

OPINION and ANALYSIS

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local and international writings on the Middle East**

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Inconvenient Truth: Romney right about Palestinians

John Podhoretz, New York Times, 31 July 2012

http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/inconvenient_truth_v0YgFJUTGIwWPibQYof3LI

While in Israel, Mitt Romney said something every sane person knows to be true: There is great cultural and political meaning in the fact that Israel has prospered while the Palestinians have festered.

“Culture,” Romney said, “makes all the difference . . . you notice a dramatic, stark difference in economic vitality.”

He didn’t specify what he meant by “culture,” but you can take your pick.

You want a political culture that works to create conditions under which an economy can thrive? Since signing the Oslo Accords with the Palestinians, Israel has spent two decades working to unshackle its economy from its socialist roots, with remarkable results.

The Palestinians? They’ve created what the House Foreign Affairs Committee has called a “chronic kleptocracy,” with foreign aid and investment shamelessly stolen and diverted to the bank accounts of the leaders of the Palestinian Authority and its gangsterish local strongmen.

According to Jim Zanotti of the Congressional Research Service, Uncle Sam has given the Palestinians \$5 billion since 1994. We might as well have lit a match to most of it. It hasn’t gotten to the people who might’ve used it best; it’s simply served as personal financial lubricant for the folks in power.

You want a healthy social culture? The Middle East Media Research Institute has spent decades detailing the diseased messages emanating from Palestinian TV and textbooks, instructing children in the glories of suicide terrorism against innocent Israelis.

You want a culture where citizens are free to express themselves and so live in the openness necessary to the functioning of a successful economy? Israel has a free press, much of it openly hostile to the parties in power. The Palestinian Authority has arrested and tortured critical journalists, as well as conducted denial-of-service attacks against Web sites reporting on corruption.

And this doesn’t even take into account Hamas, the radical terror group in charge of Gaza. It, too, has lived parasitically, sucking the life out of the Palestinian economy.

In 1993, pre-Oslo, the GDP in the territories was \$2.9 billion, according to the World Bank. In 2011, it was something like \$10.5 billion — a small increase when you consider population growth.

In Israel, the GDP has risen from \$66 billion in 1993 to a stunning \$243 billion in 2011 — per capita, from \$12,500 to \$31,000.

One reason Palestinian economic growth has been so disastrously slow is the terror war that Yasser Arafat launched against Israel in 2000 — the “second Intifada.”

It shattered Israeli hopes for peaceful concert with a new neighboring country, and led to an economic estrangement that proved horribly costly to Palestinians. Israelis stopped employing Palestinian workers and stopped buying Palestinian goods. Transit and trade between the two became difficult and painful.

And whose fault was it? Israel, which agreed in principle to a deal at Camp David in 2000 granting Palestinians a state with sovereign dominion over nearly 94 percent of the West Bank? No, it was exclusively the doing of Arafat, who served as a reverse George Washington — rejecting nationhood for the violence he understood better.

So Romney said Israel has done better than the areas under Palestinian control because Israeli culture is healthier. That’s not only true, it’s a necessary thing to say — because the refusal to say it and accept it contributes to the continuing immiseration and unfreedom of the Palestinians themselves.

Of course, for saying this, Romney was called a “racist” by Saeb Erakat, the longtime slaving lackey of every Palestinian murderer and thief. Erakat blames “occupation” for Palestinian poverty. But the PA has dominion over almost all of the West Bank and Hamas has control over all of Gaza, so the word “occupation” is all but meaningless — except as shorthand for “Israel still holds Jerusalem.”

Erakat’s nonsense was to be expected. But what of how that repugnant lackey’s words were then shamefully echoed by slaving US media lackeys — of the Obama re-election effort?

Dan Amira in New York magazine spoke for much of the press corps with an item titled “Mitt Romney Insults Whole New International Populace.” He wrote: “After he enraged the British by suggesting that their Olympics might not be as awesome as his Olympics, Romney moved on to Israel, where he appeared to blame Palestinian poverty in part on . . . the territory’s inferior culture.”

