

Netanyahu's Loosening Grip

Pandering to Israel has been a long-revered rule of U.S. politics, but Donald Trump's refusal has shown that Israel's grip on American policymaking is weakening, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

On March 3, Chemi Shaley, the U.S. correspondent for the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, wrote an interesting piece on what the Donald Trump phenomenon means for U.S.-Israeli relations. Here are some of his points:

1. Trump's insistence on staying "neutral" when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian problem has *not* cost him any popular support. Both Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio have "sneeringly lambasted" Trump for not supporting Israel, but to no avail. Trump just "laughed all the way to the top of the Republican presidential field."
2. Republican evangelicals are paying no mind to Trump's equivocations about Israel. They vote for Trump despite this. "Evangelical leaders ... are heartbroken that so many Believers are flocking after the thrice married, dirty-talking reality star. They are less perturbed by his deviation from the strict pro-Israel party line, however, and more by the sinful ways for which he has not asked forgiveness."
3. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's policy decision to "put all of Israel's eggs in the GOP basket" – a decision confirmed when he appeared before Congress in 2015 to denounce the Iran nuclear agreement – has turned into a political disaster.

Waning Interest in Israel (U.S. Gentiles)

The rise of Donald Trump certainly suggests that the right-wing Israeli politicians badly misread the Republican political scene. Trump has tapped into a large and growing stratum of citizens who never cared very much about foreign policy, much less Israel-Palestine specifically.

And, now that that indifference has been plainly revealed on the Republican side of the ledger, it may not be long before Democratic voters also start to say, loud enough for their leaders to hear, that Israel isn't important to them either. As Shaley suggests, what is happening here is the exposure of Israel's weakness in the United States.

Thus, for the first time it is becoming publicly noticeable that a lot of voters don't regard Israel as a linchpin ally upholding democracy in the Middle East. In fact, Israel simply is not a priority as far as they are concerned. However,

start emphasizing to this largely isolationist-minded crowd the huge amount of their tax money that goes to Israel, and not caring might quickly turn to hostility. Mr. Trump is certainly not above providing the little push necessary for this to happen. How might this scenario play itself out?

If Trump becomes president and, like most of his predecessors, tries to settle the Israel-Palestine problem, he will no doubt be met with not only the usual Israeli stonewalling, but outright hostility. After all, Trump as president will have to deal with Netanyahu as prime minister and they are alike in that both tend to "shoot from the lip."

As Shaley points out, "Trump refuses to acknowledge United Jerusalem [and] wants to remain neutral so that he can broker a peace deal with the Palestinians, which is a challenge worthy of a master dealmaker like him."

Netanyahu will loudly express his opposition. Perhaps he will refuse to deal with Trump at all. But Trump, unlike Obama, will not respond to Netanyahu's insults with discretion. He will readily blame Israel for any failure and do it loudly and disparagingly. Then he might start to publicly question why the U.S. should be wasting vast amounts of treasure on such an unthankful nation as Israel. This could be a public relations disaster from which the Israelis will not be able to recover.

Waning Interest in Israel (U.S. Jews)

As an Israeli born and bred to the perennial fear of anti-Semitism, Shaley senses a danger in Trump not only to Israel but to Jews in general:

"The Jews will run away from Trump because he scares them. Because his demagoguery is ominous, his willingness to slash and burn anyone standing in his way is disturbing, his tendency to incite his supporters against other ethnic groups ... is a source of deep anxiety."

All of this may be true, but so is the important point Shaley makes that "the Jews won't be fleeing Trump because of his policies toward Israel." In other words, increasing numbers of U.S. Jews are losing patience in the ever stubborn shenanigans of the Zionist state. And as they do so, Israel loses their support.

The truth is that today's Zionists have bought a U.S. political elite and not much more. Right now they can rely on a thin veneer of politicians who are in the process of losing influence with an alienated citizenry.

When the politicians make their adjustments to this new environment, one of the casualties may well be the U.S. alliance with Israel. Hillary, Bernie, Ted and Marco may be the last generation of American politicians who will give Benjamin

Netanyahu and his ilk the time of day.

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America's National Interest*; *America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*; and *Islamic Fundamentalism*.

Testing Out Repression in Israel

Jeff Halper, co-founder of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, sees the brutal practice of destroying Palestinian homes and similar tactics as part of an experiment in social repression that can have broader implications as income inequality spreads across the globe, as he told Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Israeli author and human rights activist Jeff Halper who has challenged the Israeli practice of destroying Palestinian homes (usually for simply building after being denied a permit) attempts to answer the question why the world continues to accept such repeated brutalities perpetrated by the Israelis against a million-plus locked-down, very poor Palestinians.

Halper detects a quid pro quo, a violent marriage of convenience in which "Israel offers its expertise in helping governments pursue their various wars against the people and, in return, they permit it to expand its settlements and control throughout the Palestinian territory."

Halper's latest book, *War Against the People: Israel, the Palestinians and Global Pacification*, focuses on "global Palestine," and "how Israel exports its Occupation, its weaponry, its models and tactics of control and its security and surveillance systems, all developed and perfected on the Palestinians, to countries around the world engaged in asymmetrical warfare, or domestic securitization, both forms of "war against the people."

He contextualizes Israel's globalization of Palestine within the capitalist world system. Inherently unequal, exploitative, violent and increasingly unsustainable, Capitalism must pursue innumerable wars against the people if it is to enforce its global hegemony. These are precisely the types of wars, counterinsurgency, asymmetrical warfare, counter-terrorism, urban warfare and the overall securitization of societies, including those of the Global North, in which Israel specializes.

Halper, whose activism also includes work for over a decade as a community organizer in the working-class Mizrahi (Middle Eastern) Jewish neighborhoods of Jerusalem, is a coordinator of the Wars Against the People project of The People Yes! Network; he has served as the Chairman of the Israeli Committee for Ethiopian Jews; he was an active participant in the first attempt of the Free Gaza Movement to break Israel's crippling economic siege on the Gaza Strip by sailing into Gaza in 2008; he's an active member of the international support committee of the Bertrand Russell Tribunal on Palestine; and he was nominated by the American Friends Service Committee for the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize, together with the Palestinian intellectual and activist Ghassan Andoni.

Halper spoke recently with Dennis J Bernstein.

DB: Let's talk a little bit about house demolitions, before we get into this book and what you're talking about in terms of the way in which Israel perfects and then exports oppression. Talk a little bit about your work with the houses.

JH: Well, I'm an Israeli activist. I grew up in the States, actually, in Minnesota, but I've lived in Israel now for more than 40 years. I've been involved all those years with the Israeli peace movement. And for the last 20 years I've been the head of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, as you mentioned. We call ourselves ICAHD.

And that's a political organization that's trying to fight the Israeli occupation, and achieve a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians. But [we also operate] in order to give people an idea of what occupation means, which is kind of an abstract term sometimes, and how it works, and what Israel's intentions are.

Now, as an anthropologist, I tried to read political intentions from what the powers are doing on the ground, not from what they're saying. We took the issue of house demolitions as our focal point. Israel has demolished 47,000 Palestinian homes in the occupied territories since 1967, since the occupation began. [T]hat's on the background of about 60,000 homes that were demolished in 1948, in what the Palestinians call the Nakba. Thousands and more are demolished inside Israel all the time, of Israeli citizens, all of whom are Arabs. For example, there is one Bedouin community in the Negev that's been demolished now 90 times, and rebuilt.

DB: Same community.

JH: The same community. And we've all gone out and rebuilt with them, and it's been re-demolished. Because they want to build a military settlement on top. And this is inside Israel. And a lot of these Bedouin men serve in the Israeli army.

So one of the points of house demolitions is that we can't really separate the occupation from Israel itself.

We think the two state solution is gone, it's over. And basically Israel has created already one state which is an apartheid state. I mean, there's only one government, one army, one water system, one currency between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, in the entire country. We don't even call the occupied territories, "occupied," we call them Judea and Samaria. Jerusalem, East Jerusalem, the Palestinian side has been annexed.

