

OPINION and ANALYSIS

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

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Hopeless or infinite?

Dr Emmanuel Navon, Arutz Sheva, 28 June 2012

http://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/11842#.T_F-eBeO0fh

Last month, South Africa's Trade and Industry Minister Rob Davies declared that he intended to issue an official notice "to require traders in South Africa not to incorrectly label products that originate from the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) as products of Israel." Davies added that Pretoria recognizes the State of Israel "only within the borders demarcated by the United Nations (UN) in 1948."

The UN did not demarcate Israel's borders in 1948. On November 29, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly approved the recommendation of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) to divide the British Mandate on Palestine between an Arab state and a Jewish state (Resolution 181). This vote constituted a mere recommendation since General Assembly resolutions are not binding in international law. Thus, the idea that the UN "created" the state of Israel with Resolution 181 is mistaken (the General Assembly can approve the admission of new states to the UN, but it cannot create states). This resolution became moot as soon as it was passed since the Arab states flatly rejected it.

The UN did not demarcate Israel's borders in 1948.

Resolution 181 suggested borders that never came into being. When Israel declared its independence on May 14, 1948, it did not specify its borders (Israel's Declaration of Independence does refer to Resolution 181, but not to the borders suggested by the resolution). The war launched by six Arab countries (Egypt, Transjordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia) against the newly declared State of Israel ended with the armistice agreements signed in Rhodes in 1949. Those agreements did not establish borders but armistice lines, which were different from the borders suggested by UNSCOP. The armistice line between Israel and Transjordan was specifically defined as "temporary" upon the latter's insistence.

This "temporary" line lasted for 18 years, until Jordan attacked Israel on June 5, 1967. When Israel conquered the West Bank in self-defense, it did not occupy a sovereign country or part of a sovereign country. Transjordan annexed the territories it had conquered west of the Jordan River during Israel's War of Independence, but this annexation was never recognized by the international community (only Britain and Pakistan recognized Jordan's conquest and annexation). As for Israel, it regained in June 1967 a territory that had been granted to the Jewish People for self-determination by the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 and by the League of Nations Mandate in 1922 –a territory that, incidentally, was given to the Jews according to the Book on which US Presidents are administered the Oath of Office.

UN Security Council Resolution 242 (adopted on 22 November 1967) does not demand an Israeli withdrawal to the 1949 armistice lines. The resolution calls for "secured and

recognized" boundaries (the 1949 armistice lines were neither) and for an Israeli withdrawal "from territories" ("the" was intentionally dropped to leave room for negotiations). Negotiations between Israel and Jordan (between 1967 and 1988) and between Israel and the PLO (between 1993 and 2008) have failed to establish "secured and recognized" boundaries. Blaming Israel alone for that failure flies in the face of the historical record.

So when South Africa recognized Israel on 24 May 1948 (for Rob Davis' information), it did not recognize Israel "within the borders demarcated by the United Nations (UN) in 1948." The UN suggested borders in 1947, not in 1948, and those borders never came into being. When South Africa recognized Israel, Israel did not have borders. It was in the middle of a war that ended-up in armistice lines which disappeared eighteen years later as a result of Arab aggression.

"Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe" Albert Einstein is said to have quipped. In the Middle-East, two things are hopeless: the Arab-Israeli conflict and human ignorance; and I'm not sure about the Arab-Israeli conflict.

An open letter to Desmond Tutu

Maurice Ostroff, The Times of Israel, 26 June 2012

<http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/an-open-letter-to-desmond-tutu/>

In a letter to the Cape Times of June 20, journalist Moira Levy wrote that because of what she saw as Israel's recent "violent racial repression," she had cut ties with her past, legacy and family roots and, painful as it is, turned her back on being a Jew. She referred to Israel's actions against African refugees, whom she said were being "rounded up and held in detention camps in the Negev desert, although they posed no threat to Israel."

In response, Archbishop Desmond Tutu published a letter in which he appealed to Ms. Levy not to blame her faith for the policies of the people who have political power in the State of Israel. He added, "When members of our family behave wrongly, we do not turn our backs on them, but try to convince them to steer a fairer course."

Below is my open letter response to the archbishop.

* * *

Dear Archbishop Tutu,

I was moved by the sincerity of your letter in the Cape Times to Ms. Levy, who has turned her back on her Jewish heritage because of her views of the treatment of African refugees in Israel.

In particular I refer to your statement, which I heartily endorse, that we are all members of the same human family, made for goodness and love. In this connection, sir, I

respectfully ask you to please read a letter from a member of this human family who happens to be an Israeli soldier serving on the Israel-Egyptian border.

This soldier is typical of the sons and daughters and brothers and sisters of the great majority of Israelis, who carry out the unwelcome job of protecting our endangered state, and who I believe are deserving of the convincing you refer to, rather than the brutal uninformed attacks which are so common. In order to persuade, it is essential to be knowledgeable about the circumstances. To a great extent, however, I believe this knowledge is lacking due to misinformation in the media. Mark Twain's quip "If you don't read the papers you are uninformed; if you do read them you are misinformed" is unfortunately true.

With respect, please allow me to suggest that your statement that you do not turn your back on members of the family with whom you disagree, but rather try to steer them to a fairer course, is infrequently applied to Israel. Instead, Israel is singled out for uninformed and often malicious attacks and threats due to the intense obsession with Israel that has blinded and continues to blind the world to the facts about this little beleaguered state. For example Ms. Levy's concept of the situation of African refugees in Israel completely lacks context. Her quoting a statement by a member of the Knesset as official government policy is as invalid as an undiplomatic statement by Julius Malema would be if it was regarded as official South African policy.

Ms. Levy fails to quote PM Netanyahu's statement that the deportation program, dubbed "Going Home," would be carried out with dignity. "We have a Jewish tradition of treating strangers humanely," he said.

She appears to be unperturbed by the ill treatment these asylum seekers receive in Egypt that causes them to flee to Israel, as well as by the brutal trafficking industry in the Egyptian Sinai, where Bedouin gangs extort high prices for kidnapped migrants, as reported by Eritrean refugee Mogos Redae to the Guardian. Mogos was tortured for nine months until his family sold their homes to raise enough money to secure his release – \$14,000.

Ms. Levy ignores that fact that the problem of absorbing a flood of asylum seekers is not unique to Israel. It is a serious problem for which humane solutions are being sought.

It would be interesting to learn what measures Ms. Levy would recommend if thousands of asylum seekers were to suddenly settle in her neighborhood.

While asylum seekers from Eritrea are not being repatriated because of the dangers they still face there, as a result of the Sudanese peace agreement, four South Sudanese officials flew to Israel to help process the repatriation of their countrymen. They accompanied 123 who left voluntarily on a chartered flight last Sunday. Each adult received €1,000 in cash, with an additional €500 for each minor. Each passenger was allowed to carry 30 kilograms of luggage. They were also given vaccines against diseases common to Sub-Saharan Africa.

