

The Trouble With 'Preventing Palestine'

Seth Anziska's new book on the Arab-Israeli "peace process" is a useful primer on the conflict, but it does not fully examine the paradox of the Carter administration's solution that we are still living with, argues As'ad AbuKhalil.

By As'ad AbuKhalil

Special to Consortium News



A new book by Seth Anziska, titled "Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo" created quite a buzz before its official release a few weeks ago. The writer had mentioned it in press articles and noted that he had unearthed important documents. The [book](#), however, is not as firm in its Palestinian advocacy as has been assumed by supporters of the cause who have praised it on social media and in reviews.

Anziska, a lecturer in Jewish-Muslim Relations at University College London, seeks to trace the origins of the current stalemate in the American-formulated "peace process" to the Carter administration and its Camp David accords. But there are several political and scholarly problems with the book:

- The title "Preventing Palestine" and the book's treatment seems to deny agency to the Palestinian people. It treats the project of establishing a Palestinian state as if it is merely a United States initiative which, alone, can determine the fate of the Palestinians. This approach is also reflected in the research where English-language sources (and some Hebrew) are consulted, but no Arabic sources are cited. Referring to the memoirs of [Shafiq Al-Hout, a founder of the PLO](#), and [interviewing Palestinian journalist Bayan Nuwayhid al-Hut](#) is not enough to write the Palestinian people into this narrative.
- The author's treatment of the Carter administration is way too charitable. It puts too much emphasis on human rights when the view of the administration was the result of a complex process.

View Inside the Carter Administration

There were different currents within the administration:

- The Arabists believed that U.S. interests in the region were best served by responding to Gulf regimes' appeal for U.S. intervention in the Middle East peace process in order to [impose a more equitable and fair settlement](#) than what was being dictated by Israel or the U.S. However, the views of Gulf regimes were not entirely due to their interest in Palestinian justice—they

were revenge for firm opposition by the Israel lobby to arms sales to Gulf countries. As the Israel lobby reconciled with Gulf regimes and supported U.S. arms to the region by 1990, Gulf advocacy for a “fair” U.S. settlement diminished and later disappeared.

- Anziska also never mentions that the domestic policy advisers to Carter came up, cynically, with the idea of “the Holocaust museum” not so much as a moral remembrance of the victims of the historical crime but as a way to appease Jewish voters (which is insulting to Jewish voters and to the victims of the Holocaust).
- The domestic policy advisers believed that Carter’s interest in a Middle East settlement would reduce Jewish support for Carter in the re-election. This explains the cynical statement made by Hamilton Jordan (Carter’s chief of staff) to the effect that Carter would become president of the West Bank.
- The national security team headed by Zbigniew Brzezinski believed that a U.S. settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict would enhance the strategic posture of the U.S. vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.
- There was also a strong Zionist camp within the administration which lobbied on behalf of Israeli intransigence. Vice President Walter Mondale (who harbored early presidential ambition) sought to obstruct Carter’s peace efforts.
- Despite Carter’s human rights rhetoric, the book mentions how the same Jimmy Carter hosted and praised the likes of the Shah of Iran and Prince Fahd of Saudi Arabia, among other pro-U.S. despots.

Re-Examining Arab-Israeli History

The author should have started his chronicle in the Nixon administration and the Rogers Plan. His periodization seems to put a special humanitarian cast on Carter’s policies, when they were a continuation of previous U.S. policies that were intended to save Israel in the wake of the 1967 war. This continuity can be seen in the book in names like Dennis Ross, Mideast point man for both the Reagan and Clinton administrations and as a special assissant to Obama; Martin Indyk, a Mideast envoy for Clinton and Obama and Douglas Feith, who worked on Mideast issues in the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations.

One of the biggest failings of the author is his inability to transcend Zionist sensibilities in the rendering of judgment about acts of political violence. His tone and language of outrage and revulsion against acts of Palestinian political violence contrast starkly with his lack of judgment on a long history of Israeli war crimes, massacres and invasions.

He applies the word “terrorist” casually to Palestinian acts of political

violence but does not apply it to the long record of Israeli-backed terrorism and war crimes. For example, he refers to “genuine Israeli concern over terror attacks in the 1970s.” Is the author of the opinion that the Palestinians in the refugee camps who were regularly bombarded from air, land, and sea by successive Israeli governments harbored no such concerns over Israeli acts of terror?

Anziska lumps all acts of Palestinian armed struggle under the same rubric of terrorism, without exploring the Palestinian people’s elementary right to self-defense.

The author only lists “at least” 5,000 victims (mostly civilians, of course) of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, when even the right-wing Lebanese newspaper, *An-Nahar*, gave an estimate of 20,000. Anziska lists the number of 20,000 in the endnote section but settles in the text on 5,000.

The book is a useful and informative account of the peace process, but is rarely original. For example, the Sabra and Shatila document that he talks about in the chapter on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon is not (contrary to what he claims) the full secret classified appendix of the Kahan Commission report. My own judgment is that it is, in fact, not even the full appendix.

What the author obtained from William Quandt, a Mideast scholar at the University of Virginia, is what the Israeli government voluntarily submitted to the defense team of *Time* magazine in the famous case of Sharon’s lawsuit against the publication. Israeli censorship is notoriously strict and political, and what the author obtained was a section (most likely redacted) from the unpublished classified appendix of the Kahan Commission report. But the originality of the findings in the report is less than the author assumes perhaps because he can’t read Arabic.

In 2017, George Freiha, the former chief of staff of the late Lebanese President-elect Bashir Gemayel, published a book titled “With Bashir” in which he published minutes of meetings between Gemayel and Ariel Sharon.

The minutes of those meetings make it clear that both sides discussed in detail a plan for the Phalanges’s henchmen to invade the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps and engage in the massacres on behalf of the Israeli occupation army and its surrogate militias in Beirut. Freiha claims he was present when both leaders mentioned invading the camps.

That was not cited in Anziska’s book.

The Contradiction With Carter’s ‘Peace Efforts’

“Preventing Palestine” is so intent on putting a positive light on Carter’s

“peace efforts” that Anziska accepts the notion that Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s easy surrender to Israeli conditions in the negotiations undercut U.S. efforts at promoting Palestinian interests. He cites Carter officials to show they wanted Sadat to push for meaningful Palestinian self-autonomy. But it is not believable that the superpower needed Sadat to pressure Israel on behalf of the U.S. to further Palestinian rights when the U.S. has far more leverage over Israel.

Just as Sadat did not care about Palestinian rights, the U.S. was willing to retract statements and issue rhetorical readjustments in order to appease the Israeli government.

This book will serve as a useful introduction for courses on the Arab-Israeli conflict on college campuses. It provides an interesting and comprehensive chronicle of the peace process since Carter’s administration.

But the paradox of the Carter administration (and of this book) is that the administration that did the most (in theory) to find a comprehensive solution (on terms that are far more agreeable to the Israeli side than to the Palestinian side) is the same administration paved the way for greater Israeli occupation and aggression by taking Egypt out of the equation so Israel could fight on one front for the first time.

The desire to lure Egypt away from the “Arab fold” on Israel was too tempting for the Carter administration to really care about the people who have never mattered to any U.S. president.

Camp David wound up being the single most important factor in enabling, even encouraging Israel to engage in successive invasions of Lebanon and of the Palestinian territories. The U.S. sold the Palestinians out to achieve a strategic benefit for Israeli occupation.

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Corbyn Might Long Regret Capitulation on Anti-Semitism

The British Labour Party's decision to adopt the IHRA's contested anti-Semitism definition is a victory for the Israel lobby and for forces on both sides of the Atlantic seeking to stifle criticism of Mideast policy, argues Daniel Lazare.

Daniel Lazare

Special to Consortium News



After months of pummeling, Jeremy Corbyn, the besieged leader of Britain's Labor Party, gave in to the Zionist lobby and adopted a fiercely contested definition of anti-Jewish hatred that Arab activists say essentially brands the Palestinian cause as anti-Semitic.

Opinion varies as to what the capitulation will mean.

Alexander Mercouris, editor of the pro-Russian website *The Duran*, wrote on Consortium News that the impact will be limited. It "will not end criticism of Israel within the Labour Party or in British society," he said. "Corbyn himself will not change his views, nor will other supporters of the Palestinian struggle"

But the redoubtable freelance journalist Jonathan Cook, based in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, was more convincing two or three weeks earlier when he argued in a piece republished on Consortium News that adopting the new definition "will be a major victory both for Israel and its apologists in Britain, who have been seeking to silence all meaningful criticism of Israel, and for the British corporate media, which would dearly love to see the back of an old-school socialist Labour leader whose program threatens to loosen the 40-year stranglehold of neoliberalism on British society."

A Victory for Israel

Cook understates the case. The decision by the party's National Executive Committee is a victory for the Israel lobby and for forces on both sides of the Atlantic seeking to stifle criticism of Mideast policy. The reason is simple. Anglo-American policy rests on unqualified support for two regional powers—Israel and Saudi Arabia—that have been granted *carte blanche* to wage war on their neighbors at any time they like. All other issues—refugees, minority rights, secularism—take a second seat next to this United States-conferred license to kill.

At a time when Western powers are cutting a swath of destruction from Libya to Yemen, there is little hope of opposing Israeli-Saudi aggression without tackling Jewish chauvinism and Wahhabist sectarianism. This requires strict neutrality with regard to ethno-religious conflicts while promoting democracy, secularism, national independence and equality.

This is elementary for “an old-school socialist” like Corbyn. But the definition that Labour has adopted tips the scales in favor of the chauvinists. Instead of charting an independent course, it subordinates the party to an endlessly bellicose foreign-policy establishment at a time when America and its allies are once again threatening war over Syria’s bid to expel U.S.-backed pro-al-Qaida forces from the northeastern province of Idlib.

The spillover will be immense in the United Kingdom and United States. In a letter to the right-wing Zionist Organization of America, Kenneth L. Marcus, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos’ chief of civil rights, announced in August that the Trump administration will use the new definition in reopening an investigation into charges that a pro-Palestinian meeting at Rutgers University in 2011 violated Jewish student rights. Unless challenged in the courts, the decision will force universities throughout the country to shut down pro-Palestinian forces of just about any stripe on the grounds that their activities are discriminatory.

Critics will wind up even more marginalized than they already are, if such a thing can be believed. Farther afield, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will gain an even freer hand in Syria and the occupied territories while the Saudis will have nothing to fear from U.S. critics as they pursue their criminal war against Yemen. The fact that the definition now carries the Labour Party’s imprimatur makes it all the more difficult to resist.

The Origins of the Definition

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), the group behind the new definition, is a non-governmental organization founded by former Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson in 1998 to counter Holocaust denial. While its intentions may seem honorable, its political slant was apparent from the outset when it named the relentless self-promoter Elie Wiesel as its honorary chairman.

Wiesel, who died two years ago, was a world-class hypocrite who condemned Germans for not speaking out against Hitler while making it a point never to speak out against the Jewish state. When hundreds of thousands of Israelis took to the streets in 1982 to protest the Israeli-backed slaughter of up to 3,500 Palestinians in Lebanon’s Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, he thus declared: “I support Israel—period. I identify with Israel—period. I never attack, never

criticize Israel when I am not in Israel.”