It *does* have an inferior political culture. Romney spoke the truth. And it wasn’t a gaffe — because anyone who publicizes his remark is helping Romney win the election. Even those who foolishly think they’re hurting him.

Palestinian financial crisis looms

Shoshana Bryen, Jewish Policy Centre, 29 July 2012

<http://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/3239/palestinian-financial-crisis-looms>

The Palestinians face an economic crisis more severe than the World Bank had anticipated; the Bank fears that the territories may become "ungovernable." This is not actually new, but since the Bank in its panic is considering bypassing restrictions on money to Hamas, it is worth looking at the roots of the "crisis."

The Palestinian Authority's 2012 budget -- produced by PM Salam Fayyad, the West's "go-to man" for economic decision-making -- was a fantasy. It called for \$3.5 billion in spending, including \$1.1 billion in aid, and showed a deficit of between \$750 million and \$1.1 billion. The latter has proven to be closer to the truth. The Palestinian economy was expected to generate about \$1.3 billion, and the PA planned to *spend three times that*. (By comparison, Vermont, the smallest generator among U.S. states, produced about \$26 billion last year.) U.S. aid (\$513 million, not including security assistance) was expected to cover about 20% of actual PA spending, with the Europeans kicking in another 20%.

With planning like that, who could be surprised by a \$200-million cash shortage?

The World Bank blames the world economy and Israel. It does not find fault with Palestinian corruption, an outsized security force, an oversized bureaucracy, an overreliance on other people's money, or the failure to find things to do that produce income. It declines to consider whether the ongoing Palestinian war against Israel has had an impact on the Palestinian economy.

There used to be income.

In 1992, 115,600 Palestinian workers entered Israel every day; in 1996, it was 63,000. Why? Because beginning in January 1995 and through the year, a series of Palestinian terror attacks -- mainly suicide bombers on buses, but including a particularly gruesome nail bomb that exploded in the center of Tel Aviv -- killed more than 100 Israelis. Israel responded by permitting fewer Palestinians to enter.

Increased security in Israel allowed the number of Palestinians to rise again, and unemployment decreased from 18.2% in September 1995 to 11% by September 2000. In mid-2000, 136,000 were working inside Israel -- 40% of all employed Palestinians. Another 5,000 worked in the joint Israeli/Arab run Erez Industrial Zone in the Gaza Strip. Thousands more worked in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in Israeli-owned businesses.

Yasser Arafat launched the so-called "second intifada" in late September of that year¹. Begun at the peak of Palestinian economic integration with Israel, the terrorist war ultimately killed more than 1,000 Israelis and wounded more than 5,600 (comparable U.S. figures would be 40,000 and 224,000 -- factors of 40). Israel's defense included reducing the number of Palestinians working in Israel, and by March 2001, the number

had been reduced to 55,000. The Erez Industrial Zone was a particular target of Palestinian terror attacks; after 11 Israelis were killed there, the complex was closed.

Israel re-established security control of the West Bank, and the "intifada" ended in 2004. In 2005, Israel removed its presence from the Gaza Strip. There was no Gaza embargo, no impediment to independent Palestinian economic activity at the time. In fact, the Palestinian new agency Ma'an waxed ecstatic about economic opportunities for the Palestinians in Gaza, particularly with the acquisition of the greenhouses and agricultural equipment the Israelis were leaving behind in a \$14-million deal brokered by then-World Bank President James Wolfenson.

Palestinian looters attacked the greenhouses almost immediately, and by early 2006, the greenhouses and the \$100 million in annual exports to Europe they had produced were destroyed.

Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007 after a brief and brutal war with Fatah. With Hamas's declared intention to wage war against Israel, rocket attacks that had begun in 2001 escalated dramatically. After more than 9,000 increasingly long-range and accurate rockets and missiles, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead in 2008/09 and the Israel/Egypt blockade of Gaza ensued².

