Organizing and promoting the travel of Iranian pilgrims to Iraq is a way for Tehran to celebrate what it portrays as an Islamic victory. At the same time, promoting the pilgrimage also continues a centuries old tradition of Iranian state patronage of Iraq's Shiite shrines.

A mere nine months after Saddam's fall, visitors to Najaf in December 2003 noticed a strong presence of foreign pilgrims, most of them Iranian. After an initial period of chaotic, ad-hoc pilgrimage, Tehran decided to assume a key role in promoting it and arranging pilgrims' affairs. In April 2005, just three months after Iraq's first post-Saddam elections, Iranian and Iraqi diplomats signed an agreement allowing 1,500 Iranian pilgrims to enter Iraq daily. By 2009, the quota for Iranian pilgrims had reached 5,000 a day and was further increased to 6,000 a day in 2011.

Tehran quickly took measures to organize and control the activities of Iranian pilgrims inside Iraq. July 2005 saw the formation of the quasi-governmental All-Iran Central Company of Pilgrimage Service Providers (Sharekat Markazi-ye Dafater-e Khadamat-e Zeyarati-e Sarasar-e Iran, SHAMSA) to provide Iranian pilgrims with packaged tours and to negotiate deals with Iraqi businesses to provide lodging, transportation, and security. Although SHAMSA is registered as a private corporation, all of its business dealings in Iraq and Iran are submitted for approval to an Iranian government body called the Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization (Sazeman-e Hajj va Zeyarat). This agency also sets the prices SHAMSA charges for its package tours and oversees the application process for tourists and guides.

Some American observers have suggested that the Iranian government is using its control over the journey to exert economic and political influence ("soft power") inside Iraq. Many Iraqis share this opinion although the belief seems to be based more on deep-seated suspicions than on hard evidence. Locals in Karbala believed rumors that Iranians were buying up real estate in the city as part of a planned takeover, allegedly using local front men to circumvent Iraqi laws that restrict the purchase of real estate by foreigners. One Iraqi journalist even described the sale of Iranian-style women's clothing in Karbala's markets as evidence of growing Iranian hegemony. Whatever influence Tehran is thought to have obtained through the pilgrimage would seem to be counter-balanced by the paranoid fears and resentments the Iranian presence has provoked among Iraqis.

Gaining influence in Iraq, however, does not seem to be a high priority for the architects of Iran's pilgrimage policy. An examination of SHAMSA's record suggests the quasi-governmental tour company is dedicated to ensuring a comfortable stay for Iranian pilgrims even when this requires taking measures that displease Iraqi hosts. SHAMSA has provoked

resentment among Iraqi businessmen through its monopolistic practices, which include forcing Iraqi hotel owners to offer special low rates to its tour groups. In 2009, SHAMSA opened a number of central kitchens in Karbala where meals are cooked by Iranian staff and delivered twice daily to the pilgrims' hotels, depriving Iraqi restaurants of Iranian pilgrims' business. When asked about these kitchens by an Iraqi journalist, a SHAMSA representative explained that Iranians needed specially prepared meals because Iraqi restaurants "are not careful when it comes to standards of hygiene."

The pilgrimage brings millions of Iranians to Iraq every year, but the Iranian government makes little effort to use its citizens as goodwill ambassadors or agents of influence. SHAMSA's security department advises pilgrims to avoid discussing politics with Iraqis and warns them not to accept any gifts of food, drink, or perfume offered to them by locals. These instructions explicitly include *nudhour*, pilgrim offerings, which are a long-standing custom in the folk religion of southern Iraq. Bread, sweets, tea, and even cigarettes are proffered as part of the *nudhour* vow intended to secure specific divine blessings, such as finding a spouse or recovering from an illness. (The term is also used to describe other types of vow-offerings, including cash donations made for the upkeep of the shrines.) Refusing gifts from strangers may be a sensible precaution for Iranian pilgrims but may easily offend well-meaning Iraqi donors. Despite this, SHAMSA's security procedures prevail, which would seem to reflect Tehran's indifference to using the pilgrimage to win friends and influence in Iraq.

On the other hand, the pilgrimage is an important tool in the arena of domestic political propaganda. By promoting the pilgrimage to Iraq, the Iranian government expresses its ideological commitment to fostering Shiite religious practice among Iran's citizens. Publicly demonstrating this commitment bolsters its oft-questioned domestic legitimacy. Equally important, Tehran's role in sponsoring the pilgrimage gives it some measure of control over how Iranian Shiites experience Iraq's shrines: All SHAMSA tour groups are accompanied by government-selected spiritual guides, who are vetted for political awareness and loyalty to the Islamic regime.

Mostafa Khaksar Qahrudi, head of the Iranian Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization, which oversees SHAMSA, explained the regime's interest in the pilgrimage with surprising candour during a 2008 meeting with SHAMSA's board of directors: "Given the Islamic character of the Islamic Republican system, the people have certain expectations ... the services provided to the pilgrim must be better than those given to a regular traveller or tourist." Qahrudi went on to describe government sponsorship of the pilgrimage as necessary for Iran's political stability:

The philosophy behind the Islamic Republican regime is faith-based, and the regime cannot appear apathetic [to the pilgrimage] ... The only way to preserve the regime is to keep the people on a spiritual path. How else could we keep the people going along with the regime?

This high regard assigned to the pilgrimage's domestic political impact by Iranian officials may explain their apparent neglect of its potential as an avenue for influence over neighbouring Iraq.

This can also be seen in the manner in which the Iranian state oversees the trip at the highest levels of the government. On paper, the Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization is a branch of Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance; in practice, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i maintains a permanent liaison to the agency and exercises veto power over all its decisions. The supreme leader's liaison office also selects and trains Shiite clerics who accompany every SHAMSA tour group as spiritual guides. Among other

conditions, candidates for the guide position must pass a test of their "political knowledge" and must demonstrate their obedience to the principle of "absolute clerical political rule."

In April 2009, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad ordered a number of administrative changes in the Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization but reversed course after receiving a public rebuke from Khamene'i, who called the president's move "inappropriate." The public disagreement between Iran's two most powerful public figures indicates that deep political sensitivities surround the pilgrimage to Iraq.

Iraqi Shiism's "Quietist" Influence

Despite the attention given to these matters by the office of the supreme leader, the government's efforts to co-opt the pilgrimage face serious competition from a rival force: an independent, Iraqi-based Shiite religious leadership that refuses to recognize the religious authority of Tehran's rulers but which is increasingly popular inside Iran. Rather than strengthening Iranian influence over Iraqi affairs, the pilgrimage seems to be enhancing the popularity of Iraq-based religious leaders inside Iran. This popularity will likely be a source of concern for the Iranian government in the years to come.

The most influential of these leaders is Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. Though born in Iran, the 83-year-old Sistani has spent most of his life in Iraq, studying and teaching in the shrine city of Najaf. Sistani enjoys an undisputed position as the most respected Shiite religious leader in Iraq, his popularity due in large part to his reputation for independence and integrity. His steadfast support for elections played a critical role in Iraq's post-Saddam democratic transition, but at the same time, he has been careful to avoid association with any political faction. Unlike many Iranian religious leaders, Sistani receives no government stipend.

Sistani's popularity extends into Iran where it has deepened in recent years, partly due to the pilgrimage. The Iranian-American scholar Mehdi Khalaji cites estimates that "nearly 80 percent of Shiite worshippers" in Iran "follow Ayatollah Ali Sistani" as their spiritual leader. This is echoed by Johns Hopkins' Vali Nasr who attributes Sistani's rising popularity to two factors: the influence of pilgrims returning from Iraq, and widespread cynicism toward Tehran's corrupt religious establishment. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, the Iranian mullahs have transformed themselves from humble scholars into an elite that controls the country's political and economic life. Sistani's popularity reflects a genuine hunger in Iran for an independent religious leadership untainted by connections and corruption.

While Sistani holds no formal political office, his authority over Iraq's Shiite shrines is recognized by the Baghdad government and is formalized by law 19 (the awkwardly named "Administration of the Holy Shrines and the Noble Shiite Pilgrimage Sites Law"). Passed by the Iraqi parliament in 2005, it directs the minister of Islamic endowments to appoint directors for each of Iraq's shrines from among "qualified individuals of integrity who possess a good reputation and who have been approved by the supreme religious authority (*marja*)—being the religious scholar from among the scholars of Najaf whose authority is accepted by the majority of Shiites in Iraq."

The custodians appointed by Ayatollah Sistani maintain tight control over the pilgrimage observances in Iraq's shrine cities. For example, before the January 2012 Arbäeen pilgrimage commemorating the martyrdom of Muhammad's grandson Hussein bin Ali, the management of the Imam Hussein shrine in Karbala issued a very detailed set of instructions covering matters of safety, hygiene, and security, as well as ritual guidelines. The governor of Karbala province also affirmed the exclusive authority of Sistani's followers to regulate and administer pilgrims' activities in and around the holy place.

Sistani's disciples are thus provided with a platform to deliver their religious message, which eschews the fiery political rhetoric favoured by Tehran's religious establishment. These views are disseminated through traditional Friday sermons at the shrines and, since the fall of Saddam Hussein, through modern media outlets as well. Every month, the Imam Ali shrine at Najaf issues a glossy Arabic magazine called *al-Wilaya*. The Kazimiyah shrine in Baghdad publishes no fewer than three magazines while the Imam Hussein shrine in Karbala has its own satellite TV channel, which began broadcasting in 2009.

The religious discourse promoted by Sistani's acolytes is devotional, not political. Their publications extol traditional religious values of piety, learning, and self-improvement while eschewing the politicized rhetoric of Iran's state-sponsored religious institutions. One searches these publications in vain for references to America as "the global arrogance" or to political opponents as "spreaders of corruption on earth." There is no talk of Western or "Zionist" conspiracies against Islam. The sermons given at the shrines during Friday prayers reflect this same pietistic outlook. When the preachers discuss politics, they do so in very general terms, calling for national unity and speaking about the Iraqi people's desire for development. They refrain from endorsing specific political parties, from issuing fiery condemnations of the United States, or from discussing the politics of neighbouring Iran.

At the same time, while the Shiite scholars of Najaf do not share the Iranian government's radical ideology, neither Sistani nor any other Iraqi ayatollah calls for a revolution in Iran. Even at the height of Iran's 2009 election crisis, Sistani and the other Iraq-based ayatollahs kept silent, refusing to endorse either the protesters or the government, carefully avoid meddling in neighbouring politics.