It did not augur well for the IHRA. After the alliance developed its working definition of anti-Semitism beginning in 2003, the European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia, an arm of the European Union, put it up on its website in early 2005, but “without formal review.” The center’s successor, the EU-sponsored Fundamental Rights Agency then took it down in 2013. After languishing for a while longer, the definition was then resurrected by the IHRA and adopted in 2016 under pressure from the conservative Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. Still, it won formal approval from only six of the alliance’s 31 member nations.

The IHRA definition’s opening statement—“Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews”—is a grammatical mess, as Antony Lerman, a senior fellow at Vienna’s Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue, observed on the British website openDemocracy. While five examples of anti-Semitism it offers are accurate, six others dealing with the Jewish state are nothing less than explosive. According to the IHRA, anti-Semitism includes:

- “Claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.”
- “Applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.”
- Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.”

How is it anti-Semitic to describe Israel as a racist endeavor when leading Zionists explicitly endorsed ethnic cleansing in the years leading up to the establishment of a Jewish state? “We cannot start the Jewish state ... with half the population being Arab,” Avraham Ussishkin, the Labor Zionist in charge of the Jewish National Fund, the agency charged with buying up land exclusively for Jewish use, declared in 1938, according to Benny Morris in *The Birth of the Palestinian Problem Revisited*. “... Such a state cannot survive even half an hour.”

A JNF official named Yosef Weitz added: “There is no way but to transfer the Arabs from here to the neighboring countries, to transfer all of them, save perhaps for Bethlehem, Nazareth, and old Jerusalem. Not one village must be left, not one tribe.”

Is it Anti-Semitic if it’s True?

Accusing critics of holding Israel to an unreasonably high standard is itself unreasonable. Considering the opprobrium heaped on the U.S. for its racial policies, on Britain for its colonial policies, on France for its collaborationist policies during World War II, and so forth, Israel has gotten

off lightly even though its anti-Palestinian policies are no less atrocious.

Controversial comparison with the Nazis is rhetoric with a history in Israeli politics. In 1948, Albert Einstein, Hannah Arendt, Sidney Hook, and other Jewish notables published an open letter accusing future Prime Minister Menachem Begin of heading up a political movement “closely akin in its organization, methods, political philosophy, and social appeal to the Nazi and Fascist parties.”

Does this make Einstein an anti-Semite?

Sixty-odd years later, hundreds of ultra-orthodox Jews paraded about in Jerusalem wearing concentration-camp uniforms with yellow Stars of David pinned to their chest. It was their way of showing that secular Israeli politicians are no better than Nazis. Are Hasidim anti-Semitic as well?

Yehuda Bauer, the Israeli historian who serves as the IHRA’s formal academic adviser, in 2003 told a group of Danish visitors that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could conceivably end in a Mideast version of the Final Solution. “What we have here between the Israelis and the Palestinians is an armed conflict—if one side becomes stronger, there is a chance of genocide,” he said. When a visitor asked, “Am I to understand that you think Israel could commit genocide on the Palestinian people?,” Bauer replied: “Yes.”

“Just two days ago,” he went on, “extremist settlers passed out flyers to rid Arabs from this land. Ethnic cleansing results in mass killing.”

By suggesting that Israel is in danger of succumbing to Nazi methods, has the alliance’s own adviser run afoul of its own definition?

Logic like this has been brought into sharp relief in view of the Israeli government’s attitude toward resurgent anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. In Lithuania, pro-Axis prosecutors have initiated legal proceedings against aged Jewish war veterans for alleged crimes committed while serving in anti-Nazi partisan units during World War II. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s government is rehabilitating interwar leader Miklos Horthy, who helped send half a million Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz in 1944. In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice Party has made it a crime to say that Poles were complicit in the Holocaust—which, in fact, thousands were—while Ukraine is now seeing “an unprecedented new surge of anti-Semitism” thanks to the U.S.-backed government’s heavy reliance on ultra-right militias in its war against pro-Russian separatists.

How has Israel responded? With forthright denunciations? With ringing appeals to humanity? With denunciations of anti-semitism? Not quite. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu maintains close diplomatic relations with Lithuania and hails

Orban as “a true friend of Israel” because he “understand[s] that the threat of radical Islam is a real one.” He has whitewashed Poland’s role in the Holocaust, earning a rebuke from Jerusalem’s famous Yad Vashem Holocaust museum on the grounds that “existing documentation and decades of historical research yield a totally different picture.”

The Israeli government’s response to Ukraine has been to sell arms to the nation’s ultra-right Azov Battalion, whose members sport Nazi regalia and whose founder, Andryi Biletsky, once proclaimed: “The historic mission of our nation in this critical moment is to lead the white races of the world in a final crusade for their survival. A crusade against the Semite-led *Untermenschen* [a term Nazis used to describe non-Aryan people].” As a result, Azov members carry Israeli-made Tavor rifles while former Israeli army officers provide training for Ukrainian military units.

Now the Labour Party officially says it’s forbidden to suggest that Israel is in any way emulating Nazi methods. Apparently it’s not anti-Semitic unless Netanyahu says it is, and considering how well he gets along with authoritarians like Orban, his judgement is questionable.

Corbyn is a mild-mannered man who has been under relentless attacks from the party’s right-wing Blairite faction for months. Now, he’s allowed a Pandora’s box to be opened by giving in to the Zionist lobby, something he might long regret.

Daniel Lazare is the author of *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace, 1996) and other books about American politics. He has written for a wide variety of publications from *The Nation* to *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and his articles about the Middle East, terrorism, Eastern Europe, and other topics appear regularly on such websites as *Jacobin* and *The American Conservative*.

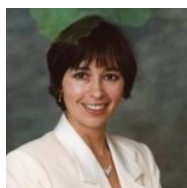
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Freedom Flotilla Missions Will Continue ‘Until Palestine Is Free’

The bold journey of the 2018 Freedom Flotilla Coalition dared Palestinians and the world to dream of peace, dignity and freedom for all. Now, we must keep working to build a culture of nonviolence, writes Elizabeth Murray.

By Elizabeth Murray

Special to Consortium News



What's next for the 2018 Freedom Flotilla Coalition?

In August, the crew and passengers of the Freedom Flotilla ships, Al Awda and Freedom, returned to their home countries after being hijacked, interrogated and imprisoned by Israeli commandos. The outcome may have appeared anticlimactic, since many supporters had hoped for a triumphant arrival by the flotilla ships in Gaza Harbor and a breaking of Israel's illegal 12-year land and sea blockade of the small Palestinian enclave.

But in many ways, the 2018 Freedom Flotilla mission has achieved its goals—which were to challenge the Israeli blockade of Gaza, raise public awareness of the blockade and other human rights violations, and let the people of Gaza know that they are not alone.

Of course, had the flotilla ships been able to reach Gaza unhindered, it would have been a remarkable accomplishment and the first time the blockade had been breached in 10 years.

Back then—in August 2008—two boats carrying international solidarity activists sailed into Gaza's shores to a hero's welcome from the locals, including children, who swam out to greet them. It was a dramatic display of people-to-people solidarity against the illegal Israeli blockade.

Their arrival in Gaza was momentous and cathartic, and served notice to the people of Gaza that their plight—and Israel's criminal blockade—had not gone unnoticed by the world. Israel has since shown great resolve in its determination to prevent such a display of humanity and solidarity from ever recurring again—even at the cost of innocent lives.

Since then, Israel has blocked similar solidarity ships from arriving in Gaza, either by hijacking them in international waters (as took place this year) or by pressuring other governments to detain the ships, as when the Greek government compelled the Gaza-bound Audacity of Hope to return to port shortly after its departure from Athens—under threat of armed force.

A Challenge to Israel

In 2010, heavily armed Israeli commandos boarded the Gaza-bound cruise ship Mavi Marmara, assaulting and injuring numerous passengers and killing nine of them, including a U.S. citizen. Despite the clear death threat from Israel, the Freedom Flotilla boats keep coming, including the Estelle in 2012 and the Marianne in 2015, challenging the Israeli blockade.

The Freedom Flotilla phenomenon makes it evident that the movement's momentum, persistence and staying power have little to do with its actual physical arrival in Gaza and more to do with other less tangible aspects of the journey.

The actual *act* of challenging Israel's illegal land and sea blockade of the Gaza Strip is in itself a bold and even revolutionary statement of the need to hold Israel accountable under international law for its human rights violations. These repeated sea-based challenges to Israeli impunity have garnered international attention and admiration from the grassroots public—particularly in view of the unwillingness of governments to acknowledge and confront Israel's 70-year subjugation and occupation of the Palestinian people.

The Freedom Flotilla's international composition—with crew and delegates of numerous nationalities (including New Zealand, Malaysia, Australia, Canada, First Nations, Spain, Israel, United States, Norway, Sweden, etc.) has inspired and energized Palestinians in the diaspora and in their homeland. They realize that this small group of activists willing to undergo significant collective risk to highlight the Palestinians' plight and break the silence represents the world's people.

Palestinians have responded by staging bold nonviolent actions of their own, such as the recent series of seaborne flotillas Gaza fishermen initiated to challenge the sea blockade and protest Israel's arbitrary fishing restrictions and random acts of terrorism against fishers, who are routinely harassed and shot at while they are trying to fish, and whose fishing boats are either shot up or confiscated. Diaspora Palestinians showed up in large numbers to greet, celebrate and host the Freedom Flotilla at every port of call.

United Against Inhumanity

The Freedom Flotilla's engagement of local grassroots community organizations, media interviews, interaction with the public through boat tours and one-on-one conversations have raised the profile of Gaza's plight, reminding the outside world that residents of Gaza have no freedom of movement, and that repeated, massive Israeli aerial bombings have disabled the electricity grid, destroyed the sewage treatment plant and rendered 98 percent of the water undrinkable.

Meanwhile, the blockade prevents the entry of critical food, medicine and

construction materials—preventing Gazans from rebuilding or repairing their destroyed homes and infrastructure.

Freedom Flotilla delegates were honored at parliamentary sessions and feted by local dignitaries and government officials in several cities along their route, raising the profile of Palestinian suffering under the Israeli blockade. As a result, the Freedom Flotilla earned explicit statements of political support for their anti-blockade mission from the Spanish municipality of Asturias-Gijon and from other grassroots political organizations.

Some Freedom Flotilla participants have provided media accounts describing abusive treatment at the hands of their Israeli captors, including [this piece](#) by United Kingdom-based Al Awda delegate and orthopedic surgeon Dr. Swee Ang. This reporting has outraged the public in their respective countries and redoubled the resolve of many organizations to promote the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS).

Roger Waters, the musician of Pink Floyd fame and an active proponent of BDS, recently invited several Freedom Flotilla crew members to his August concert in Oslo and publically hailed them as his “heroes.”

Indeed, in the wake of the Freedom Flotilla action, the BDS movement has seen several notable successes. At least 15 international bands and artists have withdrawn from an Israeli music festival. Six of 11 invited speakers also have confirmed their withdrawal from a scientific forum at Ariel University, which is built on occupied Palestinian land in an Israeli settlement. Palestinian scholars had urged speakers to withdraw, citing Israeli travel restrictions on Palestinian academics. As Israeli crimes against Palestinians continue unchecked, these developments build on the international outrage.