While many aspects of Israel's handling of the situation are subject to justifiable criticism and are being severely criticized in Israel, the situation compares very favorably with the report "South Africa: Xenophobic Rage Leaves Trail of Havoc in Gauteng" (Business

Day, May 2008) as well as with Europe. The Jesuit Refugee Service recently published a report on detention centers for refugees in 23 EU member states, revealing many severe complaints. A detainee in Malta complained of 42 detainees in one room. For many the climate feels prison-like. Many complain of unsanitary toilet and shower facilities, unhygienic kitchens, and rules that keep them isolated in their cells. Incidents of physical abuse were recorded in three quarters of the EU member states

In Britain, former PM Gordon Brown called for “British Jobs for British Workers,” David Blunkett complained that Britain was being “swamped” with asylum seekers, and Ed Milliband told the Guardian last week he would review all immigrants’ access to benefits.

If the world were not so obsessed with attacking Israel, the media would have seen and forewarned politicians about the Arab Spring that had been brewing long before it exploded. Gaddafi’s supplying of arms to the IRA and visits to him by Nick Griffin were hardly noticed. Nor was the acceptance of Gaddafi’s largesse by British academics. Nor was the £1.5m that had been stolen from the Libyan people and paid to the LSE.

Instead, the media turned a blind eye to obvious warning signs, and despite the many red faces in their ranks, they continue in the same vein, ignoring, for example, the PLO and Hamas charters, which show why Israel is compelled to undertake the defensive actions for which she is so widely criticized.

It is painfully obvious that the parallels the ANC draws with the Palestinian struggle are far from congruent. They deserve to be re-examined to gain a perspective on the lessons Israel can draw from the South African experience.

Whereas the ANC Charter states that “South Africa shall strive to maintain world peace and the settlement of all international disputes by negotiation – not war,” article 9 of the PLO Charter bluntly declares the opposite. Namely that the PLO’s armed struggle is not merely tactical; it is in fact the overall strategy. The Hamas charter makes it even clearer that there is absolutely no room for peaceful negotiation. Article 13 unambiguously states:

“Initiatives, and so-called peaceful solutions and international conferences, are in contradiction to the principles of the Islamic Resistance Movement. There is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad.

It is difficult to understand the ANC’s support for the irrationality of the Hamas concept, so different from the sober tone of the ANC Charter, as illustrated by obsessive phobia about freemasons, rotary clubs, Lions and similar organizations, promising that these organizations will be obliterated the day Islam is in control.

Nor would the ANC tolerate the incitement to indiscriminate violence against uninvolved civilians (women, children and invalids alike), which continues to be fomented in mosques and PA-controlled media, and taught in schools from the earliest age.

In fact, the ANC charter has much in common with Israel’s Declaration of Independence, which promises complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex, along with freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.

Under the circumstances, sir, I ask only that you include Israel in your laudable concept of the human family that deserves equal understanding and consideration.

This letter is being publicized as will the considered reply I hope to receive from you.

Sincerely,

Maurice Ostroff

The last Jews of Tunisia

Michael J Totten, World Affairs, 25 June 2012

http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/michael-j-totten/last-jews-tunisia?utm_source=World+Affairs+Newsletter&utm_campaign=3426d94940-WAJ_Kirchick_6_25_2012&utm_medium=email

Jews lived all over the Middle East and North Africa for thousands of years, and they lived among Arab Muslims for more than 1,000 years, but they're almost extinct now in the Arab world. Arabs and Jews didn't live *well* together, exactly, but they co-existed five times longer than the United States has existed. They weren't always token minorities, either. Baghdad was almost a third Jewish during the first half of the 20th century. Morocco and Tunisia are the last holdouts. In Tunisia, only 1,500 remain.

What happened? What changed? Islam didn't happen all of a sudden, nor did the arrival of Arabs in Mesopotamia, the Levant, and North Africa. Both have been firmly in place since the 7th century. A far more recent cascade of events transformed the region, and for the worse: the occupation of Arab lands by Nazi Germany and its puppet Vichy France, the Holocaust, post-Ottoman Arab Nationalism, Israel's declaration of independence, and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

As a consequence of all that, rather than the Arab invasion or the rise of the Islamic religion, almost the entire Arab world is *Judenrein* now. And since the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Republic regime in Iran, relations between Arabs and Jews are worse than they were at any time during the entire history of either.

Yet 1,500 Jews hang on in Tunisia. The *ancien* Ben Ali regime kept them safe, as has Tunisia's relatively tolerant and cosmopolitan culture. But what will become of them now that Ben Ali is in exile and his government is overthrown?

I met with Haim Bittan, the chief rabbi of Tunis. My colleague Armin Rosen joined me, as did our fixer and translator Ahmed Medien.

"You should say something to the rabbi in Hebrew," Ahmed told Armin. Armin is Jewish and speaks a bit of the language of Israel. "It will make him happy."

The three of us met the rabbi and his assistant in an office behind an enormous synagogue in central Tunis. I wanted to take a picture of the synagogue, but the police

wouldn't let me. They're worried someone might bomb it. I found one on Wikipedia, though.

Armin took Ahmed's advice and greeted the rabbi and his assistant in Hebrew. Their faces lit up. It was an interesting moment. There were five of us in that room. Three Jews, one nominal Christian (me), and one nominal Muslim (Ahmed). For the first time since Armin arrived in the country, he wasn't the token Jew in the room.

"How has the situation here changed for the Jews of Tunisia," I said, "since the fall of Ben Ali?"

"Nothing has changed," the rabbi said. "It's the same situation since Ben Ali's fall."

"This is a country ruled by an Islamist government," Armin said. "Do you feel that presents any problems for the Jewish community?"

"There's no problem between the government and the Jewish community," the rabbi said.

"But I have seen photographs of Salafists with their black flag in front of the synagogue here intimidating people," I said. "Was that a one-time event, or are you worried they might become increasingly dangerous?"

"They don't bother me," the rabbi said. "They lived with us before. That incident was their business, not ours."

What kind of answers were these?

Ahmed, our Tunisian translator and fixer, had a question of his own for the rabbi.

"Does it bother you that some people want Islamic law in the constitution?" he said.

"There's no problem at all," the rabbi said, "because the constitution is not written."

"He doesn't want to answer," Ahmed said quietly to Armin and me as he leaned back in his chair.

I'm not even sure why the rabbi agreed to be interviewed. He answered almost all of our questions this way, as did his assistant. They answered as though the entire Arab world would judge them for what they said and pounce if they uttered a peep of complaint. They reminded me of citizens of police states who are asked on the record what they think of the government.

I didn't want to get them in trouble or give them the third degree, but I needed something other than packaged boilerplate answers, so I chose a question that couldn't be easily dodged. The rabbi's assistant wore a black yarmulke or kippah on the top of his head, which marked him out as an obvious Jew, and I addressed my question to him.