So there is one country today. And what the house demolition issue shows is that, yes, in fact Israel is still demolishing homes, still ethnically cleansing the Palestinian population, after 70 years. And so what we do is we ... first of all, we resist demolitions. I get in front of bulldozers, we resist. We also rebuild homes. We built 189 homes, which takes quite a bit of resources, activists coming from all over the world.

So if you think of it in political terms, 189 political acts of resistance, of Israelis and Palestinians, and Internationals together. I think that is meaningful. And then we take what we learn on the ground, our analysis is genuinely grounded, and we go abroad, like I am now here in the Bay Area, to try to work with the activists. First of all, to update them on what's happening and to give them focus.

But in general, as you are saying, to raise this issue that's so difficult to raise in the mainstream American media, or even in universities. You can get fired for raising this issue.

DB: And you do.

JH: And people have been, that's right. So we're trying to go from the micro to the macro. From actually resisting demolitions on the ground, but really from there with our pictures and our maps and our analyses, to say "Why is Israel demolishing these homes? Where is it going with this whole thing?" And then bringing that analysis forward to try to mobilize the international community to finally end the occupation.

DB: Before we jump into the bigger picture, I want you to paint a little bit more of a picture of the nature of house demolition. So, what happens? Somebody shows up at your house? How's that work?

JH: Well, there are three kinds of demolitions, actually. Just briefly, you know if you think of demolition, you think well, these must be homes of terrorists. That's what Israel leads you to think, but it's not true. Of the 47,000 homes in the occupied territories that have been demolished, about 1 percent were

demolished for security reasons. It has nothing to do with security or terrorism or anything like that. Those are what we call punitive demolitions. In fact, Israel demolishes most homes in military incursions.

For example, last summer, the summer of 2014, in the assault on Gaza, 18,000 homes were demolished, and not targeted. It's kind of collateral damage that have not been rebuilt. And you think, "It's the Middle East," but it can be pretty freezing in Gaza in the winter. And these homes have not been rebuilt. The third way of demolishing, that we work most on, is that Israel simply has zoned ... it uses very dry-grade, Kafkaesque mechanisms to control Palestinians.

So it zoned the whole of the West Bank and East Jerusalem as agricultural land. So, although most of it is desert, the Aegean Desert, when a Palestinian who owns land comes to the Israeli authorities and says, "I want to build a home," their answer is, "Sorry, but this is agricultural land." Of course, if you want to build an Israeli settlement ... I mean there are 600,000 Israelis. They live on that same land in the occupied territory. But, of course, Israelis sit on the planning councils.

So if you want to rezone from agriculture to residential, it takes you a second. So it's really the manipulation of law and planning. And so that's the point. Palestinians since 1967, we're talking about 50 years now, have not been allowed to build new homes. You have children, and your children have children, and you have nowhere to live. And if you build a home, you are building illegally, right, because ... you don't have a building permit. And so immediately you get a demolition order from the Israeli army and they can come any time. They can come tomorrow morning, they can come next week, they can come in five years, maybe you'll win the lottery [and] they'll never come. Who knows? So even if you're living in your home, year after year, you are not living as securely, relaxed. Your home is not your castle.

DB: Because there always could be that knock on the door.

JH: I talked to many Palestinian women that say to me, "The first thing I do when I wake up in the morning is I look out the window, to see if there are bulldozers, the army, police. And if the coast is clear, I get dressed and wake up the kids and start making breakfast."□ That's the psychological state that Palestinians are living in.

DB: Let's talk about this book. Let's talk about how you say Israel uses the occupied territories as a training ground, a weapons and control of people training ground, which is then exported. It's sort of Israel's front line, forward trade. This concept, and these weapons, and this technology, and these techniques, are then sold to the rest of the world. Set that up for us.

JH: Over all the years of my activism, it was kind of a question that was in the back of my mind, nagging me all the time. And that was, "How does Israel get away with this?" After all, we're in the Twenty-first Century, we're well after the period of colonialism. Human rights [and] international law have entered into the public consciousness. I mean, they kind of matter to people.

Here you have a brutal occupation, on T.V. all the time. I mean, this isn't happening in the Congo or Vietnam. This is in the glare of television cameras, in the Holy Land, no less! How does Israel get away with it? And the usual explanations ... you know, AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee] and Christian fundamentalists and the Israeli lobby, and guilt over the Holocaust ... it just doesn't work. That doesn't explain why China supports Israel the way it does, and Nigeria, India.

There was some big elephant in the room that we weren't talking about, that I wasn't seeing myself, to explain that. And as I sort of looked up at Israel's place in the world, I suddenly discovered, in a way, that actually, the quid pro pro is that Israel delivers to elites all over the world. Whether you are here in the global north, (the United States or Europe), in the middle, (Brazil, India, China, Turkey, Mexico), or a poor country in the global south, you all have elites, that are struggling for control.

And I put this within the context of the capitalist world system. You have a neoliberal world system. OXFAM came out with a report two weeks ago. Now, 1 percent of the population controls half the resources: most of humanity has been excluded as surplus humanity. You have more and more repression, especially as resources are being extracted from poor people. And they're excluded. So there's more and more resistance. ... You had the Occupy Movement and you've got Black Lives Matter. There's more and more resistance, so that the capitalist world system, itself, and all the different elites that are dependent upon it, somehow have to start looking more and more towards repression.

In other words, capitalism always tried to have a happy face: Ronald McDonald, and Hollywood and Walt Disney. But the more people are starting to see through it, and are starting to see those inequalities ..., the velvet glove over the iron fist has to come [off]. And so the elites are getting more and more insecure. But the kinds of wars they're fighting are not the wars we think of. You know, Rambo and F16s and tanks ... they're not those kinds of wars. They are what generals actually are calling, "Wars Amongst the People." I took that to say what that really is, which is, "War Against the People." In other words, urban warfare, counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism. It's also called asymmetrical wars. There are a million terms.

So, really the elites in every country, and then if you take it within the world

system, the capitalist elites certainly, the capitalist part of the corporation, and so on, are looking for, "How do we keep the people under control?" Now, where's a better place to go for a model than Israel? The United States doesn't have that experience. Europe hasn't had colonial wars for 50 years now. So Israel is in the middle of an ongoing century-long war of counterinsurgency against the Palestinian people.

All these years, it has the tactics, it has the methods, it has the weaponry. It has the systems of security, systems of surveillance, all in place to export. And so that's, I think, how you can explain how Israel gets away with it. It delivers for the elites. "We'll deliver you the means of repressing your own populations, and in return you let us keep the occupation."

DB: I'm not sure how to ask this question, but is there evidence of the training ground part of this, in which, say, for instance, weapons are introduced for the first time on the battlefield, or drones, in Palestine? How does this theory [work], in terms of testing the weapons first and then exporting war?

JH: Well, first of all I document it and write about it in my book. There are a thousand footnotes, in the book.

DB: We love footnotes.

JH: But what's interesting is the Israeli arms dealers, security companies are proud of this. I mean we're talking now ... this could be seen in two ways. This could be seen as being critical of Israel, and the capitalist world. I think people understand that that's where we're coming from in this program. But I could be saying the same thing, and I could sound like the Israeli Chamber of Commerce. "Wow, that's great, I mean Israel developing these effective systems, they're helping keep the bad people and the terrorists under control, they're securing us. Wow, that's great." And so [on].

DB: And they are training police departments in the U.S.

JH: That's right, exactly. Especially, not especially, but also in California. So, in other words, the arms companies, and the security companies, (there's about 500 of them in Israel, alone, which is an old country), think this is a great thing. In other words, they're not embarrassed by it, and so the best source of information is just their web sites. Because what's the point of developing a cutting edge surveillance system on Palestinians. You know there are 600 checkpoints in the West Bank. You've got millions of Palestinians that you can use as guinea pigs: literally in a laboratory. No wonder Israel is leading in airport security, and runs airports all over the United States.

But there's no point in developing these systems if you're not marketing them,

if you're not selling them, if you're not making a name for yourself. So, in fact, all these 500 companies in Israel that sell this stuff, all have web sites. And they're all blaring their product. So it's not hidden. On the contrary, like I'm saying, if you put it within a certain context, this is actually seen as a positive contribution to the world. If you look at the world, from, you know, the way the media that you mentioned, present it, it's good that Israel is helping us defend ourselves against terrorists.