It should be noted that the Hamas budget is separate from that of Fatah on the West Bank. In 2012, it showed with planned revenues of \$60 million and a planned deficit of \$480 million. Hamas "revenues" are derived largely from smuggling -- those revenues will fall dramatically if Egypt opens the Gaza/Sinai border -- and it relies on money from Iran to fund the rocket war against Israel.

"Civil servant" salaries in Gaza are paid from Ramallah using Western money not permitted to go directly to Hamas. Fatah also pays "salaries" to Palestinian terrorists in Israeli jails and pensions to retired terrorists. Both Hamas and Fatah paid an "honorarium" to the terrorists released in the Gilad Shalit deal.

There is a pattern here.

The Palestinians are at war with Israel, and wars have consequences. One is that normal economic activity is impossible within the Palestinian territories and between the territories and Israel. Deliberately. And with the knowledge a) that essential services will be handled by one or more NGOs or charities, with the active assistance of the government of Israel, and b) that Israel will be blamed for the mess.

The World Bank and other donors fall precisely into the trap, treating Palestinian poverty as if it has no relationship to Palestinian government policy -- Hamas or Fatah. If the Palestinians were nearly as worried about poverty (rather than cash flow) as the World Bank, their leadership would figure out how to produce something people in the real world value and for which they would pay.

Or at least stop destroying avenues of economic progress with Israel.

Alawistan

Tony Badran, Foreign Policy, 27 July 2012

<http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/07/27/alawistan?page=0,0>

How long will President Bashar al-Assad remain in Damascus? His regime appears to be reeling: A bombing last week claimed the lives of his brother-in-law and three other senior figures of his regime, military defections continue, and rebel forces have arrived in the country's largest cities. The prevalent view in Washington and many other foreign capitals is that the question is not if Assad will lose the capital, but when.

Assad has no intention of abandoning Damascus without a fight. Since last week's bombing, the Syrian Army's Fourth Division -- led by Assad's brother Maher -- has launched an intense campaign to retake control of the capital's neighborhoods from the rebels. To secure Damascus, the regime has redeployed troops from the Golan and eastern Syria. Control of the capital is critical to Assad for maintaining the pretense that he is not merely an Alawite warlord, but the embodiment of the state.

The Syrian despot, however, is fighting a losing battle. As heavy fighting rages on in the cities of Damascus and Aleppo, the regime is losing control over the Syrian interior and the Kurdish northeast. The predominantly Sunni areas of Syria are falling from Assad's grasp, and there is no realistic way for him to reassert his authority there.

But Assad has one card left to play: The Syrian regime has been setting the stage for a retreat to Syria's coastal mountains, the traditional homeland of the Assads' Alawite sect, for months now. It is now clear that this is where the Syrian conflict is headed. Sooner or later, Assad will abandon Damascus.

The Syrian regime's recent decline in fortunes has seemingly accelerated this process. With the sectarian fault line clearly drawn, reports are emerging of internal population migration as Alawites begin moving back to the ancestral mountains -- echoing the dynamics seen during the Lebanese civil war. Shortly after the assassination of the top Syrian security officials, opposition activists and Western diplomats reported that Assad had relocated to the coastal city of Latakia. This claim has since been contested, but Assad's whereabouts remain uncertain.

Despite the fact that the Syrian regime is a family enterprise, Assad has sought to present himself throughout the conflict as the sole legitimate interlocutor with the outside world. Regrettably, the international community has played along with this conceit. All diplomatic initiatives to solve the Syrian crisis have stipulated dialogue with Assad and refrained from calling on him to hand over power.

However, it has long been apparent that Assad's bid to control the entirety of Syrian territory was hitting against demographic and geographic realities. Contrary to all early

assertions regarding his military, Assad's forces are little more than a sectarian militia. This limited manpower has, from the beginning, meant that Assad would not be able to re-impose his authority on the predominantly Sunni interior and periphery.