The position of Iraq's Shiite religious establishment reflects the traditional "quietist" school of Shiite thought, in which religious leaders can offer advice on political matters but do not take sides in the struggle for power. Adopting this approach, Sistani's followers in Iran can accept Khamene'i as a medieval-style king or sultan, deserving of obedience inasmuch as he maintains order and defends the country from external threats but devoid of religious authority. While Sistani's followers are not active supporters of the Iranian opposition, the existence of a popular and revered religious leadership outside of state control presents a serious challenge to Tehran's theocratic government.

The Looming Confrontation

The ideology underlying Iran's Islamic Republic holds that religion and politics are inseparable. Iran's rulers insist that opposing the regime is the same as opposing Islam. To drive this point home, the Iranian government puts its domestic enemies on trial not for treason but for the crime of "waging war against God" (*moharebeh*). To make these claims convincing, the Islamic Republic needs more than the passive acquiescence of religious leaders; it needs their active endorsement of the regime's claims. This, however, is something that neither Sistani nor any of Iraq's Shiite religious leaders have been willing to give.

In the aftermath of the 2009 post-election crackdown, a number of religious leaders inside Iran began voicing their displeasure with Khamene'i's policies. The regime responded by attacking these clerics' houses and offices, censoring their Internet sites, and in the case of the prominent cleric Ayatollah Yusof Sanei, having a pro-regime religious body deny his religious credentials. But the unintended consequences of this crackdown may only add to Iraq's prestige as a more independent and more legitimate center of Shiite Islam. The refusal of Iraqi clerics to endorse political repression in Iran may also serve to embolden religious opponents of Tehran's current regime.

In the coming years, Iran's ruling elite will likely take measures designed to either co-opt or subvert the Shiite religious leadership based in Iraq's shrine cities. A hint of what these measures might look like was provided recently when Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi-Shahrudi, the former head of Iran's judiciary and a close ally of Khamene'i, opened an office in Najaf. It was rumoured that Shahrudi, who was born in Iraq in 1949 to parents of Iranian descent, would soon return to Iraq to serve as a counterweight to Sistani. These rumours received negative coverage in Iraqi news media, and Shahrudi's office denied he was planning to move back to Iraq. Meanwhile, Iran's semi-official Fars News Agency blamed the Shahrudi controversy on "Zionist-Wahhabi media in Iraq and the region," which it said were "trying to create divisions between Iraqi and Iranian Shiites."

The Shahrudi affair has apparently affected political relations between the two countries. During a visit to Iran in April 2013, Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki was photographed meeting with Shahrudi. During the same visit, Maliki also met with Iran's deputy president Mohammed Reza Rahimi, who welcomed him by wishing for a "perfect union" between Iran and Iraq. The crudeness of this messaging provoked criticism in Iraq, forcing Maliki's allies to issue clarifications. At the same time, emphasizing close political ties with Iraq may be a way for Tehran to distract the Iranian public's attention from the intra-Shiite rivalry, providing another example of how domestic religious concerns shape Iranian policy.

With its efforts to promote Ayatollah Shahrudi stalled, Iran may instead focus on co-opting or undermining the Najaf *hawzah* (religious academy), Iraq's most important religious institution. The *hawzah* is a loosely organized academy, which operates through time-honoured but unwritten guidelines. There are no professional administrators, written exams, or formal budgets; the academy operates through private donations and personal relationships between teacher and student. This decentralized system has insulated it from political influences for centuries, but there are those who argue that the academy should be reformed and modernized. Any formalization of the *hawzah* system could make it more open to political influence, especially from Iran's Islamic Republic, a fact which has not gone unnoted by Iraqi observers.

Ayatollah Sistani is presently the most respected figure in the Najaf *hawzah*, his position the result of his personal reputation, not any formal process. He and other Najaf-based scholars oversee large charitable and educational projects, paid for by private fundraising but which could be vulnerable to competition and co-option from Iran. Already, Khamene'i's office distributes stipends to students at the Najaf *hawzah*, supplementing but also competing with stipends offered by Sistani and other Iraqis.

Sistani is currently in his eighties. When he dies, Iran may use its influence to back a particular candidate to succeed him or to prevent the emergence of any clear successor. However, such efforts will likely face determined opposition from Iraqi Shiites and from the many Iranian Shiites who now look to Iraq for religious guidance.

If the Iranian government fails to co-opt or undermine Iraq's religious leadership, it may try instead to exert tighter control over the pilgrimage itself as a means of blocking any destabilizing religious influence from Iraq. Iranian authorities already ban non-SHAMSA pilgrims from crossing into Iraq by land, ostensibly for security reasons, although pilgrims who reject the official group tours can still book flights into Iraq. Iran's minister of culture and Islamic guidance, Mohammed Hosseini, recently encouraged prospective pilgrims to join official group tours, which he described as "materially and spiritually more suitable" to their needs.

Future crackdowns on independent pilgrims or measures to tighten further political control of SHAMSA tours may provide indications of growing distress within the Iranian government

about the pilgrimage's potentially subversive political influence. However, Tehran will have to act with caution. The adoption of repressive measures against Shiite pilgrims could be another nail in the coffin of the Islamic Republic's domestic legitimacy.

Conclusions

The re-emergence of Iraq as a Shiite religious centre requires a re-evaluation of the Iran-Iraq relationship. Tehran may exercise numerous forms of influence over its smaller, weaker, and poorer neighbour, but when it comes to religious affairs, the influence seems to be running mostly in the opposite direction. In the coming years, Iranian authorities may be forced to devote their attention to counteracting Iraqi religious influence inside their country. The pilgrimage is a major avenue for this influence, which makes control of the pilgrimage a vital interest for the government in Tehran.

The contest between Iran's theocracy and Iraq's Shiite religious scholars is asymmetrical and highly volatile. Tehran enjoys vast economic and political resources and has a record of cunning and ruthless responses to perceived threats. Ayatollah Sistani and the Najaf *hawzah* have none of these advantages, but they do have a strong and growing base of popular support inside Iran. Neither side seems eager for a direct confrontation, which would have dangerous and unpredictable consequences for all involved.

It is too early to tell how this contest will end. Perhaps Tehran will neutralize Iraq's independent religious establishment, buying the Islamic Republic a renewed lease on life until the next crisis comes along. Alternatively, the rebirth of Najaf as a world centre of Shiism may deprive Iran's present rulers of their religious pretensions, paving the way for the end to the regime's Islamist system. But with close to two million Iranian pilgrims visiting Iraq each year, an amicable divorce between these two rival interpretations of Shiism seems unlikely.

Until one side or the other prevails, the religious dimension will play an important role in Iranian-Iraqi relations. Observers of these affairs should pay close attention to the pilgrimage, which may in fact be the single most important bilateral tie between the two countries. For policymakers, the pilgrimage is an important reminder that, even with all eyes turned on Iran, events in Iraq may continue to play a pivotal role in the region's future.

2. The Day After

Even with al Qaeda making gains across the Middle East and Iran still enriching uranium in its march to a nuclear breakout, John Kerry's attention is focused on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. He has visited Israel 10 times since becoming secretary of state. The aim of Kerry's feverish shuttle diplomacy is to hammer out a framework agreement between Israelis and Palestinians that will be long on generalities and short on thorny details and, as such, will enable peace talks to move forward. The objective is to establish an independent Palestinian state and to end the conflict.

The strategic goal of this immense investment of American time and prestige is grounded in the conventional view, evidently shared by Kerry, that achieving Israeli-Palestinian peace will improve America's relations with the Arab-Muslim world and foster stability in the Middle East. But a little reflection upon the character of the conflict should raise serious doubts about the cogency of this view. As improbable as a deal is at present, if Kerry really were able to broker a peace accord, it would most likely engender a harsh backlash, thereby damaging America's relations with the Arab-Muslim world and undermining stability in the region.

If this claim seems counterintuitive, that's because one of the basic assumptions animating the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is that the Arab-Muslim world in general and the Palestinians in particular are angry over the failure to establish a Palestinian state in the occupied territories. The main grievance in the Arab-Muslim world, however, is not that in 1967 Israel occupied the West Bank and has denied the Palestinians their right to national self-determination ever since, but that in 1948 the Jews uprooted Palestinians from their homes and built a state upon stolen Palestinian land.

This narrative ignores inconvenient facts like the ancient Jewish connection to the Land of Israel, the Arab refusal to accept the U.N. partition plan, which the Israelis accepted, the war that the Arab states then initiated in 1948 in order to destroy the incipient Jewish state and throw the Jews into the sea, and the subsequent expulsion of nearly one million Jews from Arab countries. But playing the victim distorts perceptions, and the governing perception in mainstream Arab-Muslim discourse is that the establishment of the state of Israel was a crime, and to accept the existence of the state of Israel is to acquiesce in that crime.

Among Arab regimes and the Palestinian leadership, the nearly universal response to the founding of the state of Israel has been to keep the Palestinians exiled in refugee camps until they can return to their homes in present-day Israeli cities such as Jaffa, Haifa, etc. The Palestinian refugees' desire to return to their original homes occupies a central place in Palestinian political discourse, and the tenor of Palestinian discourse reflects and influences the character of Arab-Muslim political rhetoric in general.

So let's imagine for a moment that through a shrewd mixture of diplomatic pressure and financial incentives the United States succeeds in brokering a peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. The Israelis won't sign on to a deal that enables millions of Palestinians to move to Jaffa, Haifa, etc., because this would mean the end of Israel as a state with a Jewish majority. Instead, the Palestinians will be absorbed into the nascent Palestinian state.

What would be the response in the Arab-Muslim world? Joy that the Palestinians have finally realized their right to national self-determination? Perhaps. More likely, however, is that with the 66-year-old dream of Palestinian return outstripped by reality, idealists and opportunists alike will characterize the establishment of a Palestinian state within 1967 borders as a historic betrayal. If recent history is any indication, Islamists will rally the masses against the dictatorial Arab leaders who consented to the betrayal, and popular opinion in the Arab world will respond accordingly.