But putting it in a critical way within the world system, we show that, in fact, security is not a neutral term. There really isn't security. The security is really defined by the interests of the ruling classes. Writing the book, I'm aware of the fact that that's language that kind of sounds old fashioned. But it really isn't. It really is ... even more today, it's truer than it was before.

The ruling classes are much more organized, they have much more fire power, are much more coordinated with each other, and so on. And actually, with scarcer and scarcer resources, they have a much more focused agenda, in terms of extraction and control. So actually, the term "ruling class" should be more in use today. The ruling classes have their interests and they package it under the word "security" because who doesn't want to be secure? And what I'm saying in the book, and that's why the subtitle talks about global pacification, is I'm saying, "We're actually being pacified."

In other words, we're being repressed to a point where we can't resist. So you wanna be secure? Fine. Do you want to be pacified? And once you start using words like "pacification," that raises questions that the word security doesn't raise. Who's pacifying me? How are they pacifying me? Why are they pacifying me? And so my book, I hope, it gives you sort of a window into the way the large world system works. I call it Globalized Palestine. In a sense, Israel over Palestine is a microcosm of the Global North over everybody else. And so I think it is a very useful book for beginning to understand global realities that we live in.

DB: You know, it's interesting, if you read back some of the literature of the capitalists of the early 50's, the visionaries among them understood about the problems that would be faced in terms of the shrinking resources. And they talked extensively about the kinds of, sort of, defense and weapon systems, and the way in which our way of life would have to be protected. This is just part of that curve.

JH: That's right. And to her credit, the only one that really is using the word capitalism, that word up front in her analysis, is Naomi Klein. With *The Shock Doctrine* and now her new book on climate change and capitalism [*This Changes Everything*]. But it's like that joke: One fish asks another fish, "How's the

water?" and the other fish says, "What water?" You know, you are living in this system. And it is so encompassing, and it affects everything that we do. Who our enemies are. How we dress. What our values are. How we talk. What language ... everything. What we eat. And it's an unsustainable system. But it's a system that we've kind of internalized. We don't even think about it anymore.

And so that's, I think, the value of critical analysis, and bringing back that language, including language like pacification, is that really shows us that we're in fact living in a very political water. And not just some normal, everyday reality that is inevitable.

DB: And how would you describe the security relationship, the security sharing relationship, between the United States and Israel?

JH: The United States is the primary global capitalist power. You know, it has a tremendous global reach. American corporations, more than any others, are dependent on the smooth flow of capital coming from what's called the Third World, or the global south. And of course, you've got, with the neoliberalism in the last 50 years, you've got again, within the United States the 99 percent/one percent split. Even here there's a lot of agitation, and people are starting to get it, and so on. And so the United States has a tremendous stake in this. But the United States is locked into the old concept of war.

For example, the Pentagon just spent, I don't know, a trillion dollars on a new F-35: cutting edge stealth bomber. You know, a great toy. But it has no military use whatsoever. Even the generals say, "We don't need [it]." [Robert] Gates, when he was Secretary of Defense, tried to cancel it. But you know how Congress works; you have every congressional district putting together pieces of it. So it's jobs. But you're locked into these huge, expensive weapon systems. ... So that's where Israel comes in.

And, of course, the United States is a tremendous, tremendous supporter of Israel. And I don't think it's just because of shared values. I think it's because Israel really delivers for the United States. It provides very sophisticated, high-tech components, for weapon systems. For example, this F-35, Israel couldn't produce that. But a lot of the cockpit, and the electronics and avionics, and the targeting systems are Israeli. And Israel becomes a kind of a surrogate for the United States, especially in countries where it's hard for America to work. You know, Kazakhstan, Indonesia, the parts of Africa that are rough.

You know, American business people are constrained because there are laws against bribes and giving bribes, and working with the mafias. These countries, a lot of them, are mafia-type countries. Israel doesn't have any of those

constraints.

DB: For instance, if you went through Central America in the 1980's and you saw the new Salvadoran death squad army or the Guatemalan death squad, if you didn't look at the main insignia you would think they were wearing Israeli uniforms. They were certainly trained by Israelis.

JH: And they had their Uzis.

DB: And they had their Uzis.

JH: And they were armed. And don't forget Israel was a key part of the Contra-Iran scandal around the Nicaraguan conflict. Israel is really more than an agent of the United States. I think Israel is really providing that key strategic support in "Wars Amongst the People" in a way that the United States really isn't geared to doing. It's too big, the Pentagon is too big, the systems are too fancy. And Israel is supplying that middle- to lower-level type technology that's the most effective.

DB: What do you think of when you hear, "Is there a chance for peace?" Or the Israeli Prime Minister saying he's searching desperately for a partner for peace? What goes through your mind? How do you respond to that? Here in the U.S. press, in the New York Times, they simply quote it like stenographers.

JH: That's right. I think people are getting it. I don't want to say, "even Americans," but it's not easy for you guys, with your media. It's not too easy for you.

DB: It's real hard. You have to really look up something.

JH: Obama, for example, two days ago signed into law a bill giving Israel \$40 billion in new American arms over a ten-year period, 2018-2028, and basically outlawing BDS, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement that people are using like we did with South Africa, to put pressures on Israel, to end the occupation. Now it's American law, or it's going through, at least, to be American law, that the United States won't deal with companies or countries in Europe or other places that support BDS. So it's very actively supporting Israel. It isn't just some generalized thing. And as long as that happens, especially Congress, as long as Congress is in Israel's pocket, uncritically, we have to say here from Bernie Sanders to Trump.

We're talking across the board Israel has nothing to worry about. And so it can pursue these interests of itself, in terms of keeping the occupation. That is why Israel doesn't ... there's no pressure on Israel to end the occupation. Because if it has the American Congress on its side, on the one hand, and

Germany on its side in Europe, that keeps Europe in line. Nobody can touch us. We're home free. And they can insult Obama, and they can say terrible things about Kerry. I mean, Netanyahu is a conservative Republican, and he says it.

You know, he can go to Congress, here he gets Republicans to invite him to the American Congress, both sessions of Congress, including the Democrats come. And in his 20-minute talk, this is a number of months ago, his 20-minute talk against making the agreement with Iran.

So here he's going against the President and American government policy, a foreign head of state, invited by the American Congress including the President's own party, to speak out against an American government policy. And in his 20-minute talk he was given a standing ovation 42 times! The Israeli press was laughing. The Israeli press said it's like the North Korean parliament.

So it's hard, it's almost hard to explain the degree to which Israel has penetrated into American politics. It's almost like a domestic American issue, like apple pie, and that's what makes it very difficult. But I think that Americans aren't aware of how isolated they're becoming, in the world, because of this uncritical support for Israel. Because it isn't only supporting Israel against Palestinians. Palestinians have a special emblematic status among oppressed peoples in the world. Here's a little people that's standing up to Israel, the Israeli army, the American neo-colonialism, Europe, and it's resisting. It hasn't been defeated. So that gives hope to oppressed peoples.

But beyond that, when you are in the U.N. in repeated votes and it's the United States, Israel and Micronesia, against everybody else, including your European allies, you know, it sends a message to the world that the United States is completely out of sync, and it's hostile to human rights. And that I think isolates the United States in a way that the American people don't really appreciate.

DB: Wow. Well, that is all a mouthful Dr. Jeff Halper. We just have 30 seconds left, but let me just ask you this. You must have been arrested. People don't love what you're doing in Israel. Are you afraid to do what you do? Why do you do what you do?

JH: I mean, I always say jokingly, but it's true, "Israel is a vibrant democracy if you are Jewish."□ If you're Jewish you have that privilege. You have that space to do it. Nobody bothers me.

DB: By the way, that's what Jeane Kirkpatrick said about South Africa, she said it's a partial democracy, the whites have a chance to vote.

JH: Exactly. And that's the situation. But if you're not Jewish it's a pretty repressive place to live, pretty violent. And now, of course, there's legislation going through the parliament to marginalize us as well. If we go to parliament the left groups, just the left groups, are going to have to wear a tag. As if we're foreign lobbies.

DB: Maybe a yellow star?