At the same time, the Freedom Flotilla’s nonviolent challenge to Israel’s blockade coincided with the (still ongoing) weekly protest by Gazans known as the [Great March of Return](#). During this peaceful action—in which unarmed Palestinians have been asserting their rights to liberty and freedom—Israeli snipers have been shooting and killing civilians of all ages, including children, women and medical workers. Casualties now are in the thousands. Images of the victims of Israeli violence have elicited expressions of disgust and outrage toward Israel, as well as sympathy and support for Palestinian freedom.

Giving Palestinians a Voice

These are the atrocities that have moved members of the Freedom Flotilla to risk their own lives to make a change.

First Mate Charlie Andreasson, a red-haired, blue-eyed Swede, explains: “Anything

I've suffered at the hands of the Israelis is nothing compared to what the Palestinians suffer."

Asked why he was on his third Freedom Flotilla mission (he was aboard the Estelle and Marianne), Andreasson said: "I have blue eyes and white skin. I may as well put them to good use." The remark alluded to an awareness that because of his race and nationality, any suffering he might be subjected to would draw international media attention—unlike the suffering of ordinary Gazans, whose daily tragedies and humiliations pass largely unnoticed by most Western news services.

Andreasson noted that historically, change is not initiated by governments, but by ordinary people "who have had enough" and who are "standing united against injustice." He cited as examples the U.S. civil rights movement, women's rights, the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa, and the rights of LGBT persons.

"So I believe we are wasting our energy when time after time we demand that our governments take action instead of getting people united around the world," he said. "That is why we have to get our asses off the sofa and start to make a change. After all, we want to be able to look at ourselves in the mirror without feeling ashamed that we didn't do anything."

Addressing those who might not be up for a sea journey to Gaza, Andreasson counseled: "You don't have to sail with the Freedom Flotilla, you don't have to risk your life or take any time off—it can be enough just to refuse to buy Israeli products."

Divina Levrini, a passenger aboard the Al Awda who also hails from Sweden and, like Andreasson, is a veteran of previous Freedom Flotilla journeys, said she has worked on behalf of the Palestinian cause since her teenage years. It was "a natural thing" for her "to go and try to put an end to the blockade" since she has been educating others about it for so many years. "If it takes Westerners to give the Palestinians a voice, so be it," she said.

Levrini thought the flotilla "made a difference." In addition to the "very important" media publicity, the flotilla mission helped bring about political change, she said. "During the two-and-one-half months the flotilla journeyed from port to port, we actually compelled politicians to act," she said—a reference in part to Navarre becoming the first Spanish state to adopt a BDS resolution.

Pointing to the dire United Nations warning that Gaza would be "uninhabitable" in two years, Levrini stated that political change "is what Gaza needs. They

need that change right now. We need to take an extreme course of action to make a change.”

Asked what message she would like to send to Israel, Levrini—who briefly staged a hunger strike during her incarceration in Israel to protest prison conditions—stated: “My only message to Israel is a bold one. The ships will continue to sail until Palestine is free from Israeli terror.”

Right to a Just Future

Before we can move toward any real justice in Gaza, more people need to acknowledge the injustice that exists.

On July 29, Israeli Navy gunboats surrounded the Al Awda as it approached Gaza Harbor with 22 passengers and crew aboard (five days later, the Freedom followed with 12 aboard). Masked commandos armed with machine guns boarded the ship and violently tasered and assaulted several passengers and crew members, including the ship’s captain, Norwegian national Herman Reksten. They did this despite being repeatedly advised by Al Awda crew member Mikkell Gruener by radio that the Al Awda was in international waters and “wanted no business” with Israel.

The Israelis seemed to reserve a special contempt for the mostly Norwegian crew. Not only did they physically assault them, but they tore down the Norwegian flag and trampled it underfoot, deeply offending the crew members, who managed to salvage it.

Both the Al Awda and the boats were purchased, refurbished, and outfitted through the private donations of Freedom Flotilla supporters from around the world. They were to have been delivered to Gaza’s fishers as gifts of friendship and solidarity from the international seafarers. Instead, Israel has confiscated them and looted the personal effects of the passenger and crew on both flotilla ships—taking laptops computers, camera equipment, watches, credit cards, cell phones, clothing and cash.

“They stole everything,” said Levrini, who was reduced to tears after witnessing Israeli commandos savagely beat, head-slam and then threaten to execute Al Awda captain Reksten. First Mate Andreasson tweeted that Israel “stole our private belongings” adding: “Once again, we got to know what it’s like to be Palestinians.”

Perhaps worst of all has been the Israeli military’s failure thus far to release 114 boxes of medical supplies—including medical gauze and sutures for the Gaza health system—that had been loaded onto the Al Awda just prior to the final leg of its journey. The consignment of medical aid was to have provided needed medical supplies and equipment to a populace being bombed and shot at

mercilessly, even as weekly Great March of Return demonstrations at the no-man's land between Gaza and Israel continue. A [petition is circulating](#) to demand that the medical supplies be delivered to Gaza.

The passengers and crew of the Freedom Flotilla boats are people of privilege. We can travel freely and do not have to deal with incessant Israeli repression, violence and humiliation. We know our experience cannot hold a candle to what people living in Gaza are forced to endure under Israel's suffocating yoke of oppression.

But the bold journey of the Freedom Flotilla Coalition dared Palestinians and the world to dream—to dream of a day when people of the world unite with such fervor for justice and human rights that barriers and obstacles will fall away, and peace, dignity, and freedom will be possible for all.

The sentiment of all those who shared in the Freedom Flotilla's journey—passengers, crew, and the land-based support teams—perhaps can best be summed up by the words of Irish Nobel Peace Prize recipient Mairead Maguire, a veteran of many Gaza solidarity boat journeys (one of the 2018 Freedom Flotilla ships was named after her) who understands the challenge ahead.

“I believe, with Gandhi, that we need to take an imaginative leap toward fresh and generous idealism for the sake of humanity—that we need to renew this ancient wisdom of nonviolence, to strive for a disarmed world, and to create a culture of nonviolence.”

Elizabeth Murray served as Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East in the National Intelligence Council before retiring after a 27-year career in the U.S. government, where she specialized in Middle Eastern political and media analysis. She is a member of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS). Murray was a delegate on the first leg of this year's Freedom Flotilla.

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An Online Vigil in Defense of Julian Assange With Daniel Ellsberg, Craig Murray, Bill Binney and Ray McGovern

Joe Lauria, editor-in-chief of Consortium News, on Saturday helped moderate a

daylong chain of interviews in defense of WikiLeaks and its publisher Julian Assange, including a discussion with Daniel Ellsberg.

A [#Unity4J online vigil](#) was held on Saturday to defend the WikiLeaks editor-in-chief, whose sanctuary at the Ecuadorian embassy in London has [turned into torturous solitary confinement](#).

Among the participants on Saturday were Craig Murray, a former U.K. ambassador; Nat Parry, son of Consortium New's founder and first editor, Robert Parry; Bill Binney, former technical director at the National Security Agency, and Ray McGovern, a former CIA officer. Joe Lauria interviewed Daniel Ellsberg, the Pentagon Papers whistleblower and author of [The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner](#).

The entire 11 hour and 45 minute event can be viewed here:

International media [have reported](#) that Ecuador may hand over Assange to United Kingdom authorities, with a fear that he then would be extradited to the United States. The U.K. and Ecuadorian sides are engaged in ongoing negotiations, but Jennifer Robinson, a lawyer for Assange and WikiLeaks since 2010, has acknowledged that Assange's legal team is [not part of those talks](#).

The fate of Assange represents a threat to human rights, asylum rights, liberty and [press freedoms](#). The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights already have found in [Assange's favor](#).

#Unity4J originated from an unplanned but [timely response to injustice](#) when Assange's internet access and visitation rights were taken away. The action has grown into a series of high-profile monthly online vigils.

A dynamic new format for the monthly online vigils was introduced on Saturday. Conceived by organizer Suzie Dawson, the concept is described as a "daisy-chain style digital relay"—which featured more than twenty guest appearances of 30 minutes duration each. At the conclusion of each segment, the guests transitioned from interviewee to interviewer.

"Every time we witness an injustice and do not act," Assange reminds us, "we train our character to be passive in its presence and thereby eventually lose all ability to defend ourselves and those we love."

For more information about Assange and WikiLeaks's legal situation, visit [iamwikileaks.org](#) and [justice4assange.com](#) and [unity4J.com](#).

How the Department of Homeland Security Created a Deceptive Tale of Russia Hacking US Voter Sites

The narrative about Russian cyberattacks on American election infrastructure is a self-interested abuse of power by DHS based on distortion of evidence, writes Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

Special to Consortium News



The narrative of Russian intelligence attacking state and local election boards and threatening the integrity of U.S. elections has achieved near-universal acceptance by media and political elites. And now it has been accepted by the Trump administration's intelligence chief, Dan Coats, as well.

But the real story behind that narrative, recounted here for the first time, reveals that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) created and nurtured an account that was grossly and deliberately deceptive.

DHS compiled an intelligence report suggesting hackers linked to the Russian government *could* have targeted voter-related websites in many states and then leaked a sensational story of Russian attacks on those sites without the qualifications that would have revealed a different story. When state election officials began asking questions, they discovered that the DHS claims were false and, in at least one case, laughable.

The National Security Agency and special counsel Robert Mueller's investigating team have also claimed evidence that Russian military intelligence was behind election infrastructure hacking, but on closer examination, those claims turn out to be speculative and misleading as well. Mueller's indictment of 12 GRU military intelligence officers does not cite any violations of U.S. election laws though it claims Russia interfered with the 2016 election.

A Sensational Story

On Sept. 29, 2016, a few weeks after the hacking of election-related websites in Illinois and Arizona, ABC News carried a sensational headline: “Russian Hackers Targeted Nearly Half of States’ Voter Registration Systems, Successfully Infiltrated 4.” The story itself reported that “more than 20 state election systems” had been hacked, and four states had been “breached” by hackers suspected of working for the Russian government. The story cited only sources “knowledgeable” about the matter, indicating that those who were pushing the story were eager to hide the institutional origins of the information.

Behind that sensational story was a federal agency seeking to establish its leadership within the national security state apparatus on cybersecurity, despite its limited resources for such responsibility. In late summer and fall 2016, the Department of Homeland Security was maneuvering politically to designate state and local voter registration databases and voting systems as “critical infrastructure.” Such a designation would make voter-related networks and websites under the protection a “priority sub-sector” in the DHS “National Infrastructure Protection Plan, which already included 16 such sub-sectors.

DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson and other senior DHS officials consulted with many state election officials in the hope of getting their approval for such a designation. Meanwhile, the DHS was finishing an intelligence report that would both highlight the Russian threat to U.S. election infrastructure and the role DHS could play in protecting it, thus creating political impetus to the designation. But several secretaries of state—the officials in charge of the election infrastructure in their state—strongly opposed the designation that Johnson wanted.

On Jan. 6, 2017—the same day three intelligence agencies released a joint “assessment” on Russian interference in the election—Johnson announced the designation anyway.

Media stories continued to reflect the official assumption that cyber

attacks on state election websites were Russian-sponsored. Stunningly, *The Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) in December 2016 that DHS was itself behind hacking attempts of Georgia's election database.

The facts surrounding the two actual breaches of state websites in Illinois and Arizona, as well as the broader context of cyberattacks on state websites, didn't support that premise at all.