"Do you walk around, either of you, on the street wearing the kippah?"

He vigorously shook his head. "We don't," he said. "People might think we're Zionists and we don't want that, so we wear a hat."

They had at least one problem then. They felt the need to be closeted, at least on the street. That's never a good sign.

Christians don't have to hide the fact that they're Christian. Everyone in Tunisia who so much as glanced at me surely assumed I'm a Christian (that is, if they gave the matter any thought in the first place) since I look European. Nearly all were perfectly friendly.

They were perfectly friendly to Armin, as well. His complexion makes him look ethnically ambiguous. He could be Hispanic, Arab, Italian, Israeli. He could be many things. He received no more and no less hospitality than I did. But what if he walked around wearing a kippah or a necklace with a six-pointed star? The rabbi's assistant wouldn't dare.

It's hard to say, though, how much trouble Armin actually would have faced had he done that. Israelis can and do visit Tunisia. They can do so on their own passports. They don't have to use second passports from a country like Britain or the United States the way Israeli visitors to Lebanon do.

And here's the thing: when you visit Tunisia you have to produce your passport a lot. You have to produce your passport every time you check into a hotel. You have to produce your passport to rent a car. You have to show your passport to police officers and the national guard at checkpoints. (That happened to me a number times.) So Israelis—not just Jews, but *Israelis*—can and do wander around all over Tunisia and announce to the police and to the staff at hotels, airports, and car rental offices that they're Israelis. And supposedly they don't experience any problems.

I'm not sure what to make of it. I'd like to report that the Jews are doing just fine, but if that's the case, why were the rabbi and his assistant so cagey? And why wouldn't they go out in public looking like Jews? Ahmed didn't even blink when Armin told him he's Jewish, nor did he mind in the slightest that Armin and I have both been to Israel. Ahmed, though, is a well-educated tri-lingual professional, and his own views of the Arab-Israeli conflict are, shall we say, unconventional compared with those of his neighbors.

Armin asked the rabbi why Libya and Algeria are entirely free of Jews while Tunisia is not.

"Jews in Tunisia don't have any problems living with other people," the rabbi said. "In the other countries they did."

And that's all he had to say about that.

"But a lot of Tunisian Jews did leave and go to Israel," I said. "Why did they leave while you stayed?"

"Only a few Tunisian Jews went to Israel," he said, "but they went for economic reasons. Maybe they didn't have a lot here and they wanted to go there for the economic opportunities. Those who had good lives here stayed."

Such cautious answers! *Move along, nothing to see.*

He might have answered differently had I not been a reporter, but who knows? There's always a chance he has internalized what he's saying to keep his stress level down, but I don't think so. I can't psychoanalyze the man, but his tone of voice and body language suggested he was extremely reserved and not entirely sincere in what he was saying.

"What's the Jewish community's view on relations between Tunisia and Israel?" Armin said. Tunisia had low-level diplomatic relations with Israel during the 1990s, but Ben Ali severed those relations during the Second Intifada. "There's talk of banning normalization with Israel in the constitution."

"That's a matter for the government to decide," the rabbi said, "not the Jewish community here."

"But the Jewish community surely has an opinion," Armin said.

I understand that he has to be careful, but we wanted the truth even if we couldn't quote him. "You can answer off the record," I said. "I'll turn my voice recorder off if you want."

He didn't want me to turn off the recorder, but he understood that I didn't like his evasiveness so he gave me a better answer.

"If Tunisia normalized relations with Israel," he said, "then the Muslims here might bother Jews. So we would rather Tunisia not have normal relations with Israel."

That was an on-the-record response. So at least he was willing to acknowledge the potential for trouble for Tunisia's Jews.

I don't mean to suggest that they're oppressed and that the chief rabbi of Tunis answered questions with a gun in his back. I do not believe they are oppressed. At least I'm unaware that they are oppressed. But it's hard to be a minority anywhere in the world. And it has been so hard to be a Jew in the Arab world lately that there are almost none left.

The rabbi can't be entirely wrong. Tunisia's Jews are not prisoners. They're free to leave if they like. They can visit Europe without any problems. They can visit *Israel* without any problems. Since they can visit Israel, they can make aliyah and receive citizenship automatically upon arrival. All a Tunisian Jew has to do if he wants to permanently relocate to Israel is buy a one-way ticket to Tel Aviv for 200 dollars. That's less than an average month's salary, so coming up with the money wouldn't be hard.

Even if it's more difficult to live as a Jew in Tunisia than the rabbi and his assistant let on, it's *possible* to live there as a Jew. More than a thousand do so voluntarily. That's something. Isn't it?

I wanted to know if Tunisian Jews and Muslims socialize with each other or if they live entirely separate lives. Do they visit each other's houses? Do they hang out in cafes?

The rabbi's assistant answered by shaking his head.

It's always a good idea to talk to minorities in the Middle East. They see things at a different angle from everyone else. The Jews I met in Tunisia, though, had no more to say about the revolution, the new government, or where Tunisia is heading than they did about their own circumstances. They were too cautious to say much of anything.

Perhaps the Christians could help. They have fewer reasons to be wary than Jews. Christians are having a hard time in lots of Arab countries, but in most places they live in a multicultural paradise by comparison.

Tunisia's Christians, though, aren't Tunisians. They're foreigners. The number of Christian Tunisians is apparently almost zero. Nearly all are Europeans and sub-Saharan black Africans. There are quite a few churches around—and they're full on Sundays, too—but you won't find many Arabs inside.

Armin and I spoke to Father John MacWilliam, a Catholic priest and missionary with the White Fathers movement. He's from Great Britain and spent years in the inferno of Algeria before moving to Tunis.

"Is it true that most Christians here aren't Tunisians?" I said.

"I'm British," he said, "and I'm Christian, but most Tunisians, 99% or more, are Muslims, at least officially. If you go to any church on Sunday, all the people are foreigners."

"There isn't even a little community of indigenous Christians here," I said, "like the Copts in Egypt? What happened to them?"

"By the 15th century there were no indigenous Christians living in this part of North Africa," he said.

They all converted to Islam. Judaism, though, kept a toe hold in the country, a toe hold it still has. Most Tunisian Jews are the descendents of Berbers, the indigenous inhabitants of North Africa before Arabs invaded in the 7th and 8th centuries. Two-thirds of Tunisia's Jews live on the southern island of Djerba, a part of the country that is still more Berber and less Arabized. (Djerba, by the way, is the famous island of Homer's Lotus Eaters in the *Odyssey*.)

Father MacWilliam moved to Tunis from Algeria, where he lived for thirteen years.

"Were you driven out?" I said, but he shook his head. "No? You were there during all that trouble? I know a lot of Christians were killed."