This sectarian geography has determined the regime's behavior. As he dug in for a long war, Assad has had to consolidate the Alawites behind him and fortify his position in the Alawite coastal mountains overlooking the Mediterranean, in the region roughly between Jisr al-Shoughour in the north, near the Turkish border, and Tal Kalakh in the south, near Lebanon.

Assad has moved to secure all natural access points leading to this Alawite redoubt. In a move somewhat reminiscent of the Lebanese precedent, he also began to clear hostile Sunni pockets within the enclave and to create a buffer zone in the plain that separates the coastal mountains from the interior. This was the calculus behind the string of mass killings in villages like al-Houla, Taldou, al-Haffeh, and Tremseh -- all Sunni population centers either inside or on the eastern frontier of the Alawite enclave in the central plain.

The common denominator to all these places is their relevance to Syria's strategic and sectarian geography. The areas near Homs and al-Haffeh, for instance, are historical access routes into the coastal mountains. In addition, villages like Taldou and Tremseh mark the eastern faultline where outlying Alawite villages are sprinkled uncomfortably near Sunni ones. They also lie strategically on the north-south axis linking Damascus to Aleppo, and the rebellious governorates of Homs and Hama to Idlib.

Damascus, however, lies well outside this prospective enclave. In the capital, the regime does not possess a demographic reservoir of loyal Alawite communities with which to balance the power relationship with its rivals. The Syrian regime has responded to this problem by ringing Damascus with military bases stocked with loyal Alawite troops to control the main communication routes out of the city. As a result, French political geographer Fabrice Balanche has written, the capital has become an "encircled city." Moreover, as recent news reports have noted, the influx of mostly Sunni refugees into Damascus from other rebellious districts has further complicated the demographic equation in the capital.

It is therefore not only conceivable, but also rather likely, that these geographic and demographic factors will at some point lead Assad to abandon Damascus and fortify himself in his Alawite stronghold. As occurred in Lebanon, this could lead to a prolonged static war, where the support of external patrons -- namely Iran and Russia -- becomes increasingly critical to Assad.

Some will argue that an Alawite enclave is unviable in the long-term, but Assad has an insurance policy to protect his retreat. As the Assad regime just reminded the world, it possesses a large stockpile of chemical weapons. While most observers are worried about Assad passing these weapons along to third-party actors like Hezbollah, he is more likely to hold on tightly to them. These weapons are his last remaining and most formidable

deterrent against his Sunni foes, and precious leverage to guarantee the quiescence of the outside world.

With this insurance policy, Assad could hang on as a warlord presiding over an Iranian and Russian protectorate on the Mediterranean. The past several weeks have dealt Assad a serious blow, but this is not yet the end of the Syrian conflict. It is rather the beginning of a new phase, the endgame of which is not in Damascus, but further west.

No illusions about Egypt

Isi Leibler, Jerusalem Post Opinion, 24 July 2012

<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Article.aspx?id=278769>

The government of Israel is making all the right noises and appropriate statements expressing hope that the new government of Egypt will maintain the cold peace.

But we should be under no illusions. Even the greatest optimists cannot gloss over the reality that the Islamic forces of the Muslim Brotherhood seeking to control Egypt are committed to ultimately revoking the peace treaty.

Their motives stem not merely from nationalist xenophobia but are deeply rooted in fanatical extremist Islamic ideology, which is infinitely more intense and inflexible. Although Mubarak treated Israel like a pariah and exploited popular anti-Semitism, in comparison to these Islamic zealots he would be considered a liberal.

The Muslim Brotherhood is the organization which spawned Hamas, and it remains adamantly committed to wiping the “Zionist entity” off the face of the map. This was reiterated last month by its leader Mohammed Badie, who called for “imposing Muslim rule throughout Palestine” and “freeing it from the filth of Zionism.”