In July, Illinois discovered an intrusion into its voter registration website and the theft of personal information on as many as [200,000 registered voters](#). (The 2018 Mueller indictments of GRU officers would unaccountably [put the figure at 500,000](#).) Significantly, however, the hackers only had copied the information and had left it unchanged in the database.

That was a crucial clue to the motive behind the hack. DHS Assistant Secretary for Cyber Security and Communications Andy Ozment [told a Congressional committee](#) in late September 2016 that the fact hackers hadn't tampered with the voter data indicated that the aim of the theft was not to influence the electoral process. Instead, it was "possibly for the purpose of selling personal information." Ozment was contradicting the line that already was being taken on the Illinois and Arizona hacks by the National Protection and Programs Directorate and other senior DHS officials.

In an interview with me last year, Ken Menzel, the legal adviser to the Illinois secretary of state, confirmed what Ozment had testified. "Hackers have been trying constantly to get into it since 2006," Menzel said, adding that they had been probing every other official Illinois database with such personal data for vulnerabilities as well. "Every governmental database—driver's licenses, health care, you name it—has people trying to get into it," said Menzel.

In the other successful cyberattack on an electoral website, hackers had acquired the username and password for the voter database Arizona used during the summer, as Arizona Secretary of State Michele Reagan learned from the FBI. But the reason that it had become known, according to Reagan in an [interview with Mother Jones](#), was that the login and password had shown up for sale on the dark web—the network

of websites used by cyber criminals to sell stolen data and other illicit wares.

Furthermore, the FBI had told her that the effort to penetrate the database was the work of a “known hacker” whom the FBI had monitored “frequently” in the past. Thus, there were reasons to believe that both Illinois and Arizona hacking incidents were linked to criminal hackers seeking information they could sell for profit.

Meanwhile, the FBI was unable to come up with any theory about what Russia might have intended to do with voter registration data such as what was taken in the Illinois hack. When FBI Counterintelligence official Bill Priestap was [asked in a June 2017 hearing](#) how Moscow might use such data, his answer revealed that he had no clue: “They took the data to understand what it consisted of,” said the struggling Priestap, “so they can affect better understanding and plan accordingly in regards to possibly impacting future elections by knowing what is there and studying it.”

The inability to think of any plausible way for the Russian government to use such data explains why DHS and the intelligence community adopted the argument, as senior DHS officials Samuel Liles and Jeanette Manfra put it, that the hacks “could be intended or used to undermine public confidence in electoral processes and potentially the outcome.” But such a strategy could not have had any effect without a decision by DHS and the U.S. intelligence community to assert publicly that the intrusions and other scanning and probing were Russian operations, despite the absence of hard evidence. So DHS and other agencies were consciously sowing public doubts about U.S. elections that they were attributing to Russia.

DHS Reveals Its Self-Serving Methodology

In June 2017, Liles and Manfra [testified](#) to the Senate Intelligence Committee that an October 2016 DHS intelligence report had listed election systems in 21 states that were “potentially targeted by Russian government cyber actors.” They revealed that the sensational story leaked to the press in late September 2016 had been based on a draft of the DHS report. And more importantly, their use of the phrase

“potentially targeted” showed that they were arguing only that the cyber incidents it listed were *possible* indications of a Russian attack on election infrastructure.

Furthermore, Liles and Manfra said the DHS report had “catalogued suspicious activity we observed on state government networks across the country,” which had been “largely based on suspected malicious tactics and infrastructure.” They were referring to a list of eight IP addresses an August 2016 FBI “flash alert” had obtained from the Illinois and Arizona intrusions, which DHS and FBI had not been able to attribute to the Russian government.

The DHS officials recalled that the DHS began to “receive reports of cyber-enabled scanning and probing of election-related infrastructure in some states, some of which appeared to originate from servers operated by a Russian company.” Six of the eight IP addresses in the FBI alert were indeed traced to King Servers, owned by a young Russian living in Siberia. But as DHS cyber specialists knew well, the country of ownership of the server doesn’t prove anything about who was responsible for hacking: As cybersecurity expert Jeffrey Carr pointed out, the Russian hackers who coordinated the Russian attack on Georgian government websites in 2008 used a Texas-based company as the hosting provider.

The cybersecurity firm ThreatConnect noted in 2016 that one of the other two IP addresses had hosted a Russian criminal market for five months in 2015. But that was not a serious indicator, either. Private IP addresses are reassigned frequently by server companies, so there is not a necessary connection between users of the same IP address at different times.

The DHS methodology of selecting reports of cyber incidents involving election-related websites as “potentially targeted” by Russian government-sponsored hackers was based on no objective evidence whatever. The resulting list appears to have included any one of the eight addresses as well as any attack or “scan” on a public website that could be linked in any way to elections.

This methodology conveniently ignored the fact that criminal hackers

were constantly trying to get access to every database in those same state, country and municipal systems. Not only for Illinois and Arizona officials, but state electoral officials.

In fact, 14 of the 21 states on the list experienced nothing more than the routine scanning that occurs every day, according to the Senate Intelligence Committee. Only six involved what was referred to as a “malicious access attempt,” meaning an effort to penetrate the site. One of them was in Ohio, where the attempt to find a weakness lasted less than a second and was considered by DHS’s internet security contractor a “non-event” at the time.

State Officials Force DHS to Tell the Truth

For a year, DHS did not inform the 21 states on its list that their election boards or other election-related sites had been attacked in a presumed Russian-sponsored operation. The excuse DHS officials cited was that it could not reveal such sensitive intelligence to state officials without security clearances. But the reluctance to reveal the details about each case was certainly related to the reasonable expectation that states would publicly challenge their claims, creating a potential serious embarrassment.

On Sept. 22, 2017, DHS notified 21 states about the cyber incidents that had been included in the October 2016 report. The public announcement of the notifications said DHS had notified each chief election officer of “any potential targeting we were aware of in their state leading up to the 2016 election.” The phrase “potential targeting” again telegraphed the broad and vague criterion DHS had adopted, but it was ignored in media stories.

But the notifications, which took the form of phone calls lasting only a few minutes, provided a minimum of information and failed to convey the significant qualification that DHS was only suggesting targeting as a possibility. “It was a couple of guys from DHS reading from a script,” recalled one state election official who asked not to be identified. “They said [our state] was targeted by Russian government cyber actors.”

A number of state election officials recognized that this information conflicted with what they knew. And if they complained, they got a more accurate picture from DHS. After Wisconsin Secretary of State Michael Haas demanded further clarification, he got an email [response from a DHS official](#) with a different account. “[B]ased on our external analysis,” the official wrote, “the WI [Wisconsin] IP address affected belongs to the WI Department of Workforce Development, not the Elections Commission.”

California Secretary of State Alex Padilla said DHS initially had notified his office “that Russian cyber actors ‘scanned’ California’s Internet-facing systems in 2016, including Secretary of State websites.” But under further questioning, DHS [admitted to Padilla](#) that what the hackers had targeted was the California Department of Technology’s network.

Texas Secretary of State [Rolando Pablos](#) and Oklahoma Election Board spokesman [Byron Dean](#) also denied that any state website with voter- or election-related information had been targeted, and Pablos [demanded](#) that DHS “correct its erroneous notification.”

Despite these embarrassing admissions, a [statement issued](#) by DHS spokesman Scott McConnell on Sept. 28, 2017 said the DHS “stood by” its assessment that 21 states “were the target of Russian government cyber actors seeking vulnerabilities and access to U.S. election infrastructure.” The statement retreated from the previous admission that the notifications involved “potential targeting,” but it also revealed for the first time that DHS had defined “targeting” very broadly indeed.

It said the category included “some cases” involving “direct scanning of targeted systems” but also cases in which “malicious actors scanned for vulnerabilities in networks that may be connected to those systems or have similar characteristics in order to gain information about how to later penetrate their target.”

It is true that hackers may scan one website in the hope of learning something that could be useful for penetrating another website, as cybersecurity expert Prof. Herbert S. Lin of Stanford University

explained to me in an interview. But including any incident in which that motive was theoretical meant that any state website could be included on the DHS list, without any evidence it was related to a political motive.

Arizona's further exchanges with DHS revealed just how far DHS had gone in exploiting that escape clause in order to add more states to its "targeted" list. Arizona Secretary of State Michele Reagan tweeted that DHS had informed her that "the Russian government targeted our voter registration systems in 2016." After meeting with DHS officials in early October 2017, however, Reagan [wrote in a blog post](#) that DHS "could not confirm that any attempted Russian government hack occurred whatsoever to any election-related system in Arizona, much less the statewide voter registration database."

What the DHS said in that meeting, as Reagan's spokesman Matt Roberts recounted to me, is even more shocking. "When we pressed DHS on what exactly was actually targeted, they said it was the Phoenix public library's computers system," Roberts recalled.

In April 2018, a CBS News "60 Minutes" segment reported that the October 2016 DHS intelligence report had included the Russian government hacking of a "county database in Arizona." Responding to that CBS report, an unidentified "senior Trump administration official" who was well-briefed on the DHS report [told Reuters](#) that "media reports" on the issue had sometimes "conflated criminal hacking with Russian government activity," and that the cyberattack on the target in Arizona "was not perpetrated by the Russian government."

NSA Finds a GRU Election Plot

NSA intelligence analysts claimed in a May 2017 analysis to have documented an effort by Russian military intelligence (GRU) to hack into U.S. electoral institutions. In an intelligence analysis [obtained by The Intercept](#) and reported in June 2017, NSA analysts wrote that the GRU had sent a spear-phishing email—one with an attachment designed to look exactly like one from a trusted institution but that contains malware design to get control of the computer—to a vendor of voting machine technology in Florida. The hackers then designed a fake

web page that looked like that of the vendor. They sent it to a list of 122 email addresses NSA believed to be local government organizations that probably were “involved in the management of voter registration systems.” The objective of the new spear-phishing campaign, the NSA suggested, was to get control of their computers through malware to carry out the exfiltration of voter-related data.

But the authors of *The Intercept* story failed to notice crucial details in the NSA report that should have tipped them off that the attribution of the spear-phishing campaign to the GRU was based merely on the analysts’ own judgment—and that their judgment was faulty.

The Intercept article included a color-coded chart from the original NSA report that provides crucial information missing from the text of the NSA analysis itself as well as *The Intercept*’s account. The chart clearly distinguishes between the elements of the NSA’s account of the alleged Russian scheme that were based on “Confirmed Information” (shown in green) and those that were based on “Analyst Judgment” (shown in yellow). The connection between the “operator” of the spear-phishing campaign the report describes and an unidentified entity confirmed to be under the authority of the GRU is shown as a yellow line, meaning that it is based on “Analyst Judgment” and labeled “probably.”

A major criterion for any attribution of a hacking incident is whether there are strong similarities to previous hacks identified with a specific actor. But the chart concedes that “several characteristics” of the campaign depicted in the report distinguish it from “another major GRU spear-phishing program,” the identity of which has been redacted from the report.

The NSA chart refers to evidence that the same operator also had launched spear-phishing campaigns on other web-based mail applications, including the Russian company “Mail.ru.” Those targets suggest that the actors were more likely Russian criminal hackers rather than Russian military intelligence.

Even more damaging to its case, the NSA reports that the same operator who had sent the spear-phishing emails also had sent a test email to

the “American Samoa Election Office.” Criminal hackers could have been interested in personal information from the database associated with that office. But the idea that Russian military intelligence was planning to hack the voter rolls in American Samoa, an unincorporated U.S. territory with 56,000 inhabitants who can’t even vote in U.S. presidential elections, is plainly risible.