And it is the United States that would be blamed for propping up these leaders and pushing them to betray the Palestinians' right to return to their homes in present-day Israel. The response to Israeli-Palestinian peace will be anti-American rage and regional instability

Viewing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from this relatively stark but straightforward perspective also helps to render intelligible the present negotiating positions of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas. Netanyahu demands that the Palestinians recognize the right to Jewish national self-determination in the Land of Israel because he believes that the failure to grant such recognition is the root problem of the present conflict. Likewise, Abbas refuses to grant such recognition. As the talking points outlined in the internal Palestinian Authority documents published by *Al Jazeera* as "The Palestine Papers" explained, "recognizing Israel as a 'Jewish state' would likely be treated by Israel and third states as Palestinian recognition of Israel's demographic objections to the right of return and, by extension, an implicit waiver of the right of return."

The pursuit of peace in the Middle East can be intoxicating stuff, but a sober approach to peace-making would be to treat the Palestinian refugee problem before trying to conclude a deal.

President Obama has spoken eloquently in various contexts about the importance of compelling different sides to a conflict to face difficult truths. That's why the president went to Jerusalem and told an Israeli audience that the occupation must end. For the sake of peace in the Middle East, President Obama can also tell a Palestinian audience that there will be no right of return.

If, however, the Palestinian position regarding the refugees proves to be uncompromising, then at least the Americans will know that the enticing yet ever elusive vision of Israeli-Palestinian peace is, at present, no more than a Middle Eastern mirage.

3. The last Christian in the Middle East?

The joyous Christmas mass celebrated in Bethlehem did nothing to dispel the tragedy of the Christian community in the Middle East, which, in the shadow of the "Arab Winter", is fighting a desperate battle for personal and economic security, a life of dignity and freedom of worship.

Facing increasing Muslim persecution, the Christians in the Middle East are emigrating as fast as they can, reminiscent of the mid-20th century exodus of the Jews from the Arab countries, when they fled persecution, murder, rape and the theft of their property at the hands of gangs of militant Muslims.

Qatar's official TV station, Al Jazeera, which encourages Islamist terrorist attacks against Israel, against the Syrian regime and against the Egyptian government, this year decided that holiday cheer required false accusations against Israel for persecuting the Christians in Jerusalem, Nazareth and Bethlehem. Despite the general confusion, chaos and mournful atmosphere of Christmas this year in the "Arab Spring" countries, Qatar TV's plan did not succeed. The reason it did not is that, as Arabs, we can see that Israel is the only place on earth that allows the three main monotheistic faiths complete and unfettered freedom of worship

Recently, the Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK, a British Muslim lobby, announced that "Islamophobia Awareness Month" would be held to combat the growing hatred for Muslim communities in the West. The leaders of the Islamic community in London turned to the media to report that the increasing hatred of Muslims in Europe is unjustified, simply the fruit of a conspiracy backed by "Zionist interests." The campaign includes posters and displays representing Islam as moderate, pluralistic and overflowing with the milk of human kindness, and its leaders as the standard bearers of global inter-religious and interracial coexistence.

In some places, such as Myanmar, Muslims are indeed being grievously victimized (by Buddhists), and these abuses should not be tolerated. And, while most Muslims undoubtedly just wish to be left to live in peace, there seems to be a widening supply, globally, of those who do not. The West has every reason to be afraid: Islamophobia is not a phobia -- an *irrational* fear -- at all.

Many of the most ardent Islamophobes, are, it would appear, Muslims themselves -- those who would like to speak or write freely, without fear; or not be tortured or hanged for sexual preferences among adults that harm no one else; or like to have a say in when and whom they marry; or leave home without permission of a male guardian, or even drive a car; or

who do not wish to be beaten by one's husband, or accused of adultery when raped or submit to female genital mutilation; the list could go on.

The West *should* be afraid: the leaders of radical Islam seem to be intent on expanding their ideology throughout Europe and beyond, cynically exploiting the freedoms of Western democracy to incite the Islamic communities in Europe against Western values, and constructing and enabling terrorist cells. After two World Trade Centre bombings in 1993 and 2001; the London tube bombing in 2005; the Madrid railway station bombing; Chechen attacks in Russia, including the Beslan school and two recent Islamic suicide bombings in Russia; attacks on synagogues in Argentina and Venezuela; the recent massacres of Egypt's Christian Copts, who predated the Muslims there by centuries -- not to mention repeated attacks on the U.S. from 1973 in Lebanon onwards, and including the attack on the Khobar Towers, Kenya and Tanzania, the USS Cole; repeated aircraft hijackings from the Munich Olympics of 1972 to the TWA takeover; the shoe bomber; the underwear bomber, the Times Square car bomber, the attempted LAX bombing in 1999; the Fort Hood, Texas, murders by the self-described "Soldier of Allah," U.S. Army Major Malik Nidal Hasan; the bombings in Buenos Aires; a bus bombing in 2011 in Bulgaria; the attack on the US Consulate in Benghazi; the murder in the Netherlands of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh and the concurrent threats to Geert Wilders and Ayaan Hirsi Ali; the attempted murders of the cartoonist Kurt Westergaard and the journalist Lars Hedegaard; the cartoon riots of 2006; the kidnapping, torture and murder of Ilan Halimi and the Toulouse shootings in France; the Boston Marathon bombings; the murder in Britain of Drummer Lee Rigby, plus countless episodes of death threats, intimidation, coercion, attempted murders, and malicious lawsuits in both Europe and Canada - none of which even includes attacks on Israel; Christians in Africa, such as Nigeria and the Sudan, or the Sunni-Shi'ite wars in which Muslims continue to slaughter each other virtually every week [Iran-Iraq war; Syria; Pakistan; Iraq] -- if you add in the open declaration of Islamic sheikhs of their intention to take over the world and force the "infidels" convert -- what is puzzling is why "Islamophobia" is even being discussed. It would seem there is a lot to be "phobic" about.

If it were only a problem of rhetoric, of boasts and militant Islamic emotionalism, the West could sleep in peace, but it is a problem of the active involvement of high-ranking Islamic community leaders inciting their followers against their Western hosts, with personal involvement in organizing and leading terrorist activities and training jihad fighters for future attacks on institutions and individuals in the West. It was not a matter of chance that the American Edward Snowden leaked the information that the West monitored the Islamic enclaves in European cities and was consequently preparing for the worst possible scenario.

Without a doubt Al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafist-jihadi organizations have done untold damage to the West, as well as to Muslims like me, who do not want bloodshed and Islamic terrorism, and do not identify with their objectives. Under such circumstances, it is hard to improve the image of the Islamic community, where so many of its members are a party to anti-Western incitement and terrorism.

Spokesmen for the Islamic community are apparently unwilling to grapple with the situation. They do not take responsibility for their own actions and blame everyone except themselves, and especially the Jews. They claim that hatred of Islam began when Salman Rushdie published *The Satanic Verses*. They minimize or deny the importance, and even the existence, of the mass-casualty Islamic terrorist attacks planned and carried out from within the main Islamic communities in the cities of Europe, such as the Sept. 11 attacks on the U.S. and the many terrorist attacks carried out against civilian populations around the world since that time.

At the beginning of November 2013, representatives of Christians in the Middle East met in Beirut to discuss the persecution and murder of Christians by gangs of radical Islamic militant thugs in the so-called "Arab Spring" countries. Their final statements were empty, pathetic and fairly hopeless. They agreed that Christians were persecuted and murdered; their women raped; their property stolen and their churches burned by Muslim Brotherhood operatives. And they agreed that arsonists repeatedly burned the Coptic Virgin Mary Church in Egypt and the authorities repeatedly did nothing to keep it from happening.

But while the interim government in Egypt did outlaw the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization -- accusing its operatives of repeated acts of arson against Coptic churches and sites in Egypt, and premeditated attacks on the Coptic community -- the trend towards eradicating the Christian presence in the region continues unabated, and thus the unprecedented, massive emigration of Christians from the Middle East comes as no surprise. Similar Islamist attacks are being carried out against Christians not only in Egypt, but also in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Nigeria, the Sudan, and more subtly in Iran, where an American, Pastor Saeed Abedini, remains housed in a "violent offenders" prison.

The ethnic cleansing of the Christians in the Middle East perpetrated by the Muslim Brotherhood is rooted in the Islamist concept that Christianity and Judaism, despite both being monotheistic, became irrelevant after Muhammad (saas). Therefore, their existence is temporary, inferior to Islam, and Christians and Jews are *dhimmis*, or a "tolerated" lower caste who must pay a head tax to Muslims for "protection" [from marauding Muslims], and who will eventually have to convert to Islam.

A similar process is ongoing in the city of Bethlehem in Palestine. A holy city, it had a Christian majority until, in the wake of the Oslo Accords, Israel withdrew, turning it over to the Palestinian Authority. Until then, the city had been 95% Christian, but most Christians were forced to leave their homes and find other places to reside, and Muslims from the surrounding villages took up residence. Currently the population of Bethlehem is 65% Muslim. It is not difficult to imagine what would happen to Christians and Jews if Israel also turned Jerusalem over to the Palestinian Authority.

During the Christmas mass in Bethlehem, Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas claimed that Jesus was a Palestinian. It was a pathetic attempt, this time made by the Palestinians, to distort history and the principles of both the Islamic and Christian faiths for the sake of political Palestinian advancement. Senior sheikhs in the Arab-Muslim world and Palestinian religious leaders in Al-Aqsa mosque all obstinately and fervently claim that there never was a Jewish Temple in Jerusalem; that it is all a Zionist lie. The claim is not only false; its objective is to dispossess the Jews and rob them of their historical "blessed land," even though it was promised to them by the Holy Qur'an.

If and when the claim that there was no Jewish Temple in Jerusalem becomes acceptable, the Christian narrative of Jesus, who threw the money-lenders out of the Temple, also logically becomes a fairy tale with no basis in fact -- all for the sake of justifying Palestinian fantasies and to negate the right of the Jews to their historically capital city.

Sheikh Ra'ed Salah, the leader of the Islamic Movement -- the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Israel -- is also a cog in the defraud-and-deceive machine. Interviewed by Al-Jazeera last month, he claimed that Islam defends the Christians and Muslims in Jerusalem -- and this is from the mouth of the Islamic cleric who for years, in collaboration with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, has spearheaded the effort to oust the Christians from their religious seats in Jerusalem. The Islamic Movement also tried to construct a mosque at the entrance to the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, an attempt which was foiled by the Jews.

The fact, like it or not, is that under the rule of the Jews in Israel, the Christian and Muslim communities live in complete security and have absolute freedom of worship. Churches are not burned. Mosques are not burned. Neither Christians nor Muslims are attacked when they leave their houses of prayer. The Pope's upcoming visit to Bethlehem is apparently meant to show the Christians in the Middle East that they have not been abandoned by the Holy See - but as an act of reassurance, it is "too little too late." The Christians in the Western world are organizing to defend themselves, and taking security steps which radical Islamists call "Islamophobia."