It represents the most intolerant wing of Islam, rejecting coexistence with other religions, and is renowned for persecuting and harassing Christians. The Brotherhood is not merely dedicated to imposing sharia law in Egypt but is fervently committed to achieving global conquest on behalf of Islam.

Its leaders, who during World War II allied themselves with the Nazis, are notorious for promoting rabid anti-Semitism. The imams continuously remind their followers that Jews are the descendants of apes and pigs and deserve to be killed as enemies of the Prophet Mohammed. They have a long tradition of assassinating opponents, terrorism and suicide bombings.

However, the Muslim Brotherhood is pragmatic and politically savvy and thus disinclined to overplay its hand, initially avoiding extreme behavior which could result in a break with the US and Western countries and lead to a total meltdown of the already disintegrating Egyptian economy. They recognize that Mubarak’s ouster was principally propelled by economic factors and that if they are to retain power they must feed 80 million Egyptians.

US Administration spokesmen are burying their heads in the sand when they imply that once the Brotherhood is in control it is likely to act responsibly and provide a pluralistic environment for Egyptians. Even more absurd are the reassurances that it is undergoing a liberal transformation and committed to maintaining a democratic system of government. Similar delusional nonsense was disseminated about Hamas when it “democratically” gained control of Gaza.

Every “elected” radical Islamic group has ultimately imposed a regime in which political opponents and

other independent societal elements were marginalized. One need only observe the more “democratic” and “liberal” Erdogan Islamist regime in Turkey which, in a relatively short time, completely eradicated the reforms of Kemal Ataturk, imprisoned the former military leaders and replaced the secular military government with an Islamic authoritarian regime. The Muslim Brotherhood is far more radical than its Islamic Turkish counterpart.

The reality is that democracy cannot survive in a society dominated by Islamic extremists who brook no opposition. Indeed, much as we despise authoritarian, dictatorial and even totalitarian regimes, precedents clearly indicate that a regime ruled by Islamic fanatics is likely to be far more oppressive than a military autocracy.

Although weakened, the military did dissolve the Islamic fundamentalist-dominated parliament and still represents a barrier to total Muslim Brotherhood control. But it is likely to avoid a direct confrontation unless it is confident it has public support. In this explosive environment, US pressure on the military to stand down can only serve to further undermine Western interests and lead to intensified oppression.

We should not expect newly elected President Mohamed Mursi to be a moderating influence. His recent undertakings to act on behalf of the entire Egyptian people are totally out of synch with his long-standing record of support for hardline Brotherhood policies.

Just prior to the election, Mursi announced that the Koran would be the constitution of Egypt and “that this nation will enjoy blessing and revival only through the Islamic sharia. I swear for Allah and before you all that regardless of the actual text [of the constitution]... it will truly reflect the sharia.”

Mursi, who refused to accept a congratulatory call from Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, stated that he would honor Egypt’s existing international agreements including the peace treaty with Israel. Yet he repeatedly includes the caveat that it is necessary to re-examine the 1978 Camp David agreements and that if Israel’s leaders (who he previously referred to as “vampires” and “murderers”) did not keep their commitments to the Palestinian people, Egypt was not obliged to honor the peace treaty.

Often repeated chants expressed at his rallies included “Mursi will liberate Gaza,” “Jerusalem will become the capital of the United Arab nation” and “death for the sake of Allah is our most lofty aspiration.”

Setting aside the current “standoff” with Israel, there is every likelihood that at a future time of his choosing, like Arafat, Mursi is likely to suggest that the Prophet’s violation of the Treaty of Hudaibiya in 629 CE on the grounds that agreements with infidels and Jews need not be honored, was a historical precedent that could be applied against Israel.

Any doubt about Mursi’s outlook toward the West was clarified with his televised inaugural presidential speech, which the US government ignored. He proclaimed that “it is my duty to make all efforts” to seek the release of the “Blind Sheikh,” Egyptian Omar Abdel Rahman, who headed the terrorist group which allegedly orchestrated the assassination of Sadat, was accused of being allied with Osama bin-Laden and is now serving a life sentence in a North Carolina prison for conspiring in 1993 to destroy the World Trade Center and seeking to bomb New York City landmarks.