The Mueller Indictment’s Sleight of Hand

The Mueller indictment of GRU officers released on July 13 appeared at first reading to offer new evidence of Russian government responsibility for the hacking of Illinois and other state voter-related websites. A close analysis of the relevant paragraphs, however, confirms the lack of any real intelligence supporting that claim.

Mueller accused two GRU officers of working with unidentified “co-conspirators” on those hacks. But the only alleged evidence linking the GRU to the operators in the hacking incidents is the claim that a GRU official named Anatoly Kovalev and “co-conspirators” deleted search history related to the preparation for the hack after the FBI issued its alert on the hacking identifying the IP address associated with it in August 2016.

A careful reading of the relevant paragraphs shows that the claim is spurious. The first sentence in Paragraph 71 says that both Kovalev and his “co-conspirators” researched domains used by U.S. state boards of elections and other entities “for website vulnerabilities.” The second says Kovalev and “co-conspirators” had searched for “state political party email addresses, including filtered queries for email addresses listed on state Republican Party websites.”

Searching for website vulnerabilities would be evidence of intent to hack them, of course, but searching Republican Party websites for email addresses is hardly evidence of any hacking plan. And Paragraph 74 states that Kovalev “deleted his search history”—not the search histories of any “co-conspirator”—thus revealing that there were no joint searches and suggesting that the subject Kovalev had searched was Republican Party emails. So any deletion by Kovalev of his search

history after the FBI alert would not be evidence of his involvement in the hacking of the Illinois election board website.

With this rhetorical misdirection unraveled, it becomes clear that the repetition in every paragraph of the section of the phrase “Kovalev and his co-conspirators” was aimed at giving the reader the impression the accusation is based on hard intelligence about possible collusion that doesn’t exist.

The Need for Critical Scrutiny of DHS Cyberattack Claims

The DHS campaign to establish its role as the protector of U.S. electoral institutions is not the only case in which that agency has used a devious means to sow fear of Russian cyberattacks. In December 2016, DHS and the FBI published a long list of IP addresses as indicators of possible Russian cyberattacks. But most of the addresses on the list had no connection with Russian intelligence, as former U.S. government cyber-warfare officer Rob Lee [found on close examination.](#)

When someone at the Burlington, Vt., Electric Company spotted one of those IP addresses on one of its computers, the company reported it to DHS. But instead of quietly investigating the address to verify that it was indeed an indicator of Russian intrusion, DHS immediately informed *The Washington Post*. The result was a sensational story that Russian hackers had penetrated the U.S. power grid. In fact, the IP address in question was merely Yahoo’s email server, as Rob Lee told me, and the computer had not even been connected to the power grid. The threat to the power grid was a tall tale created by a DHS official, which the Post had to embarrassingly [retract.](#)

Since May 2017, DHS, in partnership with the FBI, has begun an even more ambitious campaign to focus public attention on what it says are Russian “targeting” and “intrusions” into “major, high value assets that operate components of our Nation’s critical infrastructure”, including energy, nuclear, water, aviation and critical manufacturing sectors. Any evidence of such an intrusion must be taken seriously by the U.S. government and reported by news media. But in light of the DHS record on alleged threats to election infrastructure and the

Burlington power grid, and its well-known ambition to assume leadership over cyber protection, the public interest demands that the news media examine DHS claims about Russian cyber threats far more critically than they have up to now.

Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist and winner of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for journalism. His latest book is *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*.

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Trump's Iran Debacle: What Will Germany and Russia Do?

It falls to Germany to save the Iran nuclear deal and try to prevent a devastating new Middle East War, argues Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare *Special to Consortium News*



In the wake of Donald Trump's thoroughly unsurprising decision to scuttle the Iran nuclear accord, two countries that may be most in the hot seat are Germany and Russia. The big question now is whether their mutual discomfort leads them to find common cause.

Angela Merkel's plight is especially painful. Not only are Germany's extensive business links with Iran at risk thanks to Trump's decision to re-apply sanctions, but the German chancellor's political fortunes have taken a beating thanks to years of American incompetence in the Middle East.

In Libya, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton devoted two weeks during the 2011 Arab Spring to persuading Qatar to join the anti-Gaddafi coalition, only to stand by and watch as the oil-rich emirate seized the opportunity to distribute some \$400 million to murderous Salafist rebels spreading anarchy from one end of the country to the other. The result was a failed state that soon turned into a jumping-off point for hundreds of thousands of desperate refugees making their way to Germany and other parts of the European Union.

Remarkably, Clinton did the same thing a few months later in Syria by teaming up with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Arab gulf states to fund what would soon

become a full-scale Islamist invasion. The upshot: more murder and mayhem, more refugees, and more terrorism when ISIS – funded by the Saudis and Qataris according to no less an authority than Clinton herself – decided to extend its jihad to Paris, Brussels, Nice, Manchester, Barcelona, and Berlin starting in November 2015. As if that weren't enough, Washington irritated its German partners by opposing the Nord Stream II natural gas pipeline, a Russo-German project headed by ex-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, and then, under Trump, by pulling out of the Paris climate accords last June.

Untutored Ambassador

A bruised and battered Merkel thus saw her share of the vote shrink by more than twenty percent in last September's German federal

election while the anti-immigrant Alternative für Deutschland saw its portion more than double. Now, Trump's decision to dump the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as the Iran nuclear agreement is formally known, is making matters much, much worse. First, Israel took advantage of the move to launch its biggest attack on Syria since the 1973 Yom Kippur War, raising prospects that Middle East chaos may be poised for yet another upsurge. Then US Ambassador Richard Grenell showed what America really thinks of its German partners by tweeting: "As @realDonaldTrump said, US sanctions will target critical sectors of Iran's economy. German companies doing business in Iran should wind down operations immediately."

Grenell, a former Fox News commentator, sounded like an all-too-typical American boss barking an order at an unpaid intern. Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn described the tweet as an "impertinence" while Andrea Nahles, leader of the center-left German Social Democrats, said: "It's not my task to teach people about the fine art of diplomacy, especially not the US ambassador. But he does appear to need some tutoring."

Quite right. But Germany is not the only one feeling the pain – Russia is too. It is allied with Iran in support of Syria's embattled president Bashar al-Assad, yet has somehow managed to maintain good relations with Israel. This is why Putin invited Benjamin Netanyahu to be his personal guest at this week's May 9 Victory Day celebrations in Moscow where the Israeli prime minister joined Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic in laying a wreath on the Soviet Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. When Putin paid tribute to the Soviet troops "who saved Europe and the world from slavery, from the horrors of the Holocaust," by defeating Nazi Germany (quote begins at 2:00), there was no doubt as to whom he was addressing.

But the celebration also featured a traditional Red Square military parade

featuring not only unmanned robo-tanks and Sukhoi Su-57 stealth fighters, but mobile batteries of anti-aircraft missiles. Less than twelve hours later, Netanyahu showed his thanks by destroying at least five Russian-made anti-aircraft batteries as part of the assault on Syria. According to the Israeli military, Israel notified Russia of the impending attack via “deconfliction” procedures in place since September 2015 – which means that Russia more or less assented to the destruction of its own defense systems.

It's Up to Germany

This can't go on, especially with Israel intervening ever more heavily on the side of pro-Al Qaeda rebels whom Russia, Iran, and Syria are trying to repel. The more the battle intensifies, the more impossible Putin's position will become.

The man needs back-up, but from where? The answer lies in the other signatories to the JCPOA – China, the UK, France, and Germany. But the first is preoccupied with events in the Far East, the second is in political disarray, while the third is a joke thanks to the preening and arrogant Emmanuel Macron. That leaves Germany. If it provided Russia with even a modicum of support, the upshot could be a major shift in the way the deadly game of Middle East politics is played.

Germany has real clout with regard to the Jewish state. It is Israel's biggest trading partner in Europe and, after the US, its second largest trading partner overall. It is an important cultural and scientific partner, while Berlin, in one of history's more delectable ironies, is now home to one of Israel's largest expatriate communities, some 15,000 Jews and Arabs who find life in the German capital freer and more vibrant than back home and, as a consequence, have peppered it with Hebrew-language kindergartens, a Hebrew library, a Hebrew literary magazine, a Hanukkah market, and Iranian-Israeli techno parties.

The same goes for Germany and Iran. As Gary Leupp recently pointed out in *Counterpunch*, Germany comprises sixty percent of EU investment in the Islamic state where it sells machinery, metals, chemicals, and agricultural products. With Daimler recently signing an agreement with Iranian Khodro to produce Mercedes-Benz motor vehicles, its investments are currently increasing at a rate of around about twenty-five percent per year.

Amid inflation, a currency crisis, and a growing strike wave, Iran is grateful for such business and desperate for more. So when Germany talks, it listens. Syria, much of which resembles postwar Berlin after a half-dozen years of imperialist assault, would listen as well if Germany gave it half a chance. Indeed, it would be so grateful for the slightest olive branch that Damascenes

would no doubt take to the streets in celebration.

Walking on *Eierschalen*

So a joint Russo-German diplomatic offensive could provide the basis for a genuine realignment. Needless to say, there are a thousand and one reasons why this won't occur. Germany walks on eggshells when it comes to Israel for obvious historical reasons and is therefore reluctant to do anything that might anger the Jewish state. It routinely defers to the US, which midwifed the German Federal Republic in 1949 and provided it with a veneer of political legitimacy in the ensuing decades. Public intellectuals like Jürgen Habermas have made careers out of arguing that Germany's future lies in deeper and deeper integration with the liberal west, while NATO and the EU insure a deepening western orientation as well.

If Germany were to turn in the other direction, the protests would be deafening not only in Washington, Paris, and London, but in Berlin. They would be even more so in Poland, the Ukraine, and the Baltics where local nationalists, many leaning in an increasingly fascist direction, have come to rely on unbroken western support.

It would be a dangerous leap into the unknown on the part of a country that couldn't be more risk averse. But Germany may have no choice. Trump is nuts, American power is receding more rapidly than anyone would have thought possible two or three years ago, while western liberalism is crumbling as well. Hardliners are in control in Washington where Republicans and Democrats compete to see who can be more obsequious to Israel and more hostile to all things Russian. The same goes for Tel Aviv and Tehran where, thanks to Trump, the hardliners are equally in the saddle.

If there are two countries that know what can happen when the crazies are in control, it's Russia and Germany. But now that history has placed them in the same boat as it approaches the cataracts, Putin, for one, is rowing madly. Will Merkel lend a hand with the oars?

Daniel Lazare is the author of *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace, 1996) and other books about American politics. He has written for a wide variety of publications from *The Nation* to *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and his articles about the Middle East, terrorism, Eastern Europe, and other topics appear regularly on such websites as Jacobin and The American Conservative.

Erasing Obama's Iran Success

The nihilism of modern American politics extends globally with one side seeking to destroy any positive legacy of the other, as the Trump administration continues its drive to sabotage President Obama's successful Iran nuclear accord, reports ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Those wishing to kill the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the agreement that restricts Iran's nuclear program, have never given up. The agreement's ever-lengthening successful record, now more than two years old, of keeping closed all possible pathways to an Iranian nuclear weapon ought to have discouraged would-be deal-slayers. But the slayers got a new lease on life with the election of Donald Trump, who, as part of his program of opposing whatever Barack Obama favored and destroying whatever he accomplished, has consistently berated the JCPOA.