The increasing speed with which the Christians of the Middle East are fleeing would suggest that the battle for a regional Christian presence has already been lost. Those standing in the breach are a handful of Christians in Israel who remain an obstacle to the rising tide of political Islam threatening Europe, Africa and the USA. At the rate Christians are leaving the Arab countries, it is entirely possible that the next time the Pope celebrates mass in Bethlehem, he will be the last Christian in the Middle East.

4. Is UNESCO the new address of the Arab narrative?

The opening of an exhibition, "People, Book, Land -- The 3,500 Year Relationship of the Jewish People to the Holy Land," which has been two years in the planning, and for which the Simon Wiesenthal Centre gave UNESCO unprecedented control over editing and vetting as the price of co-sponsorship, was scheduled for Monday evening, Jan. 20.

Thousands of invitations were sent, dignitaries had begun to arrive in Paris, the pictures and descriptions for the exhibit were in the process of being hung on the walls, all in anticipation of the grand opening in Paris at UNESCO headquarters.

But at 9:00 p.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 14, the SWC received a letter from the office of Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). That letter contained shocking news.

The exhibition, two years in the planning, was cancelled.

Why?

Hold on to your hats, because you have to read this carefully: The exhibition was cancelled because the member states of the Arab League sent a letter (on Jan. 14) explaining an important policy matter to UNESCO. What was that important policy matter? That "the exhibition could create potential obstacles related to the peace process in the Middle East."

There was no other reason given. Just that the Arab League pointed out to UNESCO - an entity which is by definition, by charter, by its own insistence, is solely concerned with Education, Science and Culture - that the exhibit could interfere with the Middle East peace process. And on the very day that the Arab League raised the issue, UNESCO pulled the plug on this exhibition. An exhibition, by the way, for which UNESCO insisted it could - and it did - hire its own scholars to vet and edit every single word, document, picture, map and representation.

So, on the very day that the very first peep was heard from the Arab League, and on the basis of the League's position - without any room for discussion, negotiation or representation - the exhibit which internationally acclaimed architects, historians and every other kind of scholar in the field laboured over for years, was cancelled.

How to catalogue the levels and layers of insult to the Jewish people?

Actually, the rabbis who head the Simon Wiesenthal Centre did a pretty good job of that. The letter they sent to UNESCO's Madam Bokova is worthy of an exhibition all on its own.

To think: Jews standing up for themselves, their cause and their years of hard labour, calling out an international entity which had demanded, and been given, so much just so that the Jews could, for once, be treated in the same way and with the same dignity as everyone else. That didn't happen, but the full-throated response from Rabbis Hier and Cooper is impressive.

They started out reminding the good madam that the SWC had followed every request and condition laid down by UNESCO in order to ensure a smooth process and a successful event. Then they reminded her that she was the one who put her own signature on the agreement to launch the joint undertaking. And then they told her what they expected of her:

"We insist that you live up to your responsibilities and commitments as the co-organizer of this exhibition by overturning this naked political move that has no place in an institution whose mandate is defined by education, science, and culture -- not politics. Failure to do so would confirm to the world that UNESCO is the official address of the Arab narrative of the Middle East."

Rabbi Cooper spoke with this author on Thursday, Jan. 16. In Cooper's view, the exhibition was not pulled because of the content. It is a purely historical body of work. And if there are critics out there who cannot believe the SWC could be trusted to ensure absolute honesty and partiality about the topic, surely the UNESCO-appointed academics made sure that was the case.

"No, pulling the exhibition had nothing to do with the content, it was simply the very idea - truth or not - that Jews have had a 3,500 years long relationship with the Holy Land" that the Arab League could not permit and the League's displeasure was not something UNESCO could abide for even a single day.

"But the fact - and it is a fact - of our historic three and a half millennia-long connection to the land is now being treated as something that is subject to negotiations" is both galling and appalling.

Cooper continued, "This episode makes it clear that there really are two sets of rules. One set of rules for non-Jews, and another, ever-shifting, always-worsening set of rules for the Jews."

Israel's ambassador to international organizations, Nimrod Barkat, dashed off a letter to UNESCO's Bokova and the other dignitaries involved. He described the cancellation of the opening and the "postponement" of the entire exhibition as unjust and discriminatory towards Israel.

Barkat also reminded them all that UNESCO has "hosted numerous events and exhibitions accentuating the relations between the Muslim and Christian Religions with the Holy Land and of course holds its annual "Palestine Day."

THE U.S. WITHDREW EVEN ITS LIMITED SPONSORSHIP USING THE SAME LANGUAGE AS THE ARAB LEAGUE

But there is an additional dimension to the problem.

There are fewer than a handful of nations sponsoring the "Jewish People's Connection to the Holy Land." In fact, there are only three national sponsors: Israel, Canada and Montenegro. Not even the United States was a sponsor!

Rabbi Cooper explained that the U.S. was asked, but declined, claiming it never sponsors any exhibition unless it was involved from the outset. Fair enough. But what the U.S. State Department did agree to do was to co-sponsor the opening for the exhibition. The one on Jan. 20.

But on Jan. 9, the SWC received the first in the series of disturbing missives. This one was from Kelly Siekman at the State Dept. Siekman informed Rabbi Cooper that "We pledge the full support of the United States to your [other] exhibit opening in January and to the important and related programs promoting holocaust remembrance at UNESCO. **At this sensitive juncture in the ongoing Middle East peace process, and after thoughtful consideration with review at the highest levels, we have made the decision that the United States will not be able to co-sponsor the current exhibit during its display at UNESCO headquarters.**"

Ah. Once again: give us a good show about all those dead Jews. The ones who died in agony, powerless and pitiful. That's a show we'll be happy to sponsor and kick in money to buy fancy food for anytime! But pictures and other historical evidence showing the Jews were connected to the Holy Land, that Jews are entitled to something because they existed somewhere, long ago, before other religions even began? Not so much.

Rabbi Cooper explained that he is flying out to Paris on Friday and that the SWC will hold a press conference on Monday, the day on which the opening of the "3,500 year Relationship of the Jews to the Holy Land" exhibition should have taken place.

"Instead," Cooper said, "we will call on Secretary of State Kerry to clear up any misunderstandings. We will call on him to make it clear that there is a legitimate and historic connection of this people and that land. Our exhibition does not promote a political position, it evidences a historical fact."

And Rabbi Cooper spoke to the irony in the letter from the State Department which eagerly looks forward to promoting Holocaust remembrances, but finds the world a bit too sensitive to handle any acknowledgment of the truth regarding the relationship between the Jews and the Holy Land.

"For us at the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, where so much of what we do deals with death and torture, this was an opportunity for us to focus not on war, but on rebirth, of language, of the people. Of course the exhibition deals with other people who also have connections to the Holy Land, Christians, Muslims, the Ottomans. It was supposed to be a positive celebration."

Yes, it was supposed to be a positive celebration of re-birth and connections. Instead it became yet another example of the refusal to publicly celebrate and recognize anything but poor, powerless, dead Jews.

5. There's reason for optimism on Arab-Israeli peace

It's quite possible that of all the people writing about the Arab-Israeli conflict these days, I'm the only one with any confidence that the current peace talks will lead to a positive outcome.

Generally, betting on a Middle East peace deal is the political equivalent of playing Three Card Monte. It's impossible to win. But, at the same time, there are real reasons for optimism about where this process might lead. In fact, Israelis and Palestinians may be closer to peace today than any point in the past 65 years.

This is, in part, the result of a number of historical currents that have come together at this moment. Israelis continue to remain generally supportive of a two-state solution; the Palestinians, while less supportive, have seen their political leverage slowly dissipate; and perhaps above all, the rejectionists on both sides but particularly on the Palestinian side (and I'm speaking here of Hamas) are in an unusually weak position.

But historical currents by themselves are not determinative. There is also the role of personality and contingency. Enter John Kerry.

When Kerry began his quixotic pursuit of a comprehensive peace deal, many were skeptical. But even the doubters gave begrudging hosannas to the approach he had taken. Unlike the flawed Oslo process, Kerry insisted that this round of peace talks aim towards the achievement of a final settlement on all outstanding issues. Even more importantly, he brought the neighboring Arab states into the mix by incorporating the Arab Peace Initiative, which calls for full recognition of Israel in return for acceptance of a Palestinian state. This had the effect of both giving Israel a major sweetener for a deal but also offered the prospect of marginalizing Hamas even further by drying up their support in the Arab world. It was a strong starting point.

Since then Kerry has kept up the pressure and created a negotiation structure that left both sides (but particularly the Israelis) with little choice to move forward or be blamed for any breakdown in talks. Case in point, earlier this month Kerry travelled to the region in order to get sign off from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Abbas on a framework agreement that would serve as the template for future negotiation. While the framework represents a rough set of principles, it will likely establish certain baseline ideas, like a Palestinian state oriented around the 1967 lines, that are anathema to the Israeli right-wing. As a State Department official said to me, "We strongly believe that the framework would be significant breakthrough in the process as we move toward a final status agreement/peace treaty."

This will likely leave a clear set of options for Bibi: sign the framework agreement and set Israel on the path to peace or don't and risk a break with the USA or worse (more on this in a second). Of course, much will depend on how decisively the framework agreement lays out the clear outlines of a final deal – and the extent to which it forces Netanyahu to adopt positions that he and his right-wing supporters have long rejected. But Netanyahu has bobbed and weaved his way during these negotiations and has refused to make conclusive moves in the direction of peace. Kerry is making it increasingly difficult for him to continue that charade.

The US secretary of state, however, is not alone in tightening the vise on Netanyahu. The Palestinians are playing their part as well – though, truth be told, more out of a position of weakness than strength. Considering the inclination of the Palestinian political leadership to, in the depressingly accurate words of former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban, never miss an opportunity, it is quite possible (and many have speculated) that Bibi's approach to Kerry's gambit was to hope the Palestinian leadership would blow things up.

But with the head of Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas as supportive of a two-state solution as any Palestinian leader ever; with Hamas in a historically weak position and with Palestinians having largely turned their back on violence as a political tool, the Palestinian leadership have stuck along with Kerry's diplomacy even they are almost certain to get something less than a good deal. Try as hard as he might to conjure examples of Palestinian duplicity, Netanyahu has failed, putting him and Israel in the uncomfortable position that if the talks don't move forward, it is Israel that will likely shoulder the blame – a fact not lost on the Israeli Prime Minister.