JH: We're playing with what that tag is going to look like. But really it's true. They're not even aware of the background, the implications. You know, Israel is becoming so fascistic, really. I mean I'm not just using that as a slogan, that it's replicating very dark times of other countries. It's an irony that here Israel would do something like that.

DB: So are you afraid?

JH: No, I'm not afraid. I mean, certainly things could happen. And it's getting harder and harder to protest in Israel. But I'm not afraid. You know, I just keep plugging on, what can I tell you?

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.

A Plea for Reason on Israel

Alon Ben-Meir, born to an Iraqi Jewish family and a longtime negotiator between Israelis and Arabs, has faced accusations of over-optimism on the possibilities of peace but has now reluctantly concluded that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has no interest in reconciliation, prompting this open letter called "a plea for reason."

By Alon Ben-Meir

Dear Prime Minister Netanyahu,

I write this letter to you with a heavy heart as it pains me deeply to see the beautiful dream of a strong and proud Israel, the country that was expected to embrace what is virtuous, moral, and just, now losing its reason for being, as a free and secure Jewish state living in peace and harmony with its neighbors.

The state's social fabric is being torn apart by political divisiveness and

economic injustice. The country is increasingly isolated, degenerating into a garrison state surrounding itself with walls and fences, vilified by friends and reviled by enemies.

As the Prime Minister who served longest in this position, the country is virtually crumbling under your watch. The question is, where are you leading the people, and what will be in store for them tomorrow as Israel is now at a fateful crossroad and facing an uncertain future?

Certainly you and those who follow you in good faith will disagree with my analysis, but I urge you to look carefully into the dire issues I am raising here as they unfold, for which you are now more responsible than any of your predecessors.

You conveniently surround yourself with a corrupt political elite, ministers with no morals, no compunction, and nothing but an insatiable lust for power. They are consumed by their personal political agendas and absorbed in domestic corruption and intrigues.

You have several such ministers, among them a Justice Minister, Ayelet Shaked, who endorsed the idea that “the entire Palestinian people is the enemy” which is nothing short of a call for indiscriminate killing that will include “its elderly and its women, its cities and its villages, its properties and its infrastructure”; an Education Minister, Naftali Bennett, who wants to annex most of the West Bank without giving a single thought to the ominous danger that such an ill-fated scheme would inflict on Israel; and a Cultural Minister, Miri Regev, who is out to stifle freedom of the arts and expression, who make a mockery of Israel’s democratic foundation and institutions.

You backed three draconian bills: one would suspend Knesset members who deny Israel as a Jewish and democratic state; the second would withdraw funding from cultural institutions deemed “not loyal” to Israel; and the third would require leftwing NGOs who receive foreign funding to label themselves as such in any publication (while exempting privately-funded right-wing NGOs). You are enveloped in an ideological siege with a ghetto mentality and selective religious precepts, supported by a blind chorus of parliamentarians that only echoes your distorted tune.

You manipulate the public with national security concerns and falsely connect security to borders, only to usurp more Palestinian land and defend the ruinous settlement policy.

You delight in facing an inept political opposition, relegated to a permanent state of suspension, and are thrilled to see them decaying with no political

plans to challenge you to find a solution to the endemic Palestinian conflict on which you politically thrive. With these lame opposition parties sitting on the fringes of political despair, they have now become easy to co-opt in support of your misguided domestic, foreign, and Palestinian-targeted policies, all in the name of national unity.

You still boast about Israel's economic prowess, when in fact the economy as a whole is in a state of stagnation and labor productivity is the lowest among Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, and a handful of billionaires control the financial heart of the state while tens of thousands of families are scrambling to survive.

More than 1.7 million Israelis are living in poverty, 775,000 of whom are children, while hundreds of millions of dollars are siphoned off to spend on illegal settlements and hundreds of millions more are spent to protect the settlers, leaving Arab villages and towns with mostly Middle Eastern Jews to rot.

The gulf between the rich and poor is widening. The top 10 percent of the population earns 15 times that of the bottom 10 percent, making Israel one of the most unequal countries in the developed world. Tourism is diving, foreign investments are plunging, and the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement is gaining momentum.

The corruption and criminality among top officials is staggering; more than 10 ministers and at least 12 members of the Knesset have been convicted of crimes over the past 20 years alone. Former President Moshe Katsav and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert were sentenced to seven years and 19 months in prison, respectively. Scores more were indicted, but escaped punishment through various legal loopholes often accorded to top officials.

You discriminate against Israeli Arabs (who constitute 20 percent of the population) with your government's policy of unequal treatment, and then question their loyalty to the state. Radical Zionists like you claim that a multi-culturist Israel cannot survive that apartheid, or something like it, is the only viable alternative essentially repeating the argument which was used in earlier European history against the Jews themselves.

I might add with deep sorrow that discrimination is not confined to the Israeli Arabs, but extends to Middle Eastern and Ethiopian Jews four generations after the establishment of the State of Israel. The May 2015 violent clashes between police and Jews of Ethiopian origin only reveal the depth of Israel's social disparity.

Israel's President Reuven Rivlin, from your own Likud Party, could not have made the reality more painfully clear than when he stated, "Protesters in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv revealed an open and bloody wound in the heart of Israeli society. This is a wound of a community sounding the alarm at what they feel is discrimination, racism and disregard of their needs. We must take a good hard look at this wound."

Demographically, the country is facing a grave danger. The number of Israelis emigrating from Israel is roughly equal to the number of those who immigrate to Israel. Nearly one million Israelis, representing 13 percent of the population, emigrated from Israel in the past 20 years. Several polls consistently show that given the opportunity, 30 percent of Israelis would consider leaving the country, mainly for economic reasons and the lack of a prospect of ending the debilitating conflict with the Palestinians.

In particular, the immigration of young American and European Jews to Israel is consistently trending downward. Many of them have lost the sense of pioneering spirit and excitement that gripped their earlier counterparts who wanted to be a part of a historic enterprise unmatched by any in contemporary human experience.

The Palestinians

You treat the Palestinians in the territories like objects, to be used and abused contingent on the call of the hour. You violate their human rights with brazen impunity and never came to grips with the debilitating and dreadful impact of nearly 50 years of occupation.

You scornfully claim, "The Jewish people are not foreign occupiers." You never wanted to understand the meaning of being utterly overpowered by another, of having one's house raided in the middle of the night, terrifying women and children, one's village arbitrarily divided by the building of fences, one's home destroyed, and of losing the sense of having any control over one's life.

Invoking memories of the Holocaust as if to justify the mistreatment of the Palestinians only debases the historical relevance of this unprecedented human tragedy. One would think that those who suffered as much as the Jews would treat others with care and sensitivity. That the victim can become a victimizer is painful to face, but it is a reality nonetheless. Having suffered so much does not give you the license to oppress and persecute others.

U.S. Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro, no less, put it succinctly when he said, "too many attacks on Palestinians lack a vigorous investigation or response by Israeli authorities. ...Too much vigilantism [in the West Bank] goes unchecked, and at times there seems to be two standards of adherence to the rule of law,

one for Israelis, and another for Palestinians.”

Not that I exempt Palestinians of their role, but by you and your ministers’ own actions and policy toward the Palestinians, you are inciting hostility and ultimately fostering violent extremism. You use national security to justify your prejudicial policies, including the mistreatment of the Palestinians and the expansion of settlements that became the mantra of Israel’s domestic policy, using old and tired talking points about national security which are dismissed as empty, self-convincing gospel.

You speak in support of a two-state solution, but you have never lifted a finger to advance it; your actions only point to the opposite direction. Yes, although the Palestinians have made scores of mistakes and are likely to make many others that will severely undermine their own national interests, they are here to stay.

Israel must determine its own destiny and not leave it to the Palestinians’ whims. You claim that the Palestinians do not want peace, but by being the far more powerful party, you can take a calculated risk, and assume the responsibility to pave the way for eventually reaching a peace agreement instead of further entrenching Israel in the occupied territories. This will make the conflict ever more intractable when coexistence is inevitable under any circumstance.

Time is not on Israel’s side, and even though they are suffering, the Palestinians can wait. You cannot freeze the status quo, and given the regional turmoil, violent extremism targeting Israel will only increase.