The themes that the agreement's opponents push are now familiar. One of those themes is that the Obama administration was over-eager to get the agreement and consequently gave up the store to conclude the accord. This argument never made sense, given the terms of the JCPOA. The asymmetries in the agreement go against the Iranians, who came under a more intrusive nuclear inspection arrangement than any other country has ever willingly accepted, and who had to fulfill almost all of their obligations to break down and set back their nuclear program before gaining an ounce of additional sanctions relief. But the argument has had the attraction for the opponents of not being directly disprovable as far as any mindset of former officials is concerned, and of jibing with the opponents' further theme of a mythical "better deal" that supposedly was there for the taking.

An additional theme from the opponents has been that the JCPOA fails to address other Iranian policies and actions that have ritualistically come to be labeled as nefarious, malign, destabilizing behavior (NMDB). This argument hasn't made sense either, given that it was clear from the outset of negotiations that no agreement restricting Iran's nuclear program would be possible if the parties negotiating the agreement dumped onto the table their other grievances against each other. Any such futile expansion of the negotiating agenda would have meant that the Iranian nuclear program would have advanced ever closer to the capability of making a bomb *and* there still would have been the NMDB.

Nonetheless, the theme has been a favorite of opponents because it distracts attention from the success of the JCPOA in preventing an Iranian nuke, because

there always will be some sort of objectionable Iranian action that can be pointed out, and because the NMDB mantra has now been chanted so much that it has come to be accepted as an unquestioned given.

Josh Meyer recently offered a variant on these themes with an extended [article](#) in *Politico* under the tantalizing title, “The secret backstory of how Obama let Hezbollah off the hook”. The attention-getting theme that the author pushes is that a task force of the Drug Enforcement Administration investigating drug trafficking and other criminal activity of Lebanese Hezbollah was stymied by “the White House’s desire for a nuclear deal with Iran”. Unsurprisingly, this theme has been replayed by the usual players dedicated to bashing the JCPOA or anything Obama-related, such as the *Wall Street Journal* [editorial writers](#). Some [Republicans in Congress](#) and even [Eric Trump](#) have echoed the theme.

The 13,000-word article aims to overwhelm with detail. Through the sheer volume of leads, tips, suspicions, and genuine facts, the reader gets the impression of a thoroughly reported piece. And Meyer clearly put a lot of work into it. But as Erik Wemple of the *Washington Post* points out in an [article](#) about the article, Meyer never produces any direct evidence that the White House intentionally impeded the task force’s work, much less that any such interference had to do with the impending nuclear agreement. After wading through all the detail, the careful reader can see that the attention-getting thesis about the Obama administration supposedly sacrificing drug and crime enforcement on the altar of the nuclear agreement rests on suspicion and innuendo. It rests on statements such as that some decisions about the Hezbollah case “might have been influenced” by an inter-agency group’s awareness of the nuclear negotiations—meaning that, as Wemple notes, the decisions just as easily might not have been influenced by such awareness.

There is ample evidence that the Obama administration took numerous tough sanctions and law enforcement actions against Hezbollah, both before and after conclusion of the JCPOA. Meyer includes in his article—and give Meyer credit for this inclusion—statements by former Obama administration officials alluding to those actions. The very separation of the nuclear file from other grievances by or against Iran—which, as noted above, was essential to concluding any nuclear agreement at all—implied that there would *not* be any moratorium on enforcement actions against Iran’s Lebanese ally Hezbollah.

Meyer’s piece suffers from a sourcing problem in that it relies heavily on just two sources who currently are employed by, or affiliated with, organizations in the forefront of opposing the JCPOA. One of those sources, David Asher, is on an advisory board of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, which has become mission control for undermining and trying to kill the nuclear agreement.

Whether or not such institutional connections affected what was told to Meyer, the account of a task force within DEA that felt frustrated that the rest of the government did not run fast and run automatically with whatever case it was building has the familiar ring of something that happens regularly, and quite properly and understandably, inside government. Such happening need not have anything to do with White House interference or with any pending international agreement such as the JCPOA. When a team of officials works hard on a project—as this team in DEA that was investigating some of Hezbollah’s activities undoubtedly did—its members naturally will feel frustrated by any inter-agency review that keeps the government from acting fully and immediately on whatever the team came up with (by, say, quickly filing a criminal indictment in federal court). Such review is vital. Typically there are not just one but several important national interests and equities that need to be considered, and that go beyond what the more narrowly focused team members would have had in mind.

In the case of Hezbollah and drug-running, those other considerations would have included such things as the possibility of violent responses, the cost of possibly losing sources of information on the group being investigated, and the legal soundness of any criminal case brought to court. Some of these considerations get misleadingly presented in Meyer’s article as if they were part of some Obama administration effort to put brakes on legal actions against Hezbollah for the sake of preserving the nuclear agreement. For example, former counterterrorism adviser Lisa Monaco is said to have “expressed concerns about using RICO [Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act] laws against top Hezbollah leaders and about the possibility of reprisals”. As the *Post*’s Wemple observes, “ ‘Expressing concerns’ about certain law enforcement strategies may have been Monaco’s way of, like, using her governmental experience to sharpen U.S. policy, rather than working as the cog in an alleged plot to take it easy on Hezbollah.”

Beyond the multiple severe weaknesses in Meyer’s argument about what the Obama administration did or did not do are two important pieces of context that he never addresses. One concerns just what difference a more aggressive campaign against Hezbollah during the period in question, even if it were possible, would have made. Meyer makes it sound as if doing or not doing everything that this one task force in DEA wanted to do was the difference between crippling or not crippling a grave security threat. In an [interview on NPR](#), Meyer asserted that the Obama administration “did allow a group that was a regionally focused militia-slash-political organization with a terrorist wing to become a much more wealthy global criminal organization that has a lot of money that can now be used to bankroll terrorist and military actions around the world.” No, it didn’t. Even if one were to believe everything that Meyer’s piece insinuates

about an alleged White House obstructionist operation motivated by nuclear negotiations, this would not have made Hezbollah “a much more wealthy” organization, much less have made it more likely to conduct terrorist and military actions “around the world”.

Hezbollah has been in existence for more than three decades. During that time it has grown into a strong and multifaceted organization, including being recognized as a major political movement, with seats in the Lebanese parliament and portfolios in the Lebanese government. Money-making criminal operations have long been a part of Hezbollah’s activity, and investigations and legal action—through several U.S. administrations—have long been a part of the U.S. response to that activity. What one disgruntled team in DEA wanted to do during one administration was a minor episode in this story, not the make-or-break development that Meyer portrays it as.

Another piece of context applies to the whole theme, of which Meyer’s article is one manifestation, about the Obama administration supposedly drooling over a prospective nuclear agreement with Iran and giving it priority over everything else. It wasn’t Obama who gave the specter of an Iranian nuclear weapon overriding priority. It was other people who did that, and especially people who today lead the charge for aggressive confrontation with Iran and for killing the JCPOA. Well before the negotiations that would lead to the JCPOA ever began, the rallying cry of these forces was that an Iranian nuclear weapon would be one of the gravest dangers the United States ever faced. During the 2012 presidential campaign, Republican candidate Mitt Romney identified this possibility as the single most serious security threat against the United States. Most prominent among the alarmists was Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who made sure the whole world would understand his dumbed-down message by displaying a cartoon bomb before the United Nations General Assembly. It was only after the JCPOA closed all possible avenues to an Iranian nuclear weapon—and drained Netanyahu’s Looney Tunes bomb in the process—that we started hearing from the same forces more about how the JCPOA supposedly is bad because it doesn’t address other nefarious Iran-related activity. Activity such as drug-running by Hezbollah.

Imagine that everything Meyer’s piece says or implies were true. Imagine that the Obama administration really did see a choice between getting the JCPOA and cracking down on Hezbollah’s criminal activity. And imagine that the Obama administration said “yes” to everything that gung-ho team in DEA may have wanted to do. Then presumably the administration also would have to say, “Well, yes, we did have a chance to negotiate an agreement that would prevent an Iranian nuclear weapon, but we thought a drug bust was more important.” How would the alarmists, who had been ringing the alarm bell so long and hard about an Iranian

nuclear weapon, react to that? We can be confident the reaction would not be to express compliments to Mr. Obama.

The gross inconsistency of those opposing the JCPOA reflects how their real objectives have little to do with the terms of the agreement or how it was negotiated. Their objectives have more to do with not wanting anyone to have any agreement with Iran on anything (Netanyahu's objective, while he portrays Iran as the sole source of everything bad in the Middle East), or about staying in step with American supporters of Netanyahu's government, or about not wanting any of Barack Obama's accomplishments to survive.

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Israeli-Saudi Tandem Adjusts to Syria Loss

Facing defeat in the proxy war in Syria, the Israeli-Saudi tandem is planning a new front against Hezbollah, presaged by Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri's sudden resignation, as ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke explains.

By Alastair Crooke

It seems that matters are coming to a head in the Middle East. For many states, the coming period will likely prove to be the moment in which they determine their futures – as well as that for the region as a whole.

The immediate peg for “crunch time” is Russia's fast-track proposal of a conference to be held in Sochi, with the near-full kaleidoscope of Syrian opposition invited, which, if all goes as planned, might mean 1,000 delegates arriving in Sochi as soon as Nov. 18.

The Syrian government has agreed to attend. Of course, when one hears of attendance in these numbers, it suggests that this is not intended as a “sleeves rolled-up” working session, but rather as a meeting in which Russian thoughts will be mooted on the constitution, the system of government, and the place of “minorities” – with a chaser that Russia wants fresh elections pretty darned quick: which is to say, in six months' time. In short, this is to be the “last chance saloon” for opposition figures: come aboard now, or be shut out, in the

cold.

This initiative has plenty of push behind it, including President Putin's personal endorsement, but no guarantee of success. Both Iran and Turkey (the co-guarantors of Astana) privately may have reservations, not knowing precisely what Moscow might unveil. Iran is insistent on Syria retaining a strong centralized government, and Turkey is likely to worry about whether the Kurds might receive too much from Moscow; it will also have reservations about sitting down with the YPD (Syrian Kurds), which it views to be little more than a re-branded PKK, which Turkey regards as a terrorist organization. If Turkey does pull out, it will take an important slice of the opposition with it.

Critical moments in history, however, do have a habit of proving to be less critical than first imagined, but this one effectively marks the beginning of the winding up process of the Syrian war and of the 20-year "New Middle East" project (as devised by the U.S. and Israeli governments). How each state responds, will determine the Middle East landscape for the next years.

Military Mop-up

Late last week, the Syrian army took the rest of Deir Ezzor city, and with it its rear now secure, the Syrian army is free to continue the 30 or so kilometers to reach Abu Kamal (al-Bukamal) – the last ISIS urban outpost – and the vital border crossing on the Euphrates with Iraq. It is estimated that there may be 3,500 Da'esh (another name for the Islamic State or ISIS) in Abu Kamal. But Abu Kamal's "twin" (on the Iraqi side of the border), al-Qaim, was taken by the Iraqi government's PMU militia forces on Friday. The Iraqi forces are now clearing the city of its estimated 1,500 Da'esh fighters.