This matters more than it did in the past because it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the growing signs of Israel's international isolation. For those not getting the hint, the message from Europe and, in particular, the European Union has been fairly clear. Over the past several weeks there have been repeated examples of European countries and companies putting Israel on notice. There were the guidelines put forward by the EU last August banning EU grants or loans to Israeli companies doing business in the West Bank. Last month, a Dutch water company ended its business relationship with an Israeli firm that operates in the occupied territories and the UK Trade & Investment, a business promotion book, warned companies about the "reputational implications" of collaborating with Israeli settlements.

Yet at the same time the EU has said that a deal with the Palestinians would open up a floodgate of new investment and closer economic ties with the Jewish state. The Europeans have used both the carrot and stick with Israel – and made abundantly clear what will be the consequences of failure.

Finally, there is the pressure coming from inside Netanyahu's own government. Over the past several weeks, two of Bibi's more prominent coalition members – Tzipi Livni, who is helming the peace talks and Yair Lapid, who helms the second largest voting bloc in the Israeli Knesset - have hinted that they expect the peace process to move forward ... or else. Livni's departure would not be a major problem for Bibi, but Lapid leaving would be something else altogether. It would force Netanyahu to create a new coalition in the Israeli Knesset – one composed almost exclusively of far right and religious parties.

Bibi could, of course, choose to go down that road or he could move forward with negotiations, sign the framework agreement and hope that an exit ramp somehow materializes along the way. In short, he could do what the recently deceased Ariel Sharon would never do - let others dictate decisions about Israel's future.

To some extent, however, the train has already left the station. Anything less than a deal in these talks – no matter who is blamed for their collapse – will almost certainly lead to a very dark future for Israel. No longer will a nation that rules over millions of Palestinian Arab, and denies the majority of them full political rights, be able to label itself the Middle East's only true democracy. Relations with the USA (particularly with the Obama Administration) will inevitably suffer. How much? No one can say for sure, but that uncertainty alone should concern Israelis.

The harsh criticism last week of Kerry by Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Ya'alon – and the tough US reaction to it – offers one potential preview. Finally, the international sanctions and boycott effort will only gather steam; as too will Israel's growing international isolation.

For Netanyahu, the choice to make peace and give up the West Bank is increasingly the only good option he has left. The question now is whether Bibi realizes that the game is up or whether he fully appreciates the consequences of failure. The argument for optimism on the peace process is that never before have the historical forces been so well-aligned for the achievement of a final deal.

State Department officials speak to the "courageous decisions" taken on both sides to date: namely Netanyahu's agreement to release Palestinian prisoners and Abbas's assent to put off efforts to "upgrade the status of the Palestinians in international organizations". But, of course, far more difficult steps will need to be made to reach a deal that is acceptable to all sides. Ultimately, any breakthrough will come down to political leaders willing to make a decisive break with the past. We're not there yet.

6. How Israel went from a beacon of hope to a 'normal' outpost of reaction

The literature on Jewish self-hate is vast; not so the literature on Jewish self-love.

Max Weber once proposed that oppressed peoples develop a "theodicy of dis-privilege," a way of explaining to themselves (and compensating for) their persecution, and that the most common such theodicies rely on the assertion by the oppressed of their superior moral virtue. After all, the others hate unreasonably, while we, the innocent, harm no one.

The sense of moral advantage was and remains to this day a prominent aspect of Jewish self-understanding, but it peaked back in 1967, when, on the eve of the Six Day War, all the world saw embattled Israel as Good and bellicose Egypt and Syria as Evil. Since then, we've learned – reluctantly – that the fact of Jewishness does not provide immunity against either folly or felony. We've learned, reluctantly, that power does indeed tend to corrupt, a lesson our earlier impotence had blocked us from knowing up close.

What has Israel meant to America's Jews? It has revolutionized our sense of Jewish possibility. We can, after all, be soldiers and farmers, we can be hustlers and hard-hats, we can, for better and for worse, be "normal." Once, we yearned for the day when there would be in (then) Palestine a Jewish jail, with a Jewish guard on the outside and a Jewish prisoner on the inside. At the same time, however, we yearned for a Zion that would be a light unto the nations.

We wanted normalcy, and we also wanted exceptionalism.

For a while, exceptionalism seemed victorious: The immigrants were absorbed, and the deserts did bloom, and the citizen-soldiers acted with noteworthy restraint.

Now, normalcy is in the ascendant. Consumerism is in the centre ring, bracketed on the one side by messianic fundamentalism (religious and national) and on the other, nearly in the shadows, by a secular messianism that seems increasingly a charming anachronism.

For America's Jews, it is easier to live with the earlier myths, rich resources of vicarious pride. We prefer not to know the whole truth, and when the knowledge is unavoidable, we blame its messengers and do our best to dissemble, in no small measure because we fear the enemies of the Jews may otherwise overhear. Even in our internal conversations, we are less than candid.

The most grievous consequence is the discrepancy between the Israel we celebrate and the Israel our own children observe. Where now? We grow apart. Here, religion – Judaism – along with a vague sense of Jewish peoplehood make a mess of pottage. And there? There Judaism suffers from all the distortions to which an empowered state religion is vulnerable. In the end, our Judaism bears little resemblance to Israel's.

During the brief time when peace seemed imminent, we wondered how we might adjust to life without crisis, to an Israel free from peril. Now that the prospect of peace seems at best uncertain, we wonder how to adjust to an Israel whose crisis is in significant measure of its own manufacture. [I have in mind especially the Occupation, but also the accelerating right-wing trajectory of the State.]

But peace or no peace, we shall have to enrich the sense of peoplehood, of a shared Jewish culture, if the connection is to endure. Failing that, there is little ground for intimacy. And that

enrichment is a challenge both to us and to them. They are Israelis; we are Americans. And where and how being Jewish blends with those categories is, so far, a question that has only meagre answers.

In the meantime, there remain politicians to persuade and enemies to rebut. As problematic as the relationship may be, the terrorist threats are real, as are the daily calumnies hurled at Israel, calumnies that lack all sense of proportion. Whatever our private agonies, our memories will not permit us to relax our vigilance.

While Netanyahu is plainly wrong when he claims it is today 1938 again – a trope he seems lately to have dropped – and not every crisis Israel confronts is an existential crisis, as too many of Israel's leaders believe or find it useful to claim, while Israel is hardly a nation "abandoned, alone," the ongoing assault on Israel's very legitimacy is rankling and, at the margins, even dangerous.

Someday, we shall have to contemplate the ironies, the ambiguities, the contradictions; just now, the flames are still smouldering, and they override our confusions. Someday, we shall have to develop a new and more apposite theory of the Israel-Diaspora connection.

That day is coming, but our fears, both the real and the post-traumatic (and yes, also the manipulated) delay it.

7. Stephen Harper's firsthand Israel

On Sunday, Stephen Harper's plane will touch down at David Ben Gurion Airport. When the Prime Minister, a true friend and steadfast supporter, steps onto the tarmac, he will begin his first visit to the region and officially kick off the celebrations of 65 years of diplomatic relations between Israel and Canada. He will also find himself physically between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, the two cities that embody the richness of my country as a meeting point between old and new.

To the east lies Jerusalem, home of the unbroken 3,000-year Jewish presence in the Holy Land. This ancient city is sacred to the world's three great monotheistic religions. Here, Mr. Harper will walk the cobblestone streets passing Christians, Jews and Muslims as they freely make their way to their places of worship. He will also visit Yad Vashem. This world-renowned Holocaust museum stands as a tribute to the six million Jews who were murdered by the Nazis and to the Righteous Among the Nations, non-Jews who risked their own lives to save others.

As the nation's capital, Jerusalem is the seat of government to the only democracy in the Middle East. When Mr. Harper becomes the first Canadian Prime Minister to address our parliament, the Knesset, he will look out and see 120 members who represent all of Israel's mosaic, including the Arabs who make up 20 per cent of the Israel's eight million people. Now more than ever, at a time when the region is mired in violence and instability, Israel shines as a beacon of freedom.

In a difficult neighbourhood, we have faced many threats over the course of our 66-year history. When Mr. Harper stops at the Hula Valley Bird Sanctuary Visitor and Education Centre, which has been named in his honour, he will be less than 20 kilometres from Syria and its civil war – commuting distance between Mississauga and Toronto. His visit will be an opportunity to hear about our security concerns: Halting Iran's nuclear weapons program, which has gone unabated despite the regime's charm offensive; maintaining our security

assets, including our peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan; and finding a negotiated agreement with the Palestinians.

Israel is an island of stability in a sea of volatility. Its modern history is about how a small country (two-thirds the size of Vancouver Island, and half desert) built itself up from scratch. From 1948 to 1952, our population nearly tripled from 600,000 to 1.5 million, with an influx of Jewish refugees from Arab countries and postwar Europe. Lacking in natural resources, the nascent state spent much of its early years as a developing nation.

Of necessity, Israelis transformed ourselves by harnessing the power of science and innovation. Today, we are an advanced OECD nation with more than half of our exports from the high-tech sector. We have become a global leader in the fields that are beginning to define the 21st century: brain research, nanotechnology, agriculture, water technology, solar energy and life sciences. Through our international aid agency, MASHAV, we share our experience with developing countries.

The engine behind our success and the embodiment of the new Israel is located just west of Ben Gurion Airport. Ranked second only to Silicon Valley as a global hub for startups, Tel Aviv is on the cutting edge of technological innovation. It is home to many of the 250 high-tech multinationals (including Intel, Apple and Google) that have set up research centres in Israel. When Mr. Harper receives an honorary doctorate from Tel Aviv University, he will be at the same place where researchers invented the now ubiquitous DiskOnKey flash drive and handheld bar-code scanners. In Israel's economic heartland, he and counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu will discuss ways to deepen bilateral trade, business connections and collaboration in innovation.

It is my hope that when Mr. Harper finds himself back on the tarmac at Ben Gurion, he will board his plane with a multifaceted perspective. His vocal support of Israel will then be reinforced by firsthand experience of a land that may be short on geography and resources, but steeped in history and innovation.

8. Egypt is not a democracy: but it's not nothing either

Warning: The following isn't nice.