Without a carefully thought-out plan to gradually disengage from the occupied territories, there will likely be a million settlers within a few years. This will amount to a de facto annexation of the West Bank, from which Israel will be unable to extract itself without perpetual violent confrontations with the Palestinians and risking a civil war, should a decision be made to evacuate a substantial number of settlers.

Ending the occupation is not a charitable gift to the Palestinians. Only by accepting their right to a state of their own will Israel remain a Jewish and democratic state enjoying peace and security, instead of being drawn toward an abyss from which there is no salvation.

Israel is the only country in the modern era that has maintained, in defiance of the international community, a military occupation for nearly five decades. The Israelis’ complacency about the occupation is adversely affecting Jews all over the world, and as long as the occupation lingers, anti-Semitism will continue to

rise.

What has added potency to the substantial rise in anti-Semitism in recent years is your disregard of the international consensus about the illegality of the settlements, the policy of the continuing occupation, and your disregard of the Palestinians' suffering and right to self-determination.

Did you consider what would be the ramifications of what you said during the last election, which I believe reflects your true position, that there would be no Palestinian state under your watch? There will be no peace with the Arab states, Jordan and Egypt (regardless of how they feel toward the Palestinians) may well abrogate their peace treaties with Israel under mounting regional and public pressure, the wrath of the European Union will be immeasurable, the U.S. will lose patience (if it hasn't already) and no longer provide Israel with automatic political cover, and the world will blame Israel for feeding into the region's instability; much of this is already happening.

Israel will constantly live in a state of violence and insecurity, but perhaps this is precisely what you want, to spread fear and use scare tactics to foment public anxiety by painting every Palestinian as a terrorist, as if the occupation has nothing to do with Palestinian extremism.

On foreign policy

A sound and constructive foreign policy is foreign to you, which is consequently alienating Israel's allies and bewildering its friends.

You wantonly discard diplomatic conventions and protocol; you willfully undercut President Obama by addressing a joint session of U.S. Congress, challenging him on the Iran deal only to fail miserably, baffling Democratic and Republican leaders alike.

You clashed with U.S. Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro for criticizing Israel's policy in the West Bank, and condescendingly called for a credible investigation of Palestinian killings, and publicly sparred with U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, who stated "it is human nature to react to occupation."

You antagonized Secretary of State Kerry, who highlighted "the injustice of settlement building", prompting various U.S. officials to call you "myopic, entitled, untrustworthy, routinely disrespectful and focused solely on short-term political tactics to keep [your] right-wing constituency in line."

As the U.S. and E.U. are wholly convinced that the settlements represent the main obstacle to peace, you are now not only inviting criticism but forcing both to take measures to awaken the Israelis to the harsh reality of the settlements

and your perilous ideology.

Due to your imprudent policies, Israel has few friends left. Anti-Israel sentiment is on the rise not only in Europe but in the U.S. as well, which provides the last bastion of public support for Israel.

Starting with the E.U.'s demand to label settlement products, you remain typically dismissive, shaming the E.U. and blaming them for applying double standards. You revert to the old narrative of accusing any critics of your policy as being anti-Semitic in order to deflect from your ill-advised actions which are bound to backfire.

E.U. members are growing increasingly skeptical that you will ever seek peace based on a two-state solution, and they will more than likely over time become less restrained to impose sanctions. The E.U. could potentially expand the sanctions on goods manufactured in Israel proper as well and ratchet up its political pressure on Israel to end the oppressive occupation.

The French government is now preparing to convene an international conference to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because they see no hope that you would enter into serious bilateral negotiations if left to your own devices. Your reaction was as always dismissive, using again the worn-out argument that a solution can be found only through direct negotiation. You offer to resume peace talks unconditionally but then refuse to discuss borders first, and still insist that the Palestinians must first recognize Israel as a Jewish state.

And here is the irony of it all, while Iran's President Rouhani received red carpet treatment in Italy and France, you are being cast as a loathsome leader blinded by a defunct ideology decades past its time.

Israel's Destiny

Israel's achievements in science, technology, medicine, agriculture, and many other fields in less than seven decades is nothing short of a miracle. This miracle became a reality due to the incredible resourcefulness, creativity, and dedication of men and women who committed to building a powerful and proud nation that offers a safe haven in perpetuity for the Jews. These unprecedented accomplishments, however, mean little unless Israel can live in peace and all of its citizens can enjoy equality and freedom, which are the pillars on which Israel's very future rests.

What is your vision of Israel's future? Do you know where the country will be in a decade or even less? I challenge you to provide a clear answer. If you truly take to heart Israel's security and wellbeing, then you must save it from the very self-destructive path that you have paved with fear, anxiety, and

bloodshed.

You must focus on reforming Israel's dysfunctional political system instead of capitalizing on it to promote your narrow political agenda.

You must make a supreme effort to bridge the alarming gap between rich and poor, and provide job opportunities for the tens of thousands of young men and women who want financial stability and growth so that they can build a promising future in Israel rather than seek employment abroad.

You must focus on rebuilding the run-down neighborhoods mostly occupied by Israeli Arabs and Jews of Middle Eastern origin, instead of channeling each year surpluses of nearly a quarter of a billion dollars to the settlements.

You must provide adequate funding for hospitals, and health care to the poor whose social security assistance has cruelly and shamelessly been cut in recent years, especially for Holocaust survivors and others who are forced to choose between feeding their families and paying their electric bills, and who can't afford to buy lifesaving medicine they desperately need.

You must allocate more funding for schools that would allow thousands of young men and women to attend colleges, instead of cutting budgets for secular and Christian schools while diverting funds to orthodox students, who enjoy free tuition.

You must now choose to live with the Palestinians in peace and prosper together, or live by the sword and violently consume one another. You must never forget that Israeli and Palestinian destinies are irreversibly intertwined.

You must restore Israel's stature among the community of nations as a true democracy that treats all of its citizens, regardless of sect, ethnicity, or religion, equitably rather than engage in discriminatory policies that will only erode Israel's standing.

You must reach out to the international community, strengthen Israel's alliances, and mitigate differences with its enemies. Remember, Israel will always need the political support of the international community and military and political assistance from the U.S. in particular, not the other way around.

You must recommit to the moral principles that gave birth to Israel, starting with an honest public narrative based on Israel's reality on all fronts instead of engaging in a fictional, self-indulgent narrative that distorts the truth the country and its people are facing.

Having said all this, nothing will make me happier should by some miracle you

rise to the historic occasion and heed the call of the hour and answer the plea of the people to end the conflict with the Palestinians, and make Israel proud again for its unsurpassed achievements in all spheres of life.

You have demonstrated tremendous political and leadership skills to reach the pinnacle you currently enjoy, but sadly, you have chosen misguided policies that undermine Israel's security and prospects for peace.

You should use those same qualities to lead the country and realize its destiny as a Jewish, democratic, and secure state on friendly terms with its neighbors. This will not be an aberration; many leaders before you have demonstrated the courage, vision, and capacity to drastically change course that time and circumstances have dictated. You can too if you only will it.

Yitzhak Rabin, Anwar Sadat, Mikhail Gorbachev, F.W. de Klerk, and many others came to recognize the new realities, and decided to take the risks and change course out of conviction that the country and the people need a revolutionary change of direction and deserve a trusted leadership that will guide them to a better and more promising tomorrow.

This is the legacy I would want to leave behind if I were you.

Respectfully yours,

Alon Ben-Meir

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Strangling the Israel Boycott

Brushing aside the free-speech rights of Americans, Sen. Mark Kirk and other members of the U.S. Congress are pushing Zionist-demanded legislation to stifle a boycott movement aimed at pressuring Israel to stop oppressing Palestinians, as Lawrence Davidson explains.

By Lawrence Davidson

It was bound to happen an attempt by the U.S. Congress to support the attacks on the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement already taking place in some states and municipalities. The strategy is to legitimize an increasingly standard approach to undermining the boycott of Israel, an approach wherein the

investment of any state funds, including pension funds, in any business or organization that boycotts the Zionist state is forbidden.