By "trouble" I was referring, of course, to the Algerian civil war in the 1990s when radical Islamists waged a ferocious terror insurgency that killed more than 100,000 people.

"It was a black decade," he said. "How many hundreds of thousands of people were killed, I don't know, but only a very small proportion were Christians. In the Catholic church there were 19 altogether killed. Most people know about the six monks in Tibhirine. Four of my congregation in Tizuzu were killed. There were others. It was difficult, but in other ways it was enriching because we were there helping. I opened libraries and supported university students. A lot of foreigners left, a lot of embassies closed, a lot of companies left. The Catholic church didn't leave. We stayed. When things get difficult you don't leave your friends."

Westerners who live in Arab countries are often treated better than locals. They're given a certain amount of latitude and liberty that governments sometimes think would be dangerous if enjoyed by everyone else. I've never worried that secret police would arrest me, for instance, if I insulted the president at a cafe. I don't want to be tailed or spied on in my hotel room, of course, but if they bug my phone, at the end of the day, what are they going to do? The worst an Arab police state will do to me is arrest me, interrogate me, throw me out of the country, and put me on a blacklist. Citizens in oppressive Middle Eastern countries worry the police will show up at their house with a blowtorch and pliers, that their children will go missing, that they'll be tortured to death.

The people I need to worry about most in the Middle East are criminals and terrorists. Foreigners were right to leave Algeria during the 1990s. They were singled out for destruction along with liberals, artists, feminists, intellectuals, cosmopolitans, teachers—basically anyone who didn't precisely fit the description of an ultra-conservative Salafist nutjob. So it's rather extraordinary that only 19 Christians were killed during that time.

My hat is off to Father MacWilliam. *When things get difficult you don't leave your friends.* That's what he said. But if I was in Algeria while Salafists were hacking thousands of people to death with machetes, I would have left. Almost anyone would have left. Maybe MacWilliam is a better person than I am. Maybe he's nuts. Maybe he's both. Either way, he grit his teeth and stayed through an unspeakable bloodbath.

Tunisia must feel like Switzerland by comparison. Christians in Tunisia have it pretty good. They have a few restrictions placed on them, but they can basically do whatever they want, partly because as foreigners and they're subject to less social pressure. What if they weren't foreigners, though? What if they were Tunisians? Would they be second-class citizens like the Christians of Egypt?

Probably not. The Jews aren't. They clearly face a great deal of social pressure, but 1,500 live there by choice. And they're equal under the law, at least on paper. Those facts right there are extraordinary even if the Jews do have to hunker down nervously amongst themselves.

The question is: how long can they last? Will they still be there in 100 years? Perhaps Father MacWilliam could safely address that question more directly than the rabbi.

"People here talk a lot about the religious extremists who are against the liberal values of other parts of the society," he said. "But we have religious freedom. Religious freedom is important to Tunisians. This is a country with a long history as a civilization. Tunisians are proud of the fact that it's a country with a multitude of civilizations. And since

independence it has developed human rights. On the issue of women's rights, for instance, Tunisia is more advanced than other Arab countries."

It's true. Women and men have been equal under the law in Tunisia for decades. Ninety-five percent of Egyptian girls reportedly have their clitoris removed when they're young, but female genital mutilation doesn't even exist in Tunisia. Wikipedia has a page that lists the percentage of FGM incidence by country and Tunisia doesn't even appear next to an asterisk.

Ahmed, my fixer, told me a Salafist group brought Egypt's notorious Jew-hating creepjob Wagdy Ghoneim to Tunis. The man proposed Tunisia *start* cutting off little girls' clitorises and the entire country freaked out. Human rights activists sued him just for bringing it up.

But what about the Jews? I had an awfully hard time getting straight answers. How are things really going these days? I asked Father MacWilliam about it directly. He, at least, eschewed sugar-coating.

"I don't know the Jewish community here," he said. "There are Tunisian Jewish families who have been here for centuries. Their synagogue, of course, is protected. It functions, but I think they keep a fairly low profile. There's an amalgam of what is Jewish and what is Israeli. Many Arabs assume that anyone who's Jewish is also Israeli and Zionist and is oppressing the Palestinians and so on. That doesn't make it easy for somebody who's Jewish to openly be known as Jewish. They are probably a more oppressed minority."

But how oppressed are the Jews, really? It's so hard to say. I can't very well report that they're oppressed when I have no more evidence for that than you're reading here in this article. I also can't say they're perfectly fine because they say they're perfectly fine. Not when the rabbi and his assistant were so reluctant to say anything. I've been in this business a long time. I know how people behave in interviews when they're nervous. And those two were nervous.

I did meet one Tunisian Jew, though, who spoke a little more freely. His name is Jacob Lellouche and he owns a kosher restaurant called Mamie Lily (after his grandmother) in the posh Tunis suburb of La Goulette.

Ahmed took me and Armin there for dinner. Armin and I were both surprised to discover that we were the only non-Muslims having kosher Jewish food for dinner that night. Nearly all Lellouche's customers are Muslims. Why? "Because Tunisia's Jews are used to eating this food at home," Lellouche said. The place was packed, too. We had to wait almost an hour for a table.

Armin asked if his restaurant business has changed since the revolution. Has it gotten better or worse?

"My clients here are the same," Lellouche said. "A lot of Tunisians come here, and some people come from France also. But this isn't a touristic place."

"So," Armin said, "is there some appreciation then among Muslim Tunisians for the country's Jewish culture?"

"I'm not only the owner of this restaurant," Lellouche said. "After the revolution I created the first cultural Jewish association. It's called *Dar al-Dekra*, the house of memory. Ninety percent of the association's members are Tunisian Muslims. The civil society sustains the Jewish community. An Arab Tunisian association whose name translates to 'I'm Free and I Work for My Country' is here tonight to write a communiqué, a press release."

Lellouche says his business is doing okay. That's good, especially with the post-revolutionary economic depression. But how are Jews faring in general after the fall of Ben Ali? Are they doing better or worse?

"I wouldn't say better," he said. "We have to live our lives and make our place in this country. That's all. We have to keep our culture in Tunisia's memory. We are its guardians. Our association will create the first Jewish museum in Tunisia."

He says he believes Jews will always remain in Tunisia. Not only are the Jews not enjoying their last days in the country, there won't ever *be* any last days. Maybe he really believes that. Maybe he only wants to believe it. Maybe it's even true, but we shouldn't assume it. Muslim-Jewish relations are in the abyss. What will happen if the Israeli-Palestinian conflict heats up again or if the mushrooming Salafists go on a rampage like they did next-door in Algeria?

"Was it possible," Armin said, "to have an organization like yours before the revolution?"

"It was difficult," Lellouche said, "because Mr. Ben Ali, our last president, instrumentalized the Jewish community. He wanted to project an image of tolerance and say to France and America that the Jews still live here because he wants them to live here. But I don't think that was true. We don't have problems with the society, though perhaps there is some trouble now with the Salafists."