In reporting this, the New York Times observed that Mursi had previously remarked that he suspected that unknown hidden hands might have played a role in the 9/11 World Trade Center bombings.

“When you come and tell me that the plane hit the tower like a knife in butter, you are insulting us.”

Now, notwithstanding undertakings to Jewish leaders that he would not invite Mursi to the White House unless he made a public commitment to genuinely adhere to the peace treaty with Israel, Obama has announced that he will be hosting the man who will urge him to release an unrepentant major global terrorist leader.

We in Israel are on the front lines. We may enjoy relative tranquility from Egypt in the short term due to

the prevailing chaos and restraints from the military. However, Hamas now feels confident that in the event of a future clash with Israel, Egypt is likely to provide it with maximum support and may ultimately even join it in confronting us.

This means that our border with Egypt will need to be strongly secured and Israel must gird itself for an increase in terrorist attacks emanating from the Sinai Peninsula. These are likely to include missile attacks, making the relationship with Egypt extremely fragile.

The only bright side of this dismal picture is our adversaries' awareness of the incredible power of the IDF. This ultimately represents the greatest deterrent against further deterioration or escalation of assaults against us.

Iran's Sakharovs

Nina Shea, InFocus Quarterly, Summer 2012

<http://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/3226/iran-dissidents>

Among today's most underreported stories is the persecution and pressure faced by reformist and heterodox Muslims within the Muslim World. The common post-9/11 refrain—"Where are the moderates?"—is partly answered by the Islamist practice of hurling legal charges of blasphemy, apostasy, and related accusations at those who express innovative ideas regarding their politics, society, and culture or criticize anything or anyone claiming to be Islamic.

Such charges morally discredit and silence the reformer through harsh sentences, including steep fines, prison terms, or capital punishment by the state or physical attacks on person and property by vigilantes and extremist groups who can act with impunity.

As the late Islamic scholar Abdurrahman Wahid, the former Indonesian president and head of Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim organization, warned, the efforts to crackdown on blasphemy "play directly into the hands of fundamentalists, who wish to avoid all criticism of their attempts to narrow the scope of discourse regarding Islam, and to inter 1.3 billion Muslims in a narrow, suffocating chamber of dogmatism." Nowhere is this practice more pronounced than in Iran's theocratic state, which ruthlessly applies blasphemy codes to crush political dissent from clerical rule.

A State of Repression

The population of Iran is 89 percent Shi'a Muslim. Its state institutions, according to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary doctrine, are under Shi'a establishment control. The main state institutions—the Supreme Leader; the Council of Experts, which determines the Supreme Leader; the Council of Guardians, which determines whether legislation is compatible with Islam and screens legislative candidates; and the Expediency Council, which arbitrates legal and theological disputes in the legislative process—are all manned by clerics or Islamic experts. Those who criticize the decisions or challenge the power of these groups, or question the theological doctrines that are used to legitimize them—such as Khomeini's declaration that he was

the representative of the successor to Islam's Prophet, the "hidden Twelfth Imam"—are treated as blasphemers of Islam.

Critics are tried in Iran's Islamic revolutionary courts, notorious for their arbitrariness and lack of due process. The judges are clerics, who are believed to know the "right path" (*serate mostaqim*) and allow every means—including beating, lashing, solitary confinement, amputation, rape, sexual abuse, burning, starvation, and strangulation—to force defendants to follow that path.

Many of Iran's dissidents are clerics themselves. As University of Pennsylvania professor and human rights scholar, Ann Mayer, wrote: "A symptom of the inherent repressiveness of [Iran's] official Islamic ideology can be seen in the scope and vigor of the persecutions and prosecutions of Shi'a clerics, many of whom have been martyred for failing to submit humbly to the official Islamic ideology." Many other dissidents are lay people from Iran's Shi'a community, including human rights activists, women's rights activists, journalists, writers, and lawyers. Such persons have been charged with blasphemy or even apostasy because they dared to question or criticize the regime's "divine" rules.