Bipartisan pairs in Congress Sen. Mark Kirk, R-Illinois, and Sen. Joe Manchin, D-West Virginia, and Congressional Representatives Robert Dold, R-Illinois, and Juan Vargas, D-California introduced into both houses the "Combating BDS Act of 2016" (S.2531 and H.R.4514). We can be sure that all four of them are doing this at the coordinated behest of Zionist special interests to which they are financially tied.

In other words, acting in their official capacity, these members of Congress are engaged in paying back their Zionist benefactors who have helped facilitate money and other forms of election assistance by doing what the patrons want on things that touch on Israel-Palestine. Sadly, this is the way the U.S. campaign system works. Unless you are very wealthy, you are constantly scrounging for money. Under such circumstances one's pathway to success is made easier if you don't know the difference between your ethics and your elbow.

The four sponsors of the "Combating BDS Act" would, of course, deny any such tainted motives. Rather, they would insist that theirs is an effort to weigh in against anti-Semitism and defend the integrity the "only democracy in the Middle East." If they really believe this is so, the kindest thing that can be said for these legislators is that they are profoundly ignorant about Israel and its true character. It is also possible that they know the truth about their patron, but really don't care. It is all about the money.

Intimations of the Real Israel

For instance, are Senators Kirk and Manchin and Representatives Dold and Vargas aware that the Israeli legislature, the Knesset, recently voted down a bill to include the principle of equality among citizens in the wording of the country's "Basic Law" on Human Dignity and Liberty? Basic Laws stand in for a constitution in Israel. The bill was introduced by one of the few Arab-Israeli MKs (members of the Knesset), Jamal Zahalka, who noted that "All constitutions in modern countries begin with stressing the principle of equality amongst their citizens."

That did not matter to a majority of the Knesset who, following inherently discriminatory Zionist ideals, do not believe in equality between Jewish and non-Jewish citizens. Yet to Israel's supporters in Washington the Zionist state remains a "democracy" much like the United States. Such an unquestioning assumption, so wide of the mark, displays a level of closed-mindedness that ought to require intensive remedial critical-thinking training before allowing someone to stand for office.

Are Senators Kirk and Manchin and Representatives Dold and Vargas aware that the Knesset "Ethics Committee" has suspended three Arab-Israeli MKs, including Mr. Zahalka, from participating in legislative sessions because they met with families whose members had been killed while violently resisting Israeli occupation?

The aim of the meeting was to assist the families in recovering from Israeli authorities the bodies of their slain relatives. The Israelis refuse to recognize the truism that the violence of the oppressed will eventually reach the level of the violence of the oppressor. Instead, any violent blowback occurring in response to their own violence is conveniently characterized as "terrorism."

In order for the action of the Arab MKs to make sense to most Israeli Jews and their Zionist supporters abroad, there has to be recognition of the historically established fact that the occupation of Palestinian land is real. This the Zionists will not do, and apparently, part of their deal with the U.S. politicians in Congress is that they too must echo that same denial.

Are Senators Kirk and Manchin and Representatives Dold and Vargas aware that the respected human rights organization Amnesty International has recently released a report accusing Israeli forces of using "intentional lethal force" against Palestinians in situations where such force was "completely unjustified"? Amnesty spokesman Philip Luther asserted that the Israelis had "ripped up the rulebook" by "flouting international standards" when it came to the use of force.

For the politicians in Washington who have made their pact with the Zionists, such behavior, if noted at all, is rationalized as self-defense on the part of the Israelis. However, suppression of resistance to illegal occupation cannot be judged self-defense either legally or logically. Who in Congress is aware of the Fourth Geneva Convention?

There are many other practices and policies of the State of Israel that must be ignored (including Israel's support of Al Qaeda in Syria) if Senators Kirk and Manchin and Representatives Dold and Vargas are to carry on with clear consciences. But this might be based on a false assumption that these politicians have a conscience to which they pay attention. After all, our system of politics, which all but demands submission to special interests, may well select for amoral personalities.

Ignoring the Question of Constitutionality

The apparent indifference of Senators Kirk and Manchin and Representatives Dold

and Vargas goes beyond Israel's flouting of international law. It carries over to these politicians' own disregard for the U.S. Constitution, which each gentleman has sworn to uphold.

Ever since the early 1980s, the Supreme Court has regarded domestically initiated boycotts as a legitimate form of political speech. There is little excuse for these four defenders of Israel not to know this. And what are we to say of them if they do in fact know? Only that they, like their patrons, are willing to "rip up the rulebook."

They are willing to act as if what is unconstitutional is, after all, acceptable when it protects the interests of a foreign rogue state on whose payroll they happen to be. Just how long can they get away with this? Is the answer really just as long as the Zionist money keeps coming?

Congressmen and senators tied to Zionist special interests will eventually have to rethink these alliances. Their connection with a state that has no compunction about violating international law has led them to become accomplices in the undermining of U.S. law.

Thus, the actions of politicians such Kirk, Manchin, Dold and Vargas act as a barometer indicating the degree to which under-regulated special interests have corrupted the U.S. government. Those involved are walking a path that can lead only to on-going ethical decline and policy failures.

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Netanyahu's Fortress Israel

Ignoring Israel's founding ideals about justice and compassion, Prime Minister Netanyahu and other leaders are guiding the nation into the inevitable direction of a racist apartheid state, building walls against the Arab "wild beasts," a tragedy that Alon Ben-Meir examines.

By Alon Ben-Meir

The demagoguery of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu seems to have no limit, demagoguery in a sense that he says and acts on anything to buttress Israel's hold on the West Bank in the name of national security.

This time around, Netanyahu came up with another absurd idea, proposing, as he stated, a “multi-year plan to surround Israel with security fences to protect ourselves in the current and projected Middle East.” Netanyahu went on to say that: “In our neighborhood, we need to protect ourselves from wild beasts.”

Knowing Netanyahu and his sentiment toward the Palestinians, using inflammatory language is customary for him, as he views every Palestinian as a would-be beastly terrorist. It is obvious from everything we know that the purpose of building such a fence, which runs through a significant portion of Palestinian territory, is to make the expropriation of Palestinian land permanent.

At the same time, he continues to expand settlements in the West Bank and more than likely will build new ones while providing more than 10,000 soldiers to protect the settlers, ensuring that Palestinians will never establish (under his watch) their own state; of course, all of this is in the name of national security.

Netanyahu knows only too well that no fence, however high and regardless of the material it is made of, will prevent a determined terrorist from finding a way to penetrate it. True, he will introduce the newest technology to detect any attempt to pierce through the wall; however, he seems to ignore the fact that Palestinian militants have perfected the art of building tunnels through which insurgents can still wage attacks on Israeli civilians or military personnel, even at the expense of getting killed in the process.

Netanyahu himself raised the question of the tunnels, stating: “If you’re thinking of erecting a fence there you have to take into account that they could tunnel underneath it. The people who said that there is no significance to [retaining] territory in the modern age should go to Gaza.”

Let us go to Gaza then; what do we find? Hamas has been able to build scores of tunnels underneath the fence that separates Gaza from Israel, and have successfully been able to go through the tunnels and attack Israeli forces and civilians.

Although Israeli forces found many of these tunnels during Operation Protective Edge in July 2014 and destroyed the majority of them, Hamas is now at work building new tunnels, knowing that no matter what security measures Israel takes, it will not find all the tunnels. Hamas is still in a position, should they chose to do so, to cross the fences from underneath.

Netanyahu also seems to ignore the fact that no fence, however sophisticated it may be, can stop rockets from being fired at Israel. During that same operation, Hamas was able to rain more than 3,000 rockets, which reached much of Israel’s

urban areas and caused tremendous havoc. True, most of these rockets were intercepted; however, it was not the fence that intercepted them but the Iron Dome air defense system, demonstrating the ineffectiveness of the separation wall.

Netanyahu appears to ignore another reality in northern Israel along the Lebanese border, where Hezbollah is in possession of tens of thousands of short- and medium-range advanced rockets that can reach just about every part of Israel. What kind of fence, one might ask, does Netanyahu have in mind to stop Hezbollah from firing dozens of such rockets simultaneously? Of course, Netanyahu conveniently did not talk about Hezbollah in Lebanon, because he has no plans to occupy any part of Lebanon.