Salafists haven't threatened Lellouche or his restaurant, but mobs of them have been wrecking havoc in several parts of the country since the revolution, and they rhetorically declared war on "the Jews" a number of times.

"Last week," Lellouche said, "they held a demonstration in Tunis on Habib Bourguiba Avenue. They called for the killing of Jews."

"Were they referring to Israel, to you, or to both?" I said.

"This is the third time they called for the murder of Jews," he said. "The first time, we thought they were speaking about Zionists. And the second time, we thought they were speaking about Zionists. After the third time, though, it was clear that they meant the Jews."

Are cooler Israeli heads reining Bibi in?

Robert Wright, *The Atlantic*, 1 July 2012

<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/07/are-cooler-israeli-heads-reining-bibi-in/259266/>

Over at IPS News, Gareth Porter argues that Israel's national security establishment may be reining in Bibi Netanyahu, reducing the chances of war with Iran.

In this analysis the key figure is Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz of the Kadima party, who entered the government when Netanyahu formed a new coalition in May. Porter, drawing on the thinking of Israeli academic and former government official Yossi Alpher, argues that including Mofaz in the government was a concession to the various Israeli national security elites who view Netanyahu's position on Iran as alarmist and unduly belligerent.

Netanyahu and Barak wanted to show the national security chiefs that they were being listened to by bringing someone who reflects their views into the leadership circle, Alpher said.

The result of that decision may be a much deeper shift in policy toward Iran than Netanyahu and Barak wish to acknowledge.

If Porter is right in his parsing of Mofaz's recent talk at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the pressure to strike Iran placed on President Obama by Israel could wane. In particular: Netanyahu will give up on his attempt to move Obama's "red line" from Iran's actually trying to build a nuclear bomb to Iran's merely possessing a nuclear weapons "capability"--i.e., the materials and know-how to produce a bomb within months should it decide to.

I'd add only one point to Porter's analysis.

Mofaz, and the Israeli defense elites he is said to represent, cite two reasons for skepticism about bombing: efficacy and blowback. They ask whether bombing would really set Iran's nuclear program back very far, and they worry about what Iran might do in retaliation.

I'd go further and raise questions about another of Netanyahu's premises: that the threat of a military attack--even assuming it is viewed by Iran as credible--would intimidate Iran into compliance with our wishes. When people in the Iranian leadership imagine a military assault, they surely realize that America isn't up for a ground invasion. So they presumably envision Israel and/or America "mowing the lawn" every couple of years--that is, periodically conducting surgical strikes that don't do much damage to Iran writ large but keep the nuclear program discombobulated. My question is: Why would Iran's leaders find that prospect so unattractive? This regime's recipe for maintaining what popular support it has rests heavily on the perception of an American-Zionist threat. What better way to intensify that perception, and so sustain and even expand popular support, than to get briefly bombed by America and/or Israel every couple of years?

So as American negotiators refuse to offer Iran sanctions relief in exchange for the concessions they seek, and count instead on the threat of military strikes to do the necessary incentivizing, the Iranian leadership--or at least important elements within it--may well be sitting there thinking: Go ahead, make my day.

The Cold War's Arab Spring

Claire Berlinski, Tablet Magazine, 20 June 2012

http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/103576/the-cold-wars-arab-spring?utm_source=outbrain&utm_medium=referral

The dominant narrative of modern Middle East history emphasizes the depredations visited upon the region by European colonization and accepts as a truism that the former colonial powers prioritized the protection of their material interests—in oil, above all—above the dignity and self-determination of the region's inhabitants. Thus did botched decolonization result in endless instability. The most intractable of the regional conflicts to which this gave rise, that between the Arabs and Israelis, is attributed in this narrative to Israel's unwillingness to accede to Palestinian national aspirations. Thus did the region become a breeding ground for radicalism, intensified by Cold War rivalry between the superpowers, who replaced the European colonizers as the region's meddling overlords. Then came Mikhail Gorbachev—a Westernizing reformer. At last, the Cold War was over. A new world order was at hand.

What if this conventional wisdom is nonsense? Russian exile Pavel Stroiлов argues just this in his forthcoming book, *Behind the Desert Storm*. “Not a word of it is true,” he writes. “It was the Soviet Empire—not the British Empire—that was responsible for the instability in the Middle East.”

Stroiлов, a historian now living in London, fled Russia in 2003 after stealing 50,000 top-secret Kremlin documents from the Gorbachev Foundation archives, where he was working as a researcher. He was given access to the archive in 1999, but Gorbachev refused him permission to copy its most significant documents. Having observed the network administrator entering the password into the system, Stroiлов reproduced the archive and sent it to secure locations around the world.

Stroiлов's cache includes hundreds of transcripts of discussions between Gorbachev and foreign leaders, politicians, and diplomats. (The originals are still sealed under Kremlin pressure.) There are notes from Politburo and other top decision-making meetings, notes written by Gorbachev's aides Anatoly Chernyaev and Georgy Shakhnazarov and by Politburo member Vadim Medvedev. None were ever available to independent researchers, although some were published by the Gorbachev Foundation in a heavily censored version. Stroiлов also stole the 1972-1986 diary of Anatoly Chernyaev, deputy chief of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union International Department and Gorbachev's principal aide on international affairs from 1986 to 1991. He stole reports dating from the 1960s by Vadim Zagladin, who was deputy chief of the International Department until 1987 and Gorbachev's adviser from 1987 to 1991. (Stroiлов also draws upon Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky's vast, stolen collection of documents, as well as the Mitrokhin Archive, a collection of notes taken secretly by the defector Vasili Mitrokhin during his 30 years as a KGB archivist in the foreign intelligence service and the First Chief Directorate.)

Stroiлов's book about these documents, many only now translated into English, challenges the conventional wisdom that Western colonialists are to blame for the chaos in the region. All of its major conflicts, he argues, were caused by Soviet expansionism. Terrorism and the rabid anti-Israeli animus of the Arab world were Soviet inspirations. And the revolutions we are seeing now were inevitable, for the Soviet client states were

socialist regimes, and sooner or later socialism exhausts economies and thus the patience of the people who live in them.

Stroilov focuses upon Gorbachev's intrigues in the Middle East, explaining the Arab Spring as the "final act of the Cold War." This thesis is overstated—Stroilov is a bit too enamored of his own collection to admit the complexity of these events—but there is nonetheless much in his archives to support this description. The documents clearly suggest that many contemporary conflicts in the Middle East were fomented by the Soviet empire, particularly in the final years before its break-up. And the events he describes have had a significant impact upon the current state of the region—from the conflict in Iraq to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, to the development of a de facto alliance between the European Union and the Arab states. Perhaps most significantly, there is much here to suggest that it is past time to reexamine Gorbachev's reputation as a reformer and liberalizer. Stroilov's book suggests that in the Middle East, Gorbachev's policy was old-school Kremlin imperialism, all the way to the end.