No less a security expert than former Defense Secretary Robert Gates has admonished that the West's struggle with Islamist extremism will ultimately depend not on military engagement, but on "the overall ideological climate within the world of Islam." Though Iran without doubt presents an acute threat to Western interests at this time, the United States has paid scant attention to the bitter theological struggle within Iran today and the religious dissidents who hold the potential of moderating the system. They have not received the acclaim, support, or even name recognition once accorded to Natan Sharansky, Andrei Sakharov, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and the leaders of the Helsinki human rights movement during the Cold War. Iranian journalists, bloggers, student leaders, and other secular figures also play a very heroic part and should be championed to a much greater extent than they are in the West. But the theologians and religious leaders who speak out for freedom and reform carry a moral stature that is uniquely important in the context of Iranian theocracy. Their challenge, stated in theological and moral terms, erodes the regime's claims to moral legitimacy, which Iran's ruling ayatollahs require both as a revolutionary regime and as a religious one. Publicity of their cases and their views—through the American government's bully pulpit, in United Nations forums, the media, Congressional hearings, and private activism, including by American Muslims—will help keep these brave voices alive.

Iran's Clerical Brave

In 2007, Shi'ite cleric Ayatollah Kazemeini Boroujerdi was sentenced to death in a secret trial, later commuted to 11 years imprisonment. Boroujerdi was penalized for arguing that "political leadership by clergy" was contrary to Islam, and emphasizing "there is no compulsion in religion." Ayatollah Boroujerdi is known for being outspoken in his support of the separation of religion and state. The 30 or so charges laid against him include "waging war against God," which carries the death penalty, "publicly calling political leadership by clergy unlawful," and publicly using the term "religious dictatorship" instead of "Islamic Republic." Hundreds of his followers and a number of

his family members, including his 86-year-old mother, have been arrested and detained. According to the redoubtable Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, Boroujerdi is currently imprisoned in Evin prison where he suffers from diabetes, high blood pressure, Parkinson's disease, vision loss, and kidney and heart problems, some of which are due to previous imprisonments and torture. Held largely incommunicado, he managed to smuggle out a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pleading for her to help his country.

Hojjatolislam Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari was trained as a cleric in the holy city of Qom. He has published widely in scientific and religious periodicals, and among other positions served as editor of the *Encyclopedia of Shi'a*. In a 2000 interview with Iran Press Service, he criticized compulsory veiling for women and said that mixing religion and politics "spoils, corrupts and empties both of their substance" and that no leader should have powers above those of the Constitution. Soon afterwards, at a conference in Berlin, Eshkevari spoke on "Dictatorship and its History"—a speech that was criticized publicly by conservative clerics in Iran, including Supreme Leader Khamenei. He was arrested upon his return to Iran and subjected to a closed trial on charges of apostasy, corruption on earth, waging war against God, conduct unbecoming a clergyman, insulting Islamic sanctities, and spreading lies. On October 17, 2000, Eshkevari was sentenced to death, later commuted on appeal to seven years' imprisonment.

Hashem Aghajari, a university professor and philosopher, delivered a speech in 2002 in which he built upon the ideas of Ali Shariati—an ideologue of the Islamic Revolution. Entitled "Islamic Protestantism," Aghajari argued that "Muslims are not monkeys to blindly follow the clerics." He went on to say: "Governments that suppress thinking under the name of religion are not only not religious governments but are not even humane governments." He was soon arrested for "insulting Islam" and sentenced to death. After two retrials prompted by student protests, he was finally sentenced to five years' imprisonment and released on bail in 2004.