The liberal moaning and wailing has begun. The circumstances of the referendum on Egypt's new constitution, the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, and what appears to be the impending crackdown on Hamas have produced calls for "inclusion" and "democratic norms," and the denunciation of the military-backed government. *TIME* Magazine intones, "Egyptians are Voting Away their Freedom." *The Washington Post* called for a suspension of U.S. military aid to Egypt over its "bogus democracy."

That's a rather high hand. What if Egypt doesn't have a "bogus democracy," but an insurgency that needs redress? What if, to Egyptians, the Muslim Brotherhood resembles the Taliban more than it does the Democratic Party of the United States? Remember, the Taliban wasn't entirely unwelcome in Afghanistan in the chaos of the Russian withdrawal. What if Egyptians are driven by the specter of Libyan militias, Iraqi dissolution, Syrian civil war, and the wreckage produced by a single year of Muslim Brotherhood rule? What if Egyptians value perceived security over what they understand about democracy?

If they're wrong or benighted, at a minimum it helps to see their context, rather than arrogantly trying and failing to replace it with our own. This is why "nation-building" fails.

The magic word "democracy" falls out of the mouths of pundits. AEI's Danielle Pletka simply dismissed the referendum as the end of Egypt's democratic experiment.. Michelle Dunne, Senior Associate of the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment, plowed through the laundry list:

There is a real danger that international players will lend legitimacy to a flawed and undemocratic process. They risk playing into the Egyptian transitional government's efforts to focus attention on the technicalities of the post-coup political road map while diverting notice from a deeply troubling context – widespread unrest, the recent declaration of the Muslim Brotherhood (Egypt's largest political group) as a terrorist organisation, escalating repression of secular dissidents, a draft constitution that gives the military broad powers, a drafting process that largely excluded Islamists, effectively no freedom for those who would campaign against passage of the referendum. And the likelihood of ongoing protests during the referendum, as well as of violent attacks against government targets, is high.

Her colleague, Shadi Hamid in Doha, pointed to more than 25 conversations between Gen. Sissi in Cairo and Defence Secretary Hagel.

The U.S. government has provided 15 official readouts over six months, each with a similar set of messages to Sissi: Try to be less repressive and more inclusive... With each passing month, the readouts become more surreal, with Hagel asking what has become one of the region's more brutal, repressive regimes to be "democratic." Although there are certainly competitors -- Syria and Israel-Palestine come to mind -- it is difficult to think of another case where U.S. policy is so completely divorced from realities on the ground.

It is unclear how "inclusive" anyone should be of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization whose credo is "Allah is our objective; the Quran is our law, the Prophet is our leader; Jihad is our way; and dying in the way of Allah is the highest of our aspirations."

Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Brotherhood, is designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. government. The Brotherhood is stoking riots, blowing things up, and expecting/hoping to bring a heavy Egyptian police response down on its people in the streets -- remember that part about jihad and dying. This is a favourite tactic of Hamas. They fire rockets into Israeli towns, aiming at houses, schools, and buses. When retaliation finally ensues, Hamas (and much of the rest of the world) blames Israel.

This is not the debt ceiling debate; it is politics as a blood sport, with emphasis on blood. What we call "partisan rancour" can get you killed, and in that context, a "democratic election" cannot take place. A winner-take-all referendum is the likely outcome, and everyone understands what losing means. The disastrous 2006 Hamas/Fatah election in Gaza led directly to the short and brutal Palestinian civil war. No election has taken place in Gaza or on the West Bank, because both sides fear the result.

Now consider Hamid's throwaway mention of "Israel-Palestine" as a competitor to Egypt as a "brutal repressive regime."

There is no such place as "Israel-Palestine." Israel is a free and democratic country. It has a free press, an aggressively independent judiciary, multiple political parties, a track record of elections on time and with changes in parties at the helm, open internet access, property rights, civil rights, and personal rights including gay marriage. The Palestinian Authority, after almost 20 years of governing, has no such attributes. The government is years late on

both legislative and presidential elections. Multiple security forces are controlled by political parties or individuals. There is no independent judiciary, no financial transparency (even the EU was *shocked* recently when it discovered in an audit the extent of the theft of European aid money by the PA), no rule of law, no civil rights, and no free press.

This is why there is no Israeli-Palestinian "peace." One side is bound by its people; the other is not. A democracy would consider itself further bound by norms that a thuggish kleptocracy would not. A treaty between them would not command equal allegiance, hence Israel keeps looking for additional mechanisms that would keep it *self-reliant* rather than relying on either the Palestinians or the "international community." The Palestinian Authority keeps looking for ways to avoid a deal that will result in another Palestinian civil war.

Policy wonks, enamoured as they are of their own democratic norms, want everyone to play by the same rules that have worked so well for us. But when they look at Egypt, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and the Palestinian Authority, none has the prerequisites for a democratic system, and none is out of the "you kill me, or I'll kill you" stage of political discourse. There is, most importantly, no concept of "the loyal opposition," and no assurance of multiple elections so that if you lose this time you might win later.

It isn't nice to say so, but our norms don't apply. They won't be democratic, and we can't make them. So between stability produced by the heavy hand of a secular government and the chaos that has attended the demise of such governments elsewhere, it won't be surprising if Egyptians vote for the constitution and support the al Sissi government. The best the U.S. can do in that case is help ensure that Egyptians continue to get chances to register their views periodically while working to tame the baser instincts of their leadership.

It's not much, but for Egypt, Syria, Libya, and elsewhere, it beats what they've got.

9. Of negotiations and high treason: Israel-Palestine 'peace'

No good for Palestinians will come of the current Middle East talks. Worse, harm seems likely. These negotiations threaten to undo years of work by Palestinian civil society and solidarity partners around the world who have been working tirelessly for a just peace. Their work has been done -principally- through global nonviolent resistance campaigns such as the Boycott Divestment & Sanctions campaign (BDS), the Russell Tribunal, and mounting popular local and international protests, among other tactics.

What we are hearing is that US Secretary of State John Kerry has presented both parties with an interim agreement to "serve as a framework for continued negotiations towards a permanent agreement". The "final status agreement" would be "based on the 1967 borders". Concrete concessions with profound implications are being demanded of the Palestinians, but not so for Israel, which is "negotiating" on territory, rights, and resources that already belong to Palestinians.

Much of this rhetoric is familiar, as it is recycled from the failed Oslo Accords, in which an agreement was reached exacting permanent Palestinian concessions in exchange for promises of Israeli reciprocity that never materialised. Thus, Palestinians are now being sold the same lie they bought 20 years ago. This time, the concessions demanded of Palestinians amount to a complete relinquishment of our rights as a native people, in exchange for the same empty promises and pocket change from the EU and US to sustain the status quo a little longer, enough time to permanently alter the landscape and complete the economic, political and social engineering of the Palestinian population towards the goal

of permanent impotence, in which profound divisions, corruption, and dependence preclude the emergence of organised impactful resistance.

Known truths

The details of the agreement, we are told, "are being worked out between the parties". But here are some certainties: Palestinian self-determination will not be realised from this agreement. A viable Palestinian state with a contiguous land mass will remain impossible given the physical alterations of the landscape Israel has made through rapacious land theft, colonisation, and "Judaisation" of Jerusalem and large parts of the West Bank. Israel will not cease illegal settlement construction, even if it does so temporarily. Palestinians will not have control over their airspace, natural resources (eg water, newly-discovered oil), borders or economy. Segregated roads, housing, and buses will still be a reality.

Demolition of Palestinian homes will continue. The siege of Gaza will remain and perhaps tightened further. The separation wall will still be there with guard towers and snipers. Israel will still bomb our world when they please. They will still conduct night raids. They will continue to terrorise our children. Administrative Detention will remain a cost of living for Palestinian youth. Our Jerusalem, a few kilometres away, will still be as far as the moon for the majority of Palestinians. Israel will continue to import foreign Jews from all over the world and settle them on stolen Palestinian land, where they take up arms against the native Palestinian population.

The incentives being offered to Palestinians in the current talks are so insignificant, suggesting that the Palestinian Authority (PA) will accept funding over freedom. There is talk of an "unprecedented economic package", and other "concessions", all of which amount to temporary anaesthetics. On the other hand, Israel will likely walk away with Palestinian blessing for their theft of the Jordan Valley, the most fertile land in the West Bank, and continued control of Palestinian lives and resources.

There is also talk that they might achieve a boost to their racist demographic goals - touted by Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Henry Kissinger, a WINEP adviser - by transferring large proportions of their undesirable non-Jewish citizenry to Palestinian control. But that's gravy. Their immediate aims are two-fold: To deal a heavy blow to the growing Palestinian solidarity and boycott of Israel; and to finally gain legitimacy as a racist state.

BDS effect

The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, launched in 2005 by Palestinian civil society as a nonviolent means of national and human liberation from Israeli colonisation and apartheid, has spread into mainstream culture, promising global action on the scale that helped end the similar system of apartheid in South Africa. I believe the popular BDS movement (including related solidarity actions) is the principal factor motivating Israel to try to come to some interim agreement with Palestinians at this point.

Israel is panicking, and rightfully so, because its power lies only in the realm of government and corporate elites. Israel has no defences against mass mobilisation calling for justice and basic human rights. This was precisely the case in the late 1980s, when the first intifada captured the popular imagination of the world. Even before mass communication and instant information, the images of Palestinian children with rocks facing heavily armed soldiers and tanks began to sear into international consciousness, threatening Israel's image as the victim despite their best public relations and hasbarah campaigns.

Thus, Israel, in concert with the US, orchestrated the Madrid Conference, followed by the Oslo Accords. Although Palestinians made the painful sacrifice of relinquishing claim to 78 percent of Historic Palestine, agreeing to establish a state on a mere 22 percent of our

homeland, Israel continued to act in bad faith, escalating the colonial and ethnic cleansing projects to create "fact on the ground" that currently preclude any meaningful realisation of a Palestinian state as envisioned by the Oslo Accords.

Not only did the Oslo "diplomacy" consolidate the land Israel took through terror and war in 1948 and create a new baseline from which to expand Israel's settlement endeavours, it also effectively siphoned the only real power we had - popular mobilisation - and broke our collective back by giving us false hope that liberation was around the corner. In return, we got an illusion of self-rule - a contingency of elected-for-life "leaders" who helped turn our proud people into a nation of beggars, dependent on international aid for sustenance. We saw further colonisation of our lands, which are now Jewish-only domains. And we got a well-trained Palestinian police force that, far from protecting Palestinians, collaborates with Israel to suppress legitimate resistance against tyranny.