In reaction to Netanyahu's plans to build a wall that encircles Israel, one of his main coalition partners, Education Minister Naftali Bennett, who is far more to the right than even Netanyahu, stated "The prime minister spoke today about how fences are needed. We are wrapping ourselves in fences. In Australia and New Jersey there is no need for fences."

Coming from an individual who is sinister and dangerous, Bennett is not against the wall because he feels that walls will not be effective, but because he believes that all of the West Bank belongs to Israel. Given the opportunity, he would annex much of the West Bank outright, why then build a wall in one's own land?

Netanyahu has never been committed to a two-state solution and is using the current violent flare-up, the so-called "knife Intifada," as an excuse to cement Israel's hold on much of the West Bank. His plan amounts to establishing small cantons for the Palestinians where they can exercise a sort of autonomous rule, while remaining under the watchful eye of the Israeli security forces.

A big part that gives Netanyahu the license to do what he wants is the sad complacency of the Israeli public, who has fallen into the national security trap that Netanyahu has so masterfully used to spread fear and dread among Israelis. He successfully brainwashed the majority of Israelis to believe that the Palestinians pose a present and imminent danger and must be dealt with, not as human beings with whom one can reason, but wild beasts who are determined to destroy rather than coexist with Israel.

Netanyahu's presumed recipe as he stated it, to "surround the entire state of Israel with a fence, a barrier," is nothing short of building a large prison for all Israelis. To be sure, instead of reaching out to the Palestinians and the whole international community to reach an agreement with the Palestinians, he seeks to turn Israel into a garrison and apartheid state, detested by and

isolated from the international community.

I wonder what the founders of Israel, who were dreaming of a just, moral, progressive, and compassionate Jewish state, would say had they been able to witness the moral decadence of a so-called leader who is shattering their noble dream and putting Israel's very existence at risk.

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Letting US 'Lead' Against Islamic State

America's Mideast "allies" are less eager to take on Islamic State terrorists themselves than to urge the U.S. military to do so, raising questions about whether much of today's campaign-trail tough-guy/gal talk about Washington taking the lead really means doing the dirty work for Saudi Arabia, Israel and others, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

A recent [column](#) by David Ignatius contains an important insight about how different countries perceive their roles in countering the extremist group known as ISIS. Ignatius observed a table-top war game at Israel's Institute for National Security Studies. The game scenario involved ISIS seizing control of a province in southern Syria and conducting cross-border attacks that inflict casualties on the armed forces of both Israel and Jordan.

The teams playing the roles of the Israeli and Jordanian governments both acted with restraint, hoping not to be drawn deeply into the Syrian war. The Israeli team retaliated for ISIS killing its soldiers but did not initiate any major military operations. The Jordanian team was looking for the Syrian regime and its Russian backer to use force to eject ISIS from its new position in southern Syria.



The Israeli team was led by a retired general who previously headed the planning staff of the Israel Defense Forces. Ignatius confirmed with a later visit to Israeli military headquarters that the game accurately reflected how Israel's actual military leaders currently view the war in Syria. He cites a senior Israeli military official as saying that if Israel wanted to launch a major ground offensive against ISIS forces in southern Syria (as well as ISIS-connected militants in the Sinai Peninsula), it could wipe out the ISIS forces in three or four hours.

"But," the official continued, "what would happen the day after? Right now, we think it will be worse." That is a terse but correct statement of the key question and main problem involved in any ideas at the present time about escalating the use of force in an effort to destroy ISIS.

When it comes to how most Israeli officials talk about the U.S. role, however, they say something different. According to Ignatius, "They argue that the United States is a superpower, and that if it wants to maintain leadership in the region, it must lead the fight to roll back the Islamic State."

That's not leadership; it would be, among other things, a free rider problem.

It's not just the Israelis and Jordanians who are thinking along such lines. Although U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter says, "I have personally reached out to the ministers of defense in over forty countries around the world to ask them to contribute to enhancing the fight against ISIL," the *New York Times* reports that "the United States has had little success in persuading allies to provide more troops."

It is quite rational and unsurprising for other countries to behave as they have

on this issue, both because of the long-term prospects for ineffectiveness that the Israeli official noted and as a matter of burden-shifting.

As Ignatius puts it, "Most players still want to hold America's coat while the United States does the bulk of the fighting."

It may be in the interest of those players for the roles to be apportioned that way; it certainly is not in the interests of the United States for the roles to be apportioned that way. And the question about what happens the day after applies to the United States as it would to Israel or any other party that might intervene.

All of this is related to warped but nonetheless commonly expressed views within the United States about what constitutes U.S. leadership abroad, in the Middle East or anywhere else. Too often what is labeled as leadership is really more like followership, in that it gets measured in terms of what other, coat-holding governments would like the United States to do. Also too often, leadership is equated with sounding bellicose or doing tough-looking, kinetic things such as escalating the use of military force.

The warped views of U.S. global leadership do not correspond to what generally is understood to constitute leadership in other contexts, such as a corporation or other organization. In those places, for the boss to do everything himself or herself is not seen as leadership but rather as a sign of inability to exercise leadership.

True leadership instead involves persuading everybody in an enterprise that they are part of a common effort with important goals, and motivating them to work together to do their parts of the job. Maybe Secretary Carter is not demonstrating effective leadership in his failure to get other countries to contribute more in fighting ISIS, or maybe the interests of those countries just make it difficult for even the most skillful leader to make much headway on that front. But it should not be a matter of the United States doing it all.

Sometimes a leader does have to get ahead of what other players are doing, but as a way of pointing them in the right direction and inspiring them to act as well, not as an alternative to their acting.

Underlying all of this as far as the ISIS problem is concerned is the question of whom the group most threatens. As measured by generation of refugees, destabilization of one's region, and potential for direct physical harm, the United States has less reason to feel threatened than do many other countries, including the coat-holders.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be

one of the agency's top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a [blog post](#) at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

The Dangerous Ideology of Religion

Ideology, in the hands of true-believers, tends to reject facts in favor of some grander "truth," an especially dangerous tendency when mixed with religious conviction and certainty, as Lawrence Davidson explains.

By Lawrence Davidson

Ideologies are pre-set forms of thinking that shape people's worldviews and, supposedly, help to order and simplify reality. While this supposition is always flawed to one extent or another, ideologies can be very seductive. In part this is because they free their adherents from the hard work of critical thinking. Thus, they are often held onto tenaciously.

Because ideologies distort reality, they are particularly unsuited for those aspiring to power as well as their devoted supporters. History is full of examples of politically powerful ideologies that underscore this fact: fascism, communism, various military cults (particularly popular in South America and the Middle East) and even the ideology of democracy as manipulated by corrupt elites, who play the Pied Piper to the masses.

Yet there is still one more ideology out there which, even now, wreaks havoc by either claiming for itself the trappings of secular power or attaching itself in some influential advisory way to the institutions of power. That ideology is religion in its various institutional manifestations.

I want to emphasize that I am not referring to the personal religious convictions of millions by which life is made to appear understandable and meaningful. Whether such convictions are accurate or not, they play an important role at the individual level and, as long as they do not promote harmful intolerance, should be left to benignly function at the local level.

What I am referring to are religious ideologies that are institutionalized in bureaucracies that can project power much as do secular institutions of authority. Religious ideologies so institutionalized see themselves as possessed of God-given truth while playing the game of power amidst human competitors.

Religion in Power

It is often said that we live in an age of religious revival. Whatever this might say for the "spiritual" shortcomings of modernity, this is a state of affairs rife with political danger. A quick look at history can again easily demonstrate why this is so.

,In the Tenth through Fifteenth centuries in Europe, Roman Catholicism was a strong political power centered in the Papacy. Historians often claim it preserved what was left of Greco-Roman civilization. It also brought with it the bloodletting of the Crusades and the tortures of the Inquisition.

,When, briefly, the Protestants tasted political power in the form of Calvin's Geneva, Savonarola's Florence, Cromwell's England, and the early New World establishments of North America, the result was widespread intolerance, civil war, burning flesh at Salem and elsewhere and, of course, no dancing. It does not take great imagination to see the potential for high levels of intolerance occurring if some representative of today's Christian Right, say Ted Cruz, takes power in the U.S.