Grand Ayatollah Hussain-Ali Montazeri was the most illustrious of all the clerical dissidents and, for his stances on human rights, religious tolerance, individual freedoms, and Iran's nuclear provocations, his name should be memorialized in human rights annals throughout the world. Montazeri had major religious stature and emulation as a grand marja, and, until 1989, was reportedly the designated successor to Khomeini as Supreme Leader. Like the Soviet Union's Andrei Sakharov who sacrificed his top position in the scientific field and all the perks and privileges of an esteemed establishment figure, Montazeri's theocratic career came to an abrupt halt and his property was seized when he strenuously objected to mass executions then taking place, and stated after the 1989 fatwa against Salman Rushdie that "[p]eople in the world are getting the idea that our business in Iran is just murdering people." He taught that apostates should not be subject to earthly punishments. In 1997, he was placed under house arrest and his religious school was forcibly closed. Through the Internet, he continued to criticize the regime and issue dissenting religious fatwas, including one demanding equal rights for Baha'is—the religious minority most oppressed in Iran, stripped of all constitutional rights for heresy.

Due to his stature, the regime did not dare imprison him; it indirectly tried to silence him through attacks on his followers.

One religious student and follower of Montazeri, Mojtaba Lotfi, was sentenced in 2008 to four years of imprisonment and five years of exile for posting, among other of Montazeri's sermons, one challenging Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad by name: "You call Iran the freest country in the world when you are outside, but inside Iran you deprive us of our basic and legal rights." Montazeri's post went on to say that even he, a key participant in the Islamic Revolution of 1979, had had his property confiscated and his speech censored and, if this could happen to him, how much worse it must be for the average people of Iran.

Following the disputed 2009 presidential elections in Iran, Montazeri wrote on his website that the country had become a "military regime" rather than an Islamic government and called upon senior clergy to stand in solidarity with the Iranian people and speak out. "The grand ayatollahs are well aware of their influence on the regime.... Their silence may give the wrong impression to people that the grand ayatollahs approve of whatever is underway," he stated. Montazeri died of a heart condition on December 20, 2009, sparking student protests and visits by thousands of mourners to the religious center of Qom, while other Grand Ayatollahs visited his home to pay their respects.

Mohsen Kadivar, Abdollah Nouri, and many other Shi'a scholars and clerics, as well as ordinary Shi'a laypersons, have spoken up against the grave injustices perpetrated by the Iranian theocratic regime. The specific charges brought against them are usually related to blasphemy and include "fighting against God," "dissension from religious dogma," "insulting Islam," "propagation of spiritual liberalism," "promoting pluralism," and even "creating anxiety in the minds of...Iranian officials." These vague and amorphous charges are subject to arbitrary and political enforcement and in themselves demonstrate injustice.

The 'Sin of Thinking'

Even more than other secular political opponents of the regime, these religious dissidents are the intellectuals of Iran's establishment elite and, as such, exemplify a potent moderating force against Islamism, whether of the Iranian Shi'a brand or of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood variety. While there is a sharp sectarian divide in the Muslim World, as is graphically seen in the battle lines drawn today in Syria and Iraq, Iran, nevertheless, has had a significant influence in spurring radicalization within the Sunni Muslim world. It was Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie, it bears recalling, that triggered a concerted demand from the Sunni-dominated Organization of Islamic Cooperation for worldwide punishments to deter blasphemy against Islam—even when uttered by non-Muslims in the West. Iran's fatwa has put in motion an effort to create a new norm in much of the West, as seen from the convictions in France of Brigitte Bardot for criticizing Muslim animal slaughter practices in Austria, of Elisabeth Sabaditsch-Wolff, for defaming Islam's prophet Muhammad, in Germany, of a business man who defamed the word, not the book, "Qur'an" (the latter case occurred after a demarche of Iran's government), and others.

In the ideological contest against extremism, the inspiring words and experiences of the Iranian Sakharovs—tried, tortured, and stripped of privileges for, in Hashem Aghajari's words, the "sin of thinking"—need to be uplifted and honored.

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

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