We are now in a similar place to where we were in the late 1980s. After years of struggle, organising and activism, Palestinian resistance has once again captured popular imaginations and civil society around the world - academics, activists, clergy, intellectuals, artists, trade unions, universities, municipalities, churches, and other individuals and institutions of conscience - are mobilising in solidarity with Palestinian aspirations for basic human rights and to hold Israel accountable for its unrelenting systematic crimes against the indigenous Palestinian population.

High treason

As Israel has no legitimate argument against demands for Palestinian basic rights, they are looking to stamp out BDS as they did the first intifada, both popular nonviolent resistance movements, by recycling the charade of negotiations. While the Palestinian people cannot be fooled again, such interim agreements do risk fooling our solidarity partners.

And so, the stakes now are far greater. Curtailing the expansion of BDS might actually end up being a sweet aside. The real prize for the supremacist and imperialist ideology of Zionism is Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish State. Many ask why is this such an important goal for Israel. The answer is simple. When the true heirs of the land, those who are native in every sense - historically, culturally, legally, genetically - recognise Israel as a Jewish state, they are effectively giving away their claims to their own homeland. Like a home owner who officially relinquishes her home to a squatter, Palestinians would give Israel the only real legitimacy it can ever hope to have. Making such a declaration is tantamount not only to renouncing our Right of Return to a land we just sanctified as belonging to world Jewry, but it would also mean abandonment of our Palestinian brothers and sisters who hold Israeli citizenship to permanent second-class status and institutional racist inequality.

Continued bilateral negotiations in the current gross imbalance of power will destroy us. In the words of Richard Falk, "Intergovernmental diplomacy is not a pathway to a just peace, but rather a sinkhole for Palestinian rights." One can forgive the PLO for being hoodwinked by Oslo the first time (despite warnings from luminaries like Edward Said). But to lead us into the same trap with the same language and empty promises is unconscionable. At this point, any interim agreement that does not fully end Israeli occupation, end Israeli apartheid (including full equality for Palestinians with Israeli citizenship), and repatriate Palestinian refugees should be viewed as an act of high treason against the Palestinian people.

10. Israel Palestine: Who's indigenous?

I am a Métis from Paddle Prairie Metis settlement. My father, Mervin Bellerose, co-authored the Métis Settlements Act of 1989, which was passed by the Alberta legislature in 1990 and cemented our land rights. I founded Canadians For Accountability, a native rights advocacy group, and I am an organizer and participant in the Idle No More movement in Calgary. And I am a Zionist.

Indigenous status

To begin, let us acknowledge that there is no rule that a land can have only one indigenous people; it is not a zero sum game in which one group must be considered indigenous so that therefore another is not. However, there is a very clear guideline to being an indigenous people. It is somewhat complex but can be boiled down to the checklist below, as developed by anthropologist José R. Martínez-Cobo (former special rapporteur of the Sub-commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities for the United Nations).

This list was developed because indigenous rights are beginning to be respected across the planet. This recognition is incredibly important, so we as indigenous people cannot allow non-indigenous people to make false claims, which ultimately would harm our own rights. Israel is the world's first modern indigenous state: the creation and declaration of the sovereign nation of Israel marks the first time in history that an indigenous people has managed to regain control of its ancestral lands and build a nation state. As such, this is incredibly important for indigenous people both to recognise and to support as a great example for our peoples to emulate.

The actual working definition of "indigenous people," (not the Wikipedia version, nor Merriam Webster, both more suited to plants and animals) for purposes of this essay is that developed by aforementioned anthropologist José R. Martínez-Cobo. With this as my foundation, I will detail why Jews are indigenous to Israel, and why Palestinians are not.

Martinez-Cobo's research suggests that indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system.

This historical continuity may consist of the continuation, for an extended period reaching into the present of one or more of the following factors:

- Occupation of ancestral lands, or at least of part of them
- Common ancestry with the original occupants of these lands
- Culture in general, or in specific manifestations (such as religion, living under a tribal system, membership of an indigenous community, dress, means of livelihood, lifestyle, etc.)
- Language (whether used as the only language, as mother-tongue, as the habitual means of communication at home or in the family, or as the main, preferred, habitual, general or normal language)
- Residence in certain parts of the country, or in certain regions of the world
- Religion that places importance on spiritual ties to the ancestral lands
- Blood quantum – that is, the amount of blood you carry of a specific people to identify as that people. The concept was developed by colonialists in order to eventually breed out native peoples.

Let us now look quickly at the Jews. How do they fit this definition?

- Their lands were occupied, first by the Romans, then by the Arabs in the seventh century.
- They share common ancestry with previous occupants as determined by several genetic studies.
- Their culture can be traced directly to the Levant, where it developed into what is now known as “Jewish culture.” While different Jewish communities have slightly different traditions, they all share the same root culture, and it remains unchanged. They have resurrected their traditional language, and while many still speak Yiddish and Ladino, Hebrew has become the primary language again.
- They have spiritual ties to the land, which plays a large role in their traditions as a people.

Despite all the arguments about “European” Jews, they in fact meet all the criteria set forth by Martínez-Cobo. Even though Israel is the first modern indigenous state, it still has lands that are occupied by foreigners in Judea and Samaria. Those are ancestral lands and, many feel that they should be returned to the indigenous peoples for self-determination.

Now, for the flip side.

Palestinians have what are called “rights of longstanding presence;” and although these are legitimate rights, they do not trump indigenous rights. The very nature of “longstanding presence” means that although they lived somewhere a long time, they do not have the right to occupy indigenous peoples and control them.

The argument that Palestinians are indigenous is incorrect for several reasons.

- Approximately 50% percent of Palestinian Arabs can track their ancestors back farther than their great-grandparents. Many are descended from Arabs brought to the Levant by the British to build infrastructure after World War I.
- The vast majority of Palestinians are Arabic speaking Muslims; the Arabic language is indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula, as is the Muslim religion. The Muslim religion’s holiest places are not in the Levant, but in the city of Mecca, located in the Arabian Peninsula. They have no specifically Palestinian culture that is completely Palestinian dating before the 1960s; in fact, prior to that, the majority identified as “greater Syrians.”
- Some Palestinians share common ancestry with indigenous peoples, but they neither follow indigenous traditions nor do they self-identify as those indigenous peoples. They share neither religion nor language with them. Blood quantum alone is insufficient to transmit indigenous status.
- The Arabs of the Middle East subsumed several indigenous populations, but no group can become indigenous through subsuming indigenous peoples. Rather, they conquered the entire region and spread their own language, customs, and religion. This is historical fact.

Now you might ask, why is this important? It is important to indigenous people because we cannot allow the argument that conquerors can become indigenous. If we, as other indigenous people, allow that argument to be made, then we are delegitimising our own rights.

If conquerors can become indigenous, then the white Europeans who came to my indigenous lands in North America could now claim to be indigenous. The white Europeans who went to Australia and New Zealand could now claim to be indigenous. If we, even once, allow that argument to be made, indigenous rights are suddenly devalued and meaningless. This is somewhat peculiar, as those who

are arguing for Palestinian “indigenous rights” are usually those who have little grasp of the history, and no understanding of the truth behind indigenous rights.

If you should encounter the argument that conquerors may themselves become indigenous to a region by virtue of conquering, direct those who assert the argument to this article, and help them understand not only is the argument wrong – it is dangerous to Indigenous people everywhere.

11. Canada’s important support for Israel

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Stephen J. Harper, who is to visit Israel in nine days, Canada has emerged as Israel’s staunchest ally in the world.

Yet many observers dismiss Canada as a bit player on the international scene, and write off the relevance of its interventions on behalf of Israel.

They couldn’t be more wrong.

The record shows that Canada’s support for Israel is comprehensive, concrete and weighty. It is frequently a step ahead of the rest of the world, setting a principled, pro-Israel precedent and example. It is of significant, often critical, diplomatic value.

The senior-most political and diplomatic officials in Jerusalem deeply respect and appreciate Canada’s backing. They hold Prime Minister Harper in the highest regard.

Canada was the first country in the world to immediately suspend direct aid to the Palestinian Authority when Hamas was elected in 2006, because of that terrorist organizations’ refusal to meet the criteria for international legitimacy: an end to violence, unconditional recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements.

Prime Minister Harper said: “If institutions committed to terrorism are playing a role in the Palestinian state... that is an indication to me that the road to [Palestinian] democracy has not been traveled very far.

Democracy and the continued advocacy of terrorism are fundamentally incompatible objectives.”

Canada’s position was quickly adopted by the US and the EU. Canada was the first country in the world to withdraw its support from the second UN World Conference Against Racism, known as Durban II.

Noting the anti-Semitic and anti-Israel hate-fest into which the original Durban conference degenerated, the government of Canada led the boycott of the 2009 meeting, and was one of only 15 countries to boycott the Durban III summit in 2011.

Again, other Western allies followed Canada’s lead.

Canada was the first country in the world to robustly defend Israel’s operation against Hezbollah, early during the 2006 Second Lebanon War. Harper said that “responsibility for the escalating violence in the Middle East rests entirely with those who have kidnapped Israeli soldiers. Israel has the right to defend itself.” When many countries urged restraint on Israel, Harper said “the onus to end this escalation is on the other side, and I would urge them to return the prisoners.”

When other countries accused Israel of over-reacting and using disproportionate force, Harper said, "I think Israel's response under the circumstances has been measured."

In the aftermath of the war, Prime Minister Harper opposed a one-sided statement at the Francophonie summit that sought to deplore the war and recognize the victims of Lebanon. Harper insisted that the resolution recognize losses on both sides.

Canada's steadfast position ultimately won the support of the other Francophonie members and led to a balanced consensus resolution.

During Operation Cast Lead in 2009, Canada likewise stood by Israel against Hamas aggression from Gaza.

Then-foreign minister Lawrence Cannon stated: "Israel has a clear right to defend itself against the continued rocket attacks by Palestinian militant groups which have deliberately targeted civilians. First and foremost, those rocket attacks must stop."

At the G-8 summit in 2011, Prime Minister Harper blocked American draft language that specified Israel's pre-1967 borders as the starting point for peace talks, because this ignored other key negotiating framework factors such as recognition of Israel as a Jewish state and demilitarization of a Palestinian state. Harper stood up to pressure from US President Barack Obama and then-French president Nicolas Sarkozy.

In the end, G-8 leaders conceded the merit of Stephen Harper's position, and issued a balanced statement urging Israel and the Palestinians to resume negotiations (with no mention of the '67 lines).

During Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012, Canada vigorously supported Israel's right to defend its citizens and blamed terrorists in Gaza for the escalation in violence. Foreign Minister John Baird described Israel's right to self-defense in the context of the broader conflict between terrorism and democracy: "Far too often, the Jewish people find themselves on the front lines in the struggle against terrorism, the great struggle of our generation... Canada condemns the terrorist group Hamas and stands with Israel as it deals with regional threats to peace and security."

Canada also has consistently stood up for Israel, often as a lone voice, in the G-20, the UN Human Rights Council (UNCHR), International Atomic Energy Agency and the UN General Assembly. Over three years that it sat on the UNCHR in Geneva, Canada stood alone in defense of Israel – eight times casting the only "no" vote against unfair condemnations of Israel. Also in Geneva, Canada played a critical role in getting Israel membership for the first time in the UN's Western European and Others Group, a status that Israel has sought for years.

In November 2012, Foreign Minister Baird personally cast Canada's vote against General Assembly recognition of Palestinian statehood. Canada was among only nine countries that voted against this resolution, making the case that it undermined direct Israeli- Palestinian negotiations as the basis of Middle East peace. Baird said: "We took a principled stand. We believe that statehood is a product of peace with Israel, and the Palestinian Authority is trying to go around Israel to the UN to get what they couldn't get at the negotiating table."

Prime Minister Harper's government has taken a lead role at the IAEA in Vienna and other international forums in opposing the Iranian drive for nuclear weaponry, and in backing sanctions against Iran. In 2012, Canada suspended diplomatic relations with Iran by closing its embassy in Tehran and expelling all Iranian diplomats from Ottawa. It also outlawed Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force under Canada's Anti-Terrorism Act.

Canada expanded its sanctions in 2013 by announcing a prohibition on all imports and exports from Iran, and by banning a series of Iranians and Iranian entities under the Special Economic Measures Act.

Canadian resoluteness in opposing Iran has drawn in other Western countries. Many joined the walk-out boycotts that Canada annually led of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's speeches at the UN. Almost all Western nations have supported the tough General Assembly resolution on Iran's horrendous human rights record that Canada sponsors every year.

Canada also led the world in expressing deep skepticism of the November interim agreement in Geneva between the P5+1 and Iran.

At the time, John Baird said: "Today's deal cannot be abused or undermined by deception. The Iranian people deserve the freedom and prosperity that they have been denied for too long by the regime's nuclear ambitions.

Until then, Canadian sanctions will remain tough, and in full force...

We will evaluate today's deal not just on the merits of its words, but more importantly on its verifiable implementation and unfettered access of all Iranian nuclear facilities."

Since then, world leaders have been forced to acknowledge the validity of Canada's doubt about Iran's compliance intentions and the soundness of Canada's concern about premature withdrawal of sanctions. Some have accepted Canada's contention that the scope of the talks must be broadened to include Iran's sponsorship of terrorism and its systemic violation of human rights.

Sometimes, nations lead by simply demonstrating friendship. Again, Canada is the example par excellence. Twenty ministers in the Harper governments (since 2006) have visited Israel to advance bilateral ties, including the ministers of agriculture, citizenship and immigration, defense, environment, finance, foreign affairs, industry, international trade, natural resources, public safety, public works, transport and treasury.

It is furthermore important to note that Prime Minister Harper's government has significantly enhanced defense, intelligence and law enforcement ties between Canada and Israel.

Cooperation accords have been signed in sensitive areas, and there have been frequent high-level exchanges, including reciprocal visits by the defense ministers, military chiefs of staff, intelligence chiefs and national security advisers of the two countries. Observers should not underestimate the quiet professionalism and outsized reach of Canada's security personnel across the Middle East and around the world.

Speaking to the Herzliya Conference in January 2012, Foreign Minister Baird forthrightly said that "Israel has no better friend in the world than Canada; no stronger ally who will stand up for you. We won't stand behind you; we will stand shoulder to shoulder with Israel. Canada will not remain silent while the Jewish state is attacked for defending its territory or people."

No country in the world is as generous in its trailblazing support of Israel, without apologies or hesitations.

Canada speaks out and acts to defend Israel, consistently before anybody else, without feeling the need to be "politically correct" and to "balance" its statements with (im)moral ambiguities about the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Prime Minister Harper and his team should be warmly welcomed in Jerusalem this month as super-valuable allies and trusted friends.

12. Obama and the Sunni-Shi'ite War

The ground burns in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Borders are being contested, and militant Islamists have all but overwhelmed secular authorities. Yet America's chief diplomat, Secretary of State John Kerry, was in the neighborhood this week, for the 10th time, on an expedition to Israel and the Palestinian territories. There was no sudden urgency to the impasse between Israel and the Palestinians, nor had an opening presented itself for serious negotiations. Israel's attention was focused, as it had to be, on the large menace of Iran and its nuclear drive, and the Palestinians remained mired in their own squabbles.

It was the practice of so many years that Arabs deployed what pressure they could exert on the United States on behalf of the Palestinians. No longer. It is the struggle for Syria, and the Iranian bid for primacy in the Fertile Crescent, that engage the Arabs. This "shuttle diplomacy" of our secretary of state, if anything, is evidence of the retreat of American power.

President Obama and his foreign policy lieutenants are given to the assertion that they don't want the U.S. caught in the middle of other peoples' wars. But by deeds of commission and omission, the U.S. is caught up in a deadly sectarian struggle between Shiite Iran and its "sister republics" in the Arab world on one side, and the Sunni order of Arab power on the other. Mastery of the arcane details of the Shiite-Sunni schism may not be an American specialty, but over the last two years this president and his advisers have placed the U.S. on the side of Iran and its Arab satraps in Lebanon and, now, Iraq.

Iran planned and prepared for this fight. Its role in Lebanon dates to the early 1980s, when the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini found fertile soil among the Shiites of that country. Iran formed the Hezbollah militia in the country's south and in the Bekaa Valley to the east. Hezbollah fighters, newly urbanized young men in search of financial patronage and a sense of mission, came to think of themselves as soldiers in Khomeini's wilayat al-faqih, a Shiite notion involving ordained supremacy. The Sunnis had their Arab nationalism and ties to the Arabs of Egypt and the Gulf; the Christians had their sense of Lebanese identity and their ease with the West. With Iran at the head, this was the Shiites' opportunity to conquer their self-contempt and sense of isolation.

But of late it is the breakdown of the Syrian state, and the fight over that pivotal country, that has given the Iranians this chance at a big role in Arab endeavors.

Iran and Syria made common cause in the 1980s when Old Man Assad still ruled. He broke with the taboos of Arab brotherhood and sided with the Iranian revolutionary regime in its war with Saddam Hussein. This wasn't an alliance of equals, but Hafez Assad held his own in that delicate relationship. His son, current President Bashar Assad, could not maintain that balance, and the massive rebellion that broke out against his regime in 2011 by the Sunni majority forced him into greater dependence on Iranian subsidies and military support. The Sunni Arab charge that Syria is now occupied by Iran is a slight exaggeration, but only ever so slight.

Iraq presented Iran with an entirely different setting. This was a wealthy oil country, populous, with a jealous sense of its own place in the region. After the American invasion in

2003, political primacy belonged to Iraq's Shiites, but Iraqi Shiism was not eager to slip into subordination to Iran's will and preferences.

But here, too, the Syrian war, and the lack of American interest and willpower were of immense help to the Iranians. The U.S. had quit Iraq by the end of 2011, leaving no residual forces. In the nature of such matters, the Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki had to proclaim that withdrawal as a signal day in Iraqi political history. But in truth the fragile Baghdad government was not ready to go it alone. The men in power in Baghdad were suspicious of the intentions and the schemes of the Sunni states of the Arab world, as well as those of Turkey. They would have welcomed an American force large enough to shelter them.

The sectarianism unleashed by the Syrian civil war rendered the Iraqi government more susceptible to Iran's influence, and helped poison the well between the Baghdad government and its Sunni population. For Mr. Maliki and his Daawa party, the Syrian rebellion was a Sunni rebellion, plain and simple. A man given to a healthy dosage of paranoia, Mr. Maliki was unnerved by the rebellions of the Arab Awakening. Syria's upheaval, he was convinced, had a warning for him as well. If the Sunni Arab states, Turkey and the jihadists were determined to bring down the Alawite regime in Damascus, it stood to reason that the Shiite government in Baghdad would be in their cross hairs as well.

Having quit Iraq, the Obama administration developed a vested interest in the narrative that all was well in that country. What influence the U.S. still had was tethered to the rule of Mr. Maliki, even as he drifted away from the Sunnis and the Kurds. Borrowing from the book of the Arab authoritarians of old, Mr. Maliki depicted his bid for dominion as part of a campaign against terror. When he turned up in Washington last October, he came to ask for weapons and diplomatic support, but above all to convey to his rivals that he had Washington's blessing for his campaign for a third term as prime minister.

The Obama administration played along when it would have been the better part of wisdom to deny him the visit in the midst of a political campaign. Mr. Maliki is a lucky man. His political bid for yet another term has the endorsement of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and that of Mr. Obama and Mr. Assad.

When the U.S. lay down the foundations of its presence in the Arab world, it befriended and worked with the powers that be - the Sunni regimes. The Shiites were then outsiders, and the inroads Iran was to make into the Arab states were unthinkable.

This is a radically different moment. America's allies in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the smaller states of the Gulf, and among the Sunnis in Lebanon and Syria can be forgiven the conclusion that the U.S. has acquiesced in this Iranian project. Washington is keen to conciliate Iran. Secretary Kerry has proposed a role for the Iranians in negotiations over Syria - even as Iranian forces and proxies are busy battering what is left of that country. Beirut once mattered to the U.S., but we have left it to the reign of Hezbollah, and what help comes to Lebanese moderates is now offered by Saudi Arabia and France.

A cautionary note: Iran and the Fertile Crescent are not - and by a long shot - a fair reflection of the demography of Islam. The weight of Islam is in the Sunni states. If we opt for an alliance with Iran and its satraps, we should do so in the full knowledge that our choice places us at odds with the vast majority of the Islamic world. Already, our failure to come to the support of the Syrian rebellion has eroded so much of our standing among Muslim Sunnis, in the Arab world and beyond. Five years ago in Cairo, a citadel of Sunni Islam, Mr.

Obama called for a new policy of engagement with the Islamic world. That seems more like light years away.

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

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