The Syrian army, backed up by several thousand recently injected Hezbollah forces, is poised to enter Abu Kamal in the coming days from two directions – and from the south, a co-ordinated thrust north up and into Abu Kamal by the Iraqi Hash'd a- Sha'abi (PMU) militia, will form a pincer.

American-supported SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), however, are also trying to reach Abu Kamal from the east (the U.S., pressured by Israel, would like to seal and close the border crossing). U.S. allied forces can move more quickly, as U.S. officers are seeking to bribe local tribal leaders who formerly had sworn allegiance to ISIS (with Saudi money), to switch sides, or at least to allow the SDF forces to advance unhindered by ISIS (as happened in the environs of Deir Ezzor).

In short, the military outcome in Syria is done (after six years of war), and now comes the political bargaining. How this plays out will determine the

relative strengths of the forces that will shape the Middle East in the coming years. The outcome will likely see whether Turkey can be bullied back towards NATO (by threats such as that by General Petr Pavel, head of NATO's military committee, warning of "consequences" for Turkey's attempts to buy Russian air defenses), or whether Turkey's determination to limit Kurdish aspirations will see Turkey position itself alongside Iran and Iraq (who share a common interest).

Turkey's role in Idlib, in overseeing the de-escalation zone there, remains opaque. Effectively, its forces are positioned more to control the Afrin Kurdish "canton" (rather than monitor the Idlib de-escalation zone). It is possible that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is hoping to use Turkish troops to carve out a buffer zone along the Turkish-Syrian border – in contravention to the Astana understandings. If so, this will place him at odds with both Moscow and Damascus (but will not necessarily imply a return to the NATO camp, either).

Syria's Future

The bargaining at Sochi will also make clearer whether Syria will be a strong centralized state (as Iran prefers), or a looser federal state as America (and perhaps Russia) would prefer. Sochi will be something of a litmus for the extent to which American influence can shape outcomes in today's Middle East. At present, it looks as if there is co-ordination between Moscow and Washington for a speedy political settlement in Syria, a U.S. declaration of victory over ISIS, Syrian elections, and an American exit from the Syrian theatre.

The outcome of the conference will also perhaps clarify whether the Syrian Kurds finally will remain with the U.S. CentCom project for retaining a permanent U.S. presence in northeast Syria (as Israel wants), or whether the Syrian Kurds will cut a deal with Damascus (after witnessing the crushing of the Barzani Kurdish independence project by neighboring powers).

If the latter occurs, the argument for retaining a longer-term U.S. presence in northeast Syria would lose force. The Saudis will have either to accept defeat in Syria, or act the party-pooper (by trying to re-ignite the remaining proxy forces in Idlib) – but, for that, the kingdom would need Turkey's compliance, and that may not be forthcoming.

Iraq too, irked by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's comments suggesting that the PMU are Iranian – and must "go home" – has already shown signs of re-orientating towards Russia. (It has recently signed an expansive energy and economic protocol with Russia – after having reclaimed control of its borders and of Iraq's energy resources – and is procuring Russian arms). Evidence of Iraq's close connections with Syria, Turkey and Iran was very manifest in the

quick execution of the put-down to the Kurdish independence gambit.

But the state facing the biggest dilemma in respect to the Syrian outcome is Israel. Alex Fishman, the doyen of Israeli defense columnists, has written that Israel simply has failed to adjust to strategic change, and is locked in a narrow “cold war” mentality:

“The Syrians fire rockets at open areas: Israel destroys Syrian cannons in response; the Iranians threaten to deploy Shiite forces in Syria: Israel announces ‘red lines’ and threatens a military conflict; Fatah and Hamas hold futile talks on a unity government: the prime minister declares Israel is suspending talks with the Palestinians – and everyone here applauds the security and political echelons: – ‘there, we showed them the meaning of deterrence’, [the Israeli leadership repeats].

“But what we are seeing here is a provincial defense policy, a false representation of a leadership that barely sees beyond the tip of its nose, and is busy putting out fires day and night.

“It’s a leadership that sees national security through a narrow regional viewpoint. It’s as if everything beyond Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran doesn’t exist. It’s as if the world around us hasn’t changed in the past decades, and we are stuck in the era of aggressive solutions in the form of reward and punishment as the main political-security activity. The current political-security echelon isn’t solving problems, isn’t dealing with problems, but simply postponing them, passing them on to the next generation”

Missing the Strategic Picture

What Fishman is pointing to is profound: Israel has gained some tactical victories in the neighborhood (i.e. over the Palestinians generally, and in weakening Hamas), but it has lost sight of the wider strategic picture. In effect, Israel has lost its ability to dominate the region. It had wanted a weakened and fragmented Syria; it had wanted a Hezbollah mired in the Syrian mud, and an Iran circumscribed by Sunni sectarian antipathy towards the Shi’a generally. It is unlikely to get any of these.

Rather, Israel finds *itself being deterred* (rather than doing the deterring) by the knowledge that it cannot now overturn its strategic weakness (i.e. risk a three-front war) – unless, and only if, America will fully enter into any conflict, in support of Israel. And this is what worries the security and intelligence echelon: Would America now contemplate a decisive intervention on behalf of Israel – unless the latter’s very survival was at risk?

In 2006, Israeli officials recall, the U.S. did not enter Israel’s war against

Hizbullah in Lebanon, and after 33 days, it was Israel that sought a ceasefire.

Fishman is right too that attacking Syrian factories and radar positions “out of old habit” solves nothing. It may be sold to the Israeli public as “deterrence,” but rather it is playing with fire. Syria has started to fire back with aged surface-to-air missiles (S200s) at Israeli aircraft. These missiles may not have hit an Israeli jet yet, and maybe were not even intended so to do. The Syrian message however, is clear: these missiles may be old, but they have a longer range than the newer S300: Potentially, their range is sufficient to reach Ben Gurion Airport outside Tel Aviv.

Are the Israelis sure that Syria and Hezbollah don't have more modern missiles? Are they certain that Iran or Russia will not provide them such? The Russian defense minister was very angry on his visit to Tel Aviv to have been faced with an Israeli retaliatory air attack on a Syrian radar and missile position – as a welcome gift on landing in Israel. To his protests, his Israeli counterpart, Defense Minister Lieberman condescendingly said that Israel needed nobody's advice in respect to Israel's security. General Sergey Shoygu reportedly was not amused.

Can Israel come to terms with its new strategic situation? It seems not. Ibrahim Karagul, a Turkish political commentator and an authoritative voice of President Erdogan, writing in *Yeni Safak*, notes that “the foundations of a new disintegration [and] division are being laid in our region. Saudi Arabia's ‘We are switching to moderate Islam’ announcement contains a dangerous game. The U.S.-Israel axis is forming a new regional front line.”

Karagul continues: “We have been watching the strange developments in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Israel and the U.S. for some time now. There is a new situation in the region, which we know is [principally aimed] against Iran; but has recently taken an open anti-Turkey state, aimed at limiting Turkey's influence in the region ... You will see, the ‘moderate Islam’ announcement will be immediately followed by a sudden and unexpected strengthening of Arab nationalism. This wave will not differentiate between Shiite or Sunni Arabs, but it will isolate the Muslim Arab world from the entire Muslim world.

“This separation will be felt most by the Shiite Arabs in Iraq. With this new block, Iraq and Iran are going to stage a new power showdown [i.e. will react forcefully to counter it]. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's future in power is also most likely going to [become contingent on the outcome to] this showdown.”

An American ‘Buy-in’

To give this project American “buy-in,” Israel and Saudi Arabia are focusing it on Lebanese Hezbollah, which the U.S. has declared to be a terrorist entity though the movement was part of Lebanon’s government, which was headed by Prime Minister Saad Hariri until he ominously resigned today in an announcement made in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. (Hariri is a dual Saudi-Lebanese national.)

Saudi State Minister for Gulf Affairs Thamer al-Sabhan (in Beirut last week) called for “toppling Hezbollah” and promised “astonishing” developments in “the coming days. Those who believe that my tweets are a personal stance, are delusional ... the coming developments will definitely be astonishing.”

Al-Sabhan added that the kingdom’s escalation against Hezbollah could take several forms that would “definitely affect Lebanon. Politically, it might target the government’s relations with the world. At the economic and financial levels, it could target commercial exchange and funds, and militarily it might involve the possibility of a strike on Hizbullah by the U.S.-led coalition, which labels Hizbullah a terrorist organization.” (Comment: this latter point probably was made more in hope, than in expectation. Europe and the U.S. set considerable store on maintaining Lebanon as stable).

Karagul reflects further on this U.S.-Gulf-Israeli initiative:

“The moderate Islam project was tried the most in Turkey. We always said this is ‘American Islam’ and opposed it. The February 28 military intervention is the product of such a project. It was implemented by the U.S./Israel extreme right-wing and their partners on the inside. The Fetullah Terrorist Organization (FETO) is the product of such a project, and the Dec. 17/25 and July 15 attacks were made for this very reason. They were all aimed at trapping Turkey within the U.S./Israel axis.

“But Turkey’s local and national resistance has overcome them all. Now they are burdening Saudi Arabia with the same mission. That is how they are making it appear. I do not think that it is possible for Saudi Arabia to undertake such a mission. This is impossible both in terms of the regime’s character and its social structure. This is impossible because of the ‘Israel/U.S. sauce’.

“The discourse of making the switch to moderate Islam will cause serious confusion in the Saudi administration and grave social reactions. The actual conflict is going to take place within Saudi Arabia. Also, the Riyadh administration has no chance of exporting something to the region or setting an example.

“Especially once it is further revealed that the project is security-based, that a new front line has been formed, that it is all planned by the U.S.-Israel, it

will result in a fiasco. This project is suicide for Saudi Arabia, it is a destruction plan; it is a plan that will destroy it unless it comes to its senses.”

Karagul makes the point well: the attempt to make Islam in the Christian “Westphalian” image has a disastrous history. The metaphysics of Islam are not those of Christianity. And Saudi Arabia cannot be made “moderate” by Mohammad bin Salman just ordering it. It would entail a veritable cultural revolution to shift the basis of the kingdom, away from the rigors of Wahhabism to some secularized Islam.

More War?

Where is this taking the Middle East: to conflict? Maybe. But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is not noted for his audacity: he is noted more for rhetoric which often has proved empty; and Israeli security officials are being cautious, but both sides *are* preparing against the possibility of what Karagul calls a “great power showdown.” It looks, though – from this and other Turkish statements – as if Turkey will be with Iran and Iraq, and standing against America and Saudi Arabia.

And President Trump? He is wholly (and understandably) preoccupied with the low-intensity war being waged against him at home. He probably tells Netanyahu whatever it is that might advance his domestic battles (in Congress, where Netanyahu has influence). If Bibi wants a fiery speech at the U.N. berating Iran, then, why not? Trump can then call on the trifecta of White House generals to “fix it” (just as he did with JCPOA, passing it to Congress “to fix”), knowing that the generals do not want a war with Iran.

The danger is a “black swan.” What happens if Israel goes on attacking the Syrian army and industrial premises in Syria (which is happening almost daily) – and Syria *does* shoot down an Israeli jet?

Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum.