From the close of World War I, the great prize of the Middle East has been the Persian Gulf. During the Cold War, America and its allies in Europe and Asia depended upon its oil for 90 percent of their energy needs; developing countries would be instantly crippled by a sharp hike in oil prices. But for the Soviets, attaining control of the Gulf could be achieved only by direct military aggression. Following the return of British forces to Kuwait in 1961 to defend the Emirate from Iraq's Abd al-Karim Qasim—whose ambitions for Kuwait were subsequently, if temporarily, realized by Saddam Hussein—it became clear to the Soviets that the West would go to any length to defend the oil. "And so the comrades postponed the conquest of the Gulf," writes Stroilov, "although some of them were sorely disappointed with that decision."

What, then, was Plan B? It was "the subversion and eventual destruction of Israel."

Though not as good as the Gulf oil fields, Israel would also be a big prize. It was the only democracy in the region, the strongest military power in the pro-Western camp and, indeed, the bridgehead of the Western world. Even more importantly, the very process of crusading (or jihadding) against Israel offered fantastic political opportunities. A besieged Israel effectively meant millions of Jewish hostages in the hands of the comrades, and the threat of genocide could intimidate the West into making great concessions in the Gulf or elsewhere. On the other hand, by making the Israeli-Palestinian conflict the central problem of the Middle East, the Soviets could exploit Arab nationalism, anti-Semitism, and even Islamic religious feelings to mobilize support for their policies. Indeed, under the banner of Arab solidarity, the socialist influence in the region grew far beyond the socialist regimes and parties.

The code-name for this operation against Israel, according to Gen. Ion Mihai Pacepa, the highest-ranking defector from the Soviet Bloc, was "SIG"—Sionistskiye Gosudarstva, or "Zionist Governments." In a *National Review* article, Pacepa recalls a conversation he had with KGB chairman Yuri Andropov, who envisioned fomenting "a Nazi-style hatred for the Jews throughout the Islamic world. ... We had only to keep repeating our themes—that the United States and Israel were 'fascist, imperial-Zionist countries' bankrolled by rich Jews."

In the mid-1970s, Pacepa recalls, the KGB ordered its Eastern European sister agencies to scour the Middle East for trusted agents, train them in disinformation and terrorism, and export a “rabid, demented hatred for American Zionism.” They showered the region with an Arabic translation of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and KGB-fabricated documents alleging that Israel and the United States were dedicated to converting the Islamic world into a Jewish colony.

Following the defeat of the Egyptians in the Six Day War, the Soviets came to a second realization: A conventional military confrontation with Israel, and by extension the West, carried too great a risk of escalating into nuclear war. A change of tactics was required. Gen. Alexander Sakharovsky, then head of the KGB’s intelligence arm, explained this to his East European colleagues: “[T]errorism should become our main weapon.” Sakharovsky boasted that airplane hijackings were his own invention; he decorated his office with a world map, covered in flags, each marking a successful hijacking. Though the PLO managed to unite various terrorist organizations, “the supreme headquarters of the whole network was, of course, the Kremlin,” Stroilov writes, and “the evidence accumulated at this point leaves no doubt that the whole system was invented by Moscow as a weapon against the West, and the PLO was a jewel in their crown.”

Pacepa lists examples of KGB-sponsored acts of terrorism:

November 1969, armed attack on the El Al office in Athens, leaving 1 dead and 14 wounded; May 30, 1972, Ben Gurion Airport attack, leaving 22 dead and 76 wounded; December 1974, Tel Aviv movie theater bomb, leaving 2 dead and 66 wounded; March 1975, attack on a Tel Aviv hotel, leaving 25 dead and 6 wounded; May 1975, Jerusalem bomb, leaving 1 dead and 3 wounded; July 4, 1975, bomb in Zion Square, Jerusalem, leaving 15 dead and 62 wounded; April 1978, Brussels airport attack, leaving 12 wounded; May 1978, attack on an El Al plane in Paris, leaving 12 wounded.

Stroilov’s documents indicate that the Soviets and Syrians also took credit for blowing up the U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983.

Two of Bukovsky’s documents appear in English for the first time in *Behind the Desert Storm*. The first is Yuri Andropov’s memo to Leonid Brezhnev in 1974 detailing a KGB meeting with Palestinian terrorist Wadie Haddad. It recommends that the Soviet government provide material support to Haddad’s Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The second is the transcript of a 1984 Politburo meeting approving the shipment of 15 million rubles’ worth of weapons and ammunition to the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine in exchange for a collection of ancient art. The invention of modern terrorism: All credit is due to the Kremlin.

Then there was the 1979 Iranian revolution. Again, Stroilov suggests, the conventional narrative is wrong. This was not a spontaneous Islamist uprising but a well-organized communist revolution gone awry. It had been planned since the end of World War II, when Soviet forces withdrew from Iran under Western pressure but left behind a massive spy network. The standard ratio of KGB residencies was one per country; in Iran, the Soviets had nearly 40. They worked for the next 33 years to foment the revolution, training illegals from the Soviet republics to pass as members of Iran’s ethnic groups. Unfortunately for them, they did not know that Vladimir Kuzichkin, their key spymaster in Tehran, had been recruited by MI6. The British shared the information

about the upcoming revolution with SAVAK—but too late. By then the revolution was in full force. The mullahs captured SAVAK's records, and with this knowledge they rounded up every last Soviet agent.

An odd anecdote appears in Stroilov's account of the final days of the Iran-Iraq war. Khomeini had learned from the Western press that Gorbachev was a man with whom one could do business—a great reformer. Obviously confused, he dispatched an ayatollah to deliver a handwritten letter to Gorbachev. "The text, alas, is still unknown to historians," writes Stroilov, "but the whole Politburo is on record laughing their heads off when reading it." The contents may be deduced, he says, from the transcripts of the subsequent Politburo. Khomeini had proposed that Gorbachev should abandon Marxism and convert to Islam.

This, Stroilov remarks, "was hardly much sillier than the attitude of most Western opinion-makers, who hoped that Gorbachev would miraculously transform from a communist to a democrat."

The envoy was politely disabused of the idea but reassured that the Kremlin and the ayatollahs would still find common ground in their shared goal of destroying the Great Satan:

"Without diplomatic niceties," as Gorbachev said, he told the Ayatollah how Americans and Pakistanis were undermining the well-known Soviet efforts to achieve peace in Afghanistan, and hinted that, détente and disarmament notwithstanding, he disbelieved all the US assurances of friendship. This he contrasted with the sincerity of the Soviet-Iranian relations. Soon, Comrades and Ayatollahs would note they were in complete agreement, not only about the situation in the Middle East, but also about South Africa, Latin America, East-West disarmament, and especially about "turning the Indian Ocean into a peace zone," which meant ousting the Americans. Soviet-Iranian joint committees working on these issues mushroomed in 1989, while Foreign Ministers Shevardnadze and Velayati had four meetings in six months.