,Buddhism used to be universally revered as a religion of peace and tolerance. However, put it in power or ally it to those who politically rule, and what once was benign turns malignant. Thus, consider the self-identified Buddhist government of Sri Lanka and its brutal campaign against the Tamils in the north of that country. Likewise, you can find Buddhists allied to the government of Myanmar crying for the blood of the country's Rohingya, a Muslim minority.

,There is a lot of Hindu fanaticism in India, and It remains to be seen if the present government of that country, dominated now by Hindu nationalists, will again turn loose the religious passion which, in the recent past, has led to sectarian violence and massacres of India's religious minorities (again, notably Muslims).

,Where the Muslims seek or hold state power, the situation is little different. According to Sunni tradition, the ethical standards of behavior set down in the Quran did not dictate state behavior beyond the brief reign of the so-called "rightly guided Caliphs." Shiites often point out that things fell apart almost immediately upon Mohammad's death. Civil war and internecine slaughter followed in both scenarios.

Today, in Saudi Arabia and most of the Gulf emirates, one finds Sunni intolerance of Shiite Islam and the exploitation of non-citizen laborers despite their being fellow Muslims. In Shia Iran, authorities seem unsure just how tolerant or intolerant to be toward more moderate interpretations of their own,

now politicized, religious tenets.

Then, of course, you have various organizations, claiming to be Sunni Muslim, ranging from ISIS to Al Nusra or some other Al Qaeda variant, all reaching for political power. Where they have tasted success, as in the case of ISIS, the consequences have been particularly bad.

,Since 1948 Judaism has succumbed to the same fate as other world religions entangling themselves in politics. Despite all the rationalizations, propaganda and self-deception, it is clear that institutional Judaism is now firmly melded to the deeply discriminatory and particularly brutal political ideology of Zionism.

I use the word “melded” because what we have here is something more than just an alliance of two separate entities. The Zionists have insisted since 1917, the year of the Balfour Declaration, was proclaimed, that the fate of Judaism and an Israeli “national home” are thoroughly intertwined. Their insistent manipulations have resulted in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The consequences of this melding have been horrific. If you want to know just how horrid things have become, there are numerous Palestinian and Jewish human rights groups that are easily found on the web which will document Israeli behavior in all its dehumanizing detail.

For a more personalized assessment of just what this melding means for Judaism as a religion I recommend the recent book by Marc H. Ellis entitled *The Heartbeat of the Prophetic* (New Diaspora Books, 2015). Ellis is a Jewish theologian who, in the 1970s, was greatly influenced by the work of Roman Catholic priests in Latin America who were promoting “liberation theology.”

That “for the good of the people” interpretation of religion was corrosive of the institutionalized Church, and so the movement was ultimately stifled. However, Ellis thought that the same philosophy could be applied to Judaism – an insight that eventually led him to denounce Zionized Judaism in a manner reminiscent of the prophets of the Old Testament.

For Ellis, institutionalized Judaism has been reduced to an adjunct of an expansionist and racist political ideology. He feels that there is no getting around the inherent evil of this situation. No two-state solution or other “progressive” approach can erase it. As long as Judaism persists in identifying itself in terms of the Israeli state and Zionist ideology, the ethical underpinnings of the religion are left behind in the wreckage of an evolving “Jewish empire.”

Lessons to Be Learned

What have all these historical examples to teach those of religious faith? Some fundamentalists would have us believe the lesson is to remain humble and obedient in the face of an unfathomable deity whose mysterious purposes are simply beyond human comprehension. Yet there is nothing incomprehensible about the repetitive death, destruction and intolerance bred by institutionalized ideologies. And, as the historical examples given above tell us, religious ideology is no exception.

A better lesson learned seems to be: if you want to be religious, keep it personal and tolerant, avoid tendencies toward institutionalization beyond the level of local charity and organized good works, and stay clear of political alliances.

It is said that Jesus told his disciples, “where two or three of you are gathered together there I too will be.” Those are just about the right numbers when it comes to keeping religion safe for the believers and non-believers alike. After all, when you have two or three thousand, or two or three million gathered together, for whatever purpose, then something quite different from a helpful and humane spirit is likely to be present.

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Neocons Flack for Unsavory Saudis

Exclusive: Since Israel decided that Iran was its big enemy “and made Saudi Arabia its quiet ally” American neocons have fallen in line, demanding that the U.S. government punish Iran and coddle the Saudis whatever their unsavory behavior, notes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Bret Stephens, the deputy editorial page editor who writes *The Wall Street Journal's* weekly “Global View” column, is not really a bad prose stylist, and his logic is not always unsound. But his unexamined assumptions lead him astray.

His latest installment is typical. Entitled “Why the U.S. Should Stand by the Saudis Against Iran,” it begins with not one premise, but two. The first, as the title suggest, is that the U.S. should stand by Riyadh in its time of woes.

The second is that if the kingdom stumbles, only one person is to blame, President Obama.

The article opens on a promising note: “There is so much to detest about Saudi Arabia,” Stephens writes. It bans women from driving, it shuts its doors to Syrian refugees, it promotes “a bigoted and brutal version of Sunni Islam,” and it has “increased tensions with Iran by executing a prominent radical Shiite cleric, i.e., Nimr al-Nimr.”

So why continue siding with a kingdom “that Israeli diplomat Dore Gold once called ‘Hatred’s Kingdom,’” Stephens asks, “especially when the administration is also trying to pursue further opening [sic] with Tehran?”

It’s a question that a lot of people are asking especially now that the collapse in oil prices means that the Saudis are less economically important than they once were. But Stephens says it would be wrong to abandon the kingdom “especially when it is under increasing economic strain from falling oil prices.”

Get that? It would be wrong to abandon the kingdom when oil is scarce and prices are high – because that’s when we need the Saudis the most – and it’s wrong to abandon the monarchy when oil is plentiful and prices are low when we need them the least. Oil, in other words, has nothing to do with it. It’s wrong because it’s wrong.

But Stephens thinks it’s wrong for another reason as well: because Saudi Arabia “feels acutely threatened by a resurgent Iran.” Why is Iran resurgent? Because the nuclear deal that it recently concluded with the U.S. has set it free from punishing economic sanctions.

He then goes on to list all the bad things Iran has done thanks to the power that the Obama administration has just handed it on a silver platter. “Despite fond White House hopes that the nuclear deal would moderate Iran’s behavior,” Stephens says, “Tehran hard-liners wasted no time this week disqualifying thousands of moderate candidates from running in next month’s parliamentary elections, and an Iranian-backed militia appears to be responsible for the recent kidnapping of three Americans in Iraq.”

Loaded Dice

Scary, eh? Yes, until one considers how Stephens has loaded the dice. His statement about Iran’s hardliners is accurate as far as it goes. But he might have pointed out that while Iran’s theocratic rulers certainly hobble democracy, they at least allow some sort of parliamentary elections to take place whereas Saudi Arabia, the regime he is now leaping to defend, allows exactly none.

(Sorry, but last month's meaningless municipal-council elections don't count.)

In the Saudi kingdom, political parties, protests, even seminars in which intellectuals get to sound off are all *verboden*. Since March 2014, Saudis have been expressly forbidden to do anything that might undermine the status quo, including advocating atheism, criticizing Islam, participating in any form of political protest, or even joining a political party.

Stephens's statement about the three kidnapped Americans is equally misleading. While Iran does indeed back such militias, Reuters cited U.S. government sources saying that "Washington had no reason to believe Tehran was involved in the kidnapping and did not believe the trio were being held in Iran."□

Plus, to follow Stephens's logic, if Iran is responsible for specific actions like these, then Saudi Arabia is responsible for specific actions of the Sunni Salafist forces that it funds in Syria, which include lopping off the heads of Shi'ites and committing many other such atrocities.

Stephens says that the U.S.-Iranian accord "guarantees Iran a \$100 billion sanctions windfall," a figure that the Council on Foreign Relations, no slouch when it comes to Iran bashing, describes as roughly double the true amount. He says Iran now enjoys "the protection of a major nuclear power"□ thanks to Russia's intervention in Syria and agreement to supply Tehran with high-tech weaponry.

As a result, "Iranian proxies are active in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, and dominate much of