Recalling Japan’s ‘Comfort Women’ Rapes

Japan’s current nationalist leadership downplays and denies many crimes from World War II, but a global movement continues to press for a recognition of the mass rapes and murders of so-called “comfort women,” reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

On Sept. 22, a global campaign demanding justice and reparations for the Japanese military's "Comfort Women" unveiled a bronze statue in San Francisco memorializing the Korean and other Asian women who were sexually abused by Japan's soldiers during World War II.

The statue, erected by a coalition of local groups led by the Comfort Women Justice Coalition, shows three young women, holding hands in a circle, facing outwards, as an old woman looks on.

I spoke with retired San Francisco Superior Court Judges Lillian K. Sing and Julie Tang, leaders of the movement of the Comfort Women Justice Coalition, and Flashpoints correspondent K.J. Noh, about the war crime in which as many as 400,000 women were mass raped and often murdered by the Japanese.

Dennis Bernstein: K.J., lay out a brief background on the so-called "comfort women." When did this mass kidnapping and rape take place...and basically who was responsible?

K.J. Noh: The term "Comfort Women" is a euphemism for the young women and girls forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military between 1932 and 1945 throughout the Asia Pacific region of Japan's colonial "co-prosperity sphere."

It's estimated that approximately between 200,000-400,000 women and girls, some as young as thirteen, were forced into an industrialized system of rape, "servicing" up to 60 soldiers a day. Scholars estimate that this resulted in a fatality rate of up to 90%. The system has been described as "considered unprecedented in its cruelty and magnitude," and survivors have referred to "comfort stations" as "a living hell", "a slaughter house".

The Empire of Japan was a theocratic military dictatorship at that time, and its military government systematically planned, implemented, trafficked, transported, enslaved and, towards the end of war, slaughtered these women. This crime against humanity has still not been officially acknowledged by the Japanese government.

Dennis Bernstein: The prime minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, apparently does not believe that these World War II Comfort Women deserve anything.

K.J. Noh: Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is the grandson of Japan's postwar Prime Minister, Nobusuke Kishi, a class-A war criminal, and is the figurehead of the hyper-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party faction that would like to see Japan restored as a global imperial superpower. Because of this, Abe has made Japanese historical denialism official government policy, launching a massive global PR

campaign to “correct” the world’s understanding of Japan’s colonial and WWII history.

Abe has also come out with some very bellicose statements against North Korea and is a big proponent of military action. Recently he wrote an op-ed for The New York Times in which he misrepresented the history of nuclear negotiations with North Korea, arguing that diplomacy will not work. He writes that, “Prioritizing diplomacy and emphasizing the importance of dialogue will not work with North Korea.”

In order to back up his argument, he lies about the breakdown of the 1994 agreed framework, which effectively stopped the North Korean nuclear program until 2002. He fails to mention that the framework contained promises to normalize relations with North Korea, to remove trade barriers, and to enact a non-aggression pact, and that none of these conditions were upheld by the US. He glosses this over and then makes the argument that there is no possibility of dialogue.

Interestingly, in this op-ed, Abe mentions the abduction of a young Japanese girl by the North Koreans as proof of how immoral and unethical they are. What is interesting is that the North Koreans have acknowledged abducting between thirteen and seventeen Japanese citizens and condemned those actions, although they have not given formal reparations yet. But to this day, Abe has not even acknowledged the abduction of between 200,000 and 400,000 young women and girls from Korea and the colonies.

Dennis Bernstein: Last week a memorial was unveiled in San Francisco to the Comfort Women, over the vehement opposition of the Japanese government.

Lillian Sing: I was born in Shanghai, China, where over 200,000 girls and women were kidnapped and forced into sexual slavery. As an Asian-American woman, I will not be silenced. How can I not get involved, when my sisters were kidnapped and raped over and over again—sometimes over eighty times a day?! What is most heinous is that the Japanese government has refused to recognize their role in these crimes. Justice delayed is justice denied. Over 400,000 Comfort Women were kidnapped, and now there are only a few dozen left.

Julie Tang: I grew up learning about the Japanese atrocities committed during World War II. In 1991 these now elderly women told the world what had happened to them. But it was really the Japanese government denial of what had happened that drove me to become involved. The Japanese government has done everything it could to prevent this memorial from being built, but we have been able to overcome all the hurdles.

Dennis Bernstein: Could you describe the multiple struggles you faced getting this memorial constructed?

Lillian Sing: Japan is very afraid of the truth. It even went before the US Supreme Court to block a memorial in Glendale of a little girl sitting on a chair. It feared that that memorial would interfere with Japanese/US relations. Now the mayor of Osaka has threatened to break off its sister-city relationship with San Francisco if a memorial is erected there. The Japanese government is now accusing China of being behind this, of trying to drive a wedge between South Korea and Japan over this memorial.

Julie Tang: I think it is extremely insulting to the victims for the Japanese leadership to be blaming everybody but themselves. First it claimed that these women were willing prostitutes. Now they are pointing fingers at China. They are saying that Judge Sing and I are essentially puppets of the Chinese government, that we are attempting to drive a wedge between South Korea and Japan in their efforts to contain North Korea.

K.J. Noh: The key thing to re-emphasize is that Japan was a fascist military dictatorship with a wartime command economy that controlled every aspect of procurement, distribution and recruitment of all material, including human labor.

We know for a fact that these women were trafficked over thousands of miles, all over the colonies. There are documents that requisition thousands of girls, who were often procured and delivered in short periods of time. These actions would not have been possible without coordinated government actions.

Another point to highlight is that this was not simply the largest case of sexual trafficking, it was also an unprecedented femicide. Between 75-90% percent of these women died during their sexual enslavement. That makes it a modern femicidal holocaust.

The Japanese government has never taken any responsibility for this. From time to time they make generic statements of remorse which mean nothing. They refuse to recognize, take responsibility, and to make any reasonable official reparations. And they have refused to ratify any of their apologies in the Japanese Diet, which is what would be necessary for a state apology.

A memorial is actually a poor substitute for what is really needed, which is justice, reparations, education and apology. A monument is just a small symbolic gesture against a backdrop of one of the most extraordinary cases of silencing in modern history.

The Western human rights complex has had a very selective attention, including

in the case of the Comfort Women. That is because it is largely driven by imperial geopolitical design. We see that with the statements of the State Department, of Wendy Sherman in particular, who poo-pooed the whole Comfort Women issue, saying they needed to get over it and it shouldn't be used for nationalistic purposes, and the statements of Anthony Blinken, who urged that South Korea get behind the absurd, fraudulent 2015 "agreement", the written text of which can be found nowhere. The memory of the Comfort Women is something that needs to be highlighted but is being erased.

What we are seeing now is the remilitarization of Japan as a key factor in waging war against China, the rising regional hegemon. The issue of Japanese colonization ties in intimately, is an impediment to the legitimacy of Japanese remilitarization.

Lillian Sing: San Francisco is being threatened not to accept this memorial. We want to make sure that San Francisco does not allow itself to be threatened in this way by its Japanese counterpart. Mr. Abe makes annual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine to honor class-A war criminals. We in San Francisco would like to have a memorial to honor the war victims. Our memorial is for peace, not war. And there will be no peace in Asia without Japan apologizing.

Julie Tang: I'd like to invite people to visit the memorial. Actually, it is not yet open to the public but we hope it will be soon, with the help of the mayor and the board of supervisors.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.

Hurricanes Blow Away Climate Change Denial

The startling landfall of two giant hurricanes – feasting on especially warm water off Texas and Florida – crashes into the climate change denialism that has been politically popular on the Right, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The loss of respect for truth is one of the most consequential features of public affairs in American today. The roots and causes of this tragic development are multiple. The spread of social media and the related ability to

spread untruths cheaply at the speed of electrons are parts of the story. Another part is the phenomenon of fake news (real fake news, that is, not alleged fake news that is really real news that the alleged doesn't welcome).

The advent of Donald Trump's presidency has taken this sad story to new depths. The President lies copiously, flagrantly, unashamedly, and far beyond what had been the norm for political fibbing. He has shown how a political career, rising even to the highest office of the land, can be built on lying.

Correctives to this awful trend are difficult to identify. The tribal belief system that prevails in most of the American population, in which people chiefly listen to and believe sources they identify with politically or socially and had already been telling them what they want to hear, is so well entrenched it seems almost impossible to overcome. Many people reject factual corrections as a form of bias and unfair treatment by sources (such as the "left-wing media") with which they do not identify politically or socially.

The epistemological rut in which the nation currently is mired is captured by a cartoon in which a man wearing a Trump shirt comments on how the President has lied about jobs, health care, and other topics. When asked by the person on the next barstool why he nonetheless supports Trump, the man replies, "cuz he tells it like it is."

Combating lies with counter-lies would not be wise. However much it might help to arrive at any one decision or policy that is better than the alternative, the larger effect would be to prolong and deepen the damaging disrespect for truth. One can shape arguments, however, in ways that, while still truthful, are better able to get through to lie-besotted masses than the most thoughtful and disinterested analysis would.

In that regard, the United States getting hit with two major hurricanes in rapid succession provides a teaching opportunity regarding the critical issue of climate change. Thoughtful leaders such as former President Barack Obama habitually issue the standard disclaimer that no one weather event can be attributed to manmade climate change. This sort of caution, while intellectually admirable, represents excessive reticence when considering what it takes to get through skulls and through information filters in the post-truth epoch.

Like Smoking and Cancer

Christine Todd Whitman, a Republican who ran the Environmental Protection Agency under George W. Bush, notes not only that the basic physical links involving global warming, greenhouse gases, and burning of fossil fuels are "as certain as the link between smoking and cancer." She further observes that "a broad

consensus of scientists also warn of the influence of the warming climate on extreme weather events.”

The overall connections, in other words, in terms of cause, effect, and degree of risk are unquestionable, even if no one case of lung cancer can be blamed on any one pack of cigarettes.

Focusing on the most recent tropical cyclones would not necessarily be the way a completely objective analysis in some other epoch would shape a disquisition on climate change. And focusing on Harvey and Irma would partly play to the otherwise unfortunate tendency to treat one data point as an event but two data points as a trend.

Politically, however, seizing such a teaching opportunity, in which there is an immediate physical impact even on many people who get their news from Rush Limbaugh, is a necessary while still truthful way to battle untruths.

Such a moment also places in especially stark relief the dishonesty, and related hypocrisy, of leading climate change skeptics. These include Texas Sen. Ted Cruz and other legislators on the right from his part of the country, who voted against relief for victims of Hurricane Sandy but now look to the federal government for help to victims of Hurricane Harvey, while trying to rationalize their inconsistency with the lie that most of the Sandy relief was not related to damage from the storm.

They include Florida Governor Rick Scott, who has used the standard cop-out of “I am not a scientist” to explain his failure to acknowledge manmade climate change, and whose lackadaisical policies in preparing for effects of climate change will mean additional suffering by the citizens of his state from the storm that is hitting them now. They include President Trump, whose EPA has put a former campaign aide with no scientific expertise to work in eliminating grants with the “double-C” term to ensure that climate change does not get studied with agency funds.

Without diminishing any immediate sympathy and support for those whose lives the hurricanes have upended, this is the time to shout from rooftops that dishonest climate-change-denying politicians are causing more such suffering in the future for Americans as well as others. And when Trump’s EPA destroyer (a.k.a. administrator) Scott Pruitt says that now is not the time to talk about climate change, the proper response is that now is an excellent time to talk about it.

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