Nuclear energy was listed as one of the key areas of cooperation.

The Red Arabs, as Stroilov calls them—Egypt, Libya, Syria—were socialist regimes and Soviet clients; even deposed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, he argues, never fully repudiated his connections to the Soviet Union and should more properly be understood as Nasser's successor than a Westernizing reformer. For example, in pridefully describing the fruits of one of his five-year plans to Gorbachev, Mubarak described both his real attitude toward the United States and his surprisingly modern outlook on debt-repayment:

GORBACHEV. But where did you get money from? Is it flowing in the Nile?

MUBARAK. We had to borrow a lot. [...] Everyone has debts in today's world. [...] Americans owe money to the Japanese, but Bush does not pay. So what, will Japan declare war to the US? [...] I told Reagan that the Soviet Union had never charged any interest for its loans to us. We no longer borrow money from the US. We only accept non-repayable aid, when they are prepared to give it. [...]

GORBACHEV. How much is your total debt?

MUBARAK. 50 billion dollars. [...] But we can always negotiate on the debts and get postponement of payments again and again. Nowadays, almost nobody repays debts. I'm talking to you absolutely frankly.

Subsequently, Mubarak said:

I would like to tell you that we continue military cooperation with the USA. They give us \$1,3 bn. aid. We still cannot do without it: we need spare parts for military equipment, and so on. But time will come when things turn in different direction. I am telling this to you absolutely frankly.

Pleased by this, Gorbachev thereafter kept it in mind that turning Egypt away from the United States might be feasible. Meanwhile, he worked strenuously to unite the Red Arabs with the aim of expelling the United States completely from the region. In page upon page of these transcripts, we see him striving toward this goal, particularly in his meetings with Hafez Assad:

GORBACHEV. [...] The Soviet Union, given the capabilities it has, is also prepared to contribute to the unification of the Arab ranks. Of course, our enemies won't miss the opportunity to present our honest efforts as "Moscow's conspiracy," so we should act accurately and carefully. In any case, you can count on our support. [...] A success of this cause would be a great historic victory with tremendous consequences.

In 1986, as the series of Politburo memos shows, the Syrians proudly reported that they had destroyed the prospect of peace between Israel and Jordan, "wrecked" cooperation between Jordan and the Palestinians, and "effectively blocked" President Ronald Reagan's peace plan. Gorbachev encouraged them to continue their efforts, lauding Syria's defense of the "progressive" forces of the Middle East. Gorbachev could rightly claim credit for undermining any prospects for regional peace in the 1980s.

The Soviets' proudest accomplishment of the epoch, however, was the First Intifada. In April 1988, Yasser Arafat went to Moscow to explain his plan and seek approval. "Gorbachev acknowledged that he fully understood the PLO's 'tactics of using different forms of struggle.' " Arafat was quite clear what he meant by this:

ARAFAT. We also continue the struggle in other forms, on other fronts. The armed struggle does not stop in the South of Lebanon. Artillery fire, air raids, other actions take place on daily basis.

Moscow approved.

But the ultimate, golden goal remained the same: the Gulf—the West's lifeline. In the "official narrative," as Stroilov terms it, Soviet-American cooperation in ousting Saddam from Kuwait marked the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the New World Order. In reality, Stroilov argues, Gorbachev's plan "was to take the Western side, ensuring it would have a say in solving the crisis. Then it would use this position to minimize the damage Saddam caused, and to advance its own agenda in Middle East." Among the goals of that agenda: To replace Washington's power with a "world government"

sympathetic to communist aspirations. The leaders of the Italian Communist Party were particularly inspired by this idea:

OKKETTO. The UN shall become an instrument of the world government.

RUBBI. Berlinguer spoke about the world government as early as at the 15th Congress of the ICP.

OKKETTO. At that time, many in the audience smiled at this.

GORBACHEV. We also have many people smiling at this. Maybe, indeed, it is worth thinking about arranging for the communists, social democrats and someone else to work out an agreed constructive proposal. It should be not propaganda, but a real policy.

OKKETTO. [The leader of West German Social Democrats, Willie] Brandt wants to involve representatives of parties, statesmen and other major figures in this work, to discuss the problems during seminars and conferences.

GORBACHEV. Let us arrange all this, and also consult Brandt and others.

Stroilov's archives closely detail the Soviet mediation of secret negotiations between Washington and Baghdad during the fall of 1990. The superpowers apparently came near to agreement on rather extraordinary terms: Saddam would withdraw from Kuwait in exchange for a scheme, proposed by the Soviets, to hold a U.N.-sponsored international conference designed to result in the disarmament and dismemberment of Israel.

The documents show that George H.W. Bush agreed to that deal in principle—so long as the linkage was kept secret.

G. BUSH. I agree with everything you've said. We do not seek laurels of individual or collective victors in the fight against Saddam Hussein. But both you and I want the new order to prevail in the future world. For this, we need to find such a response which provides guarantees against an aggression in the future. As far as I see, that is exactly what many provisions of your plan are designed for.

He wanted Saddam to withdraw from Kuwait as if unconditionally; the United States would then pressure Israel to join an ostensibly unrelated "peace process." Bush asked Gorbachev to see what Saddam thought about this. Saddam demurred: He would only agree if the deal was made openly. It is fascinating to compare Stroilov's transcripts with the memoirs written by Bush, Brent Scowcroft, and James Baker. The latter memoirs suggest that Gorbachev wanted to mention Israel and the Palestinians in a joint public statement but then conceded the point. In fact, the argument was about a secret deal, not a public statement.

Sooner or later, as Stroilov correctly notes, all socialist regimes collapse. He argues that what we are witnessing today is the collapse of the Soviet empire in the Middle East—a process similar to that seen in Europe in 1989-1991. But unlike the despots of Eastern Europe, the Red Arabs were allowed to survive. Rather than ousting Saddam and pressuring the Soviet Union—which now had only a few months left to live—to withdraw

its influence from the Middle East, Bush prioritized placating Gorbachev over aggressively pressing the United States' advantage. In Stroilov's view, these regimes could and should have been overthrown 20 years ago. That they were not, he argues, was because the Middle East was the domain Gorbachev was determined to retain and because Americans, naively enchanted by his charisma, allowed themselves to be hoodwinked.

Had Desert Storm reached Baghdad, the region would be an entirely different place now. "The greatest (though open) secret of the Operation Desert Storm is that it failed to achieve its objectives," Stroilov writes. According to National Security Directive 54, which authorized the military action, were Iraq to resort to destroying Kuwait's oil fields, "it shall become an explicit objective of the United States to replace the current leadership of Iraq." On Feb. 22, 1991, Saddam set Kuwait's oil wells alight. So, why did it take 12 more years to get rid of him? Because Gorbachev and Mitterrand feared that the overthrow of his regime would leave the United States with too much influence in the region and thus defected from the coalition. "Without hesitation," Stroilov writes, "Bush placed the new world order above everything else. The rebels were massacred, Saddam's regime survived, U.S. forces withdrew."

When 12 years later they returned,

Experts in the State Department concluded: what a surprise, Saddam's regime was rather popular after all. Other experts blamed the invisible hand of Al Qaeda. Yet another school emphasized the lack of democratic traditions in the history of the Islamic World in general and Iraq in particular.

But if you repeat this experiment in any other country, the result will be exactly the same. Tell citizens to rise against tyranny, promise them support from the US forces, and when the massacre begins, withdraw quietly. Come back 12 years later and see for yourself, whether the locals would be in a pro-American or anti-American mood.

It is impossible to say whether he is right—but it is certainly a thesis worth considering.

A final note: While not discussed at length in this book, the Bukovsky archives show clearly that nuclear disarmament campaigns across Europe were largely funded by the Soviet bloc. The money was channeled through communist parties or other pro-Soviet organizations.

Baroness Catherine Ashton was the treasurer for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament from 1980 to 1982. The CND was notoriously secretive about its sources of funding and refused to submit its accounts to independent audit; when it was finally forced to do so under immense pressure, the auditors discovered that 38 percent of their annual income could not be traced back to the original donors. Will Howard, a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, was responsible for this part of the fund-raising.

Baroness Ashton is now the E.U. foreign policy chief, leading negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran.

Whatever the outcome, we may surely thank the Kremlin for that, too.

In Iran, Anti-Semitic outbursts rise under Ahmadinejad

Meir Javandanfar, ALMonitor, 29 June 2012

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/in-iran-anti-semitic-outbursts-r.html>

At a ceremony marking the International Day against Drug Abuse in Tehran earlier this week (June 26), Iranian vice president Mohammad Reza Rahimi delivered an unprecedented, public anti-Semitic tirade in front of local and international dignitaries.

Breaking the usual practice of the Islamic Republic — which demonizes Zionists while purporting to respect the Jewish religion — Rahimi blamed the spread of drugs on the teachings of the Talmud, an important text that brings together centuries of discussions in Jewish academies explaining Judaism's oral laws.

Rahimi went on to say that the Talmud teaches how to destroy non-Jews and that 80% of America's wealth is in the hands of 6% of the world's Jewish population. He quoted an American researcher, who he did not name, to claim that a Jewish gynecologist sterilized 8,000 Native Americans, which Rahimi asserted was in accordance with the Talmud. He also blamed the Talmud for what he said are anti-Christian and anti-Muslim teachings and claimed that Jews see "others at their service." Delving into the rich international grab-bag of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, he blamed Jews for the Russian revolution — in which he asserted that "not a single Jew died" — trying to take over the world and fomenting differences between Shiite and Sunni Muslims.

Half way through the tirade, Rahimi seemed to become aware that he had gone too far and attempted a bit of damage control. "We respect the followers of the Prophet Moses, but we are against global Zionism," he said. He then blamed "Zionists" for the world drug trade and for opposing "manifestations of independence and freedom of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

Rahimi's attack was unprecedented because for the first time, a regime official openly attacked Jewish religious texts, as opposed to simply harping against Zionism. Despite a massive Jewish exodus after the 1979 revolution, Iran still has the largest population of Jews in the Middle East outside Israel — between 10,000 and 25,000 — and an appointed Jewish member of parliament.

Realizing the international outrage Rahimi's outbursts would cause, the Iranian regime's PR machine went into damage control mode. First the English language mouthpiece Press TV published a piece about the speech without a single direct reference to Rahimi's use of the word 'Yahood,' which means Jews. Thus, where Rahimi said in Farsi that "Jews see others at their service," Press TV changed that to "the Zionists regard themselves as the master race and they view the other races as their slaves."

The regime then pulled off the original article from the Iran Student News Agency website where it was first reported in Iran. (The full text of the speech is still available on other websites, including Aftab News.)

The outburst is the culmination of a recent rise in the public use of anti-Semitic language in Iran. In Iranian press and politics, use of the term "Yahoodi Sefat" meaning "of Jewish character" is being heard more often as a character assassination tool.

One of the biggest victims has been President Mahmoud Ahamdinejad's right hand man, Esfandiyar Rahim Mashaei. Mansoor Arzi, a well-known ultra-conservative preacher, first publicly started attacking Meshaei for being a Yahoodi Sefat. He then went on to call for the killing of "Meshaei the Jew." More recently, when ultra-conservative Iranian parliamentarian Mehdi Koochak Zadeh was reported to have been involved in a scuffle with a reporter, he publicly accused the press of being engaged in "Jewish style propagation of lies."

Anti-Semitism is not confined to ultra conservatives. Even US-educated reformist politician Ebrahim Yazdi — who served as deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs after the 1979 revolution and resigned to protest the takeover of the US embassy in Tehran — has joined the chorus. While serving in prison recently, the octogenarian (the world's oldest political prisoner at the time) issued a public letter in which he asked, "how does a president of Jewish descent want to perform his duties? In contrast to Muslims of Zoroastrian decent, Muslims of Jewish descent do not have a good record." Yazdi referred to dubious material published by Iran's Ministry of Intelligence in which those who have fallen from the regime's grace are now accused of having Jewish backgrounds.

In the past, especially during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, senior Iranian politicians refrained from such crude anti-Semitism. Khatami, who served from 1997-2005, went out of his way to show respect for Judaism by visiting Tehran's Yusef Abad synagogue. Criticism was reserved for the Israeli government, not Jews. However, when hard-line security officials sought to discredit Khatami, they concocted charges of spying for Israel against a dozen Iranian Jews.

The new trend appears to date to Ahmadinejad's public denial of the Holocaust in a speech on Dec. 14, 2005. On that day, Ahmadinejad became the most senior politician in Iranian post-revolutionary history to adopt this narrative. More significantly, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei did not stop Ahmadinejad. The president's frequent Holocaust denial appears to have legitimized the shift from public attacks against Israel to attacks against Jews and Judaism.

The trend has been exacerbated by the declining quality of regime officials. As a result of the thwarted Green uprising following fraud-tainted 2009 presidential elections, more experienced and moderate politicians have been sacked, jailed, left the country or are simply lying low.

The brain drain which has hit the top ranks of politicians and advisers has meant that the education and world view of many politicians in Iran now is far more limited than before. This could be a major reason behind why Rahimi had no qualms about making such remarks.

There is another simple, yet depressing explanation. It is perhaps unrealistic to expect a so-called Islamic regime which, more than ever, is de-legitimizing the holy religion of

Islam by killing, torturing and stealing in its name to promote politicians who respect other holy religions.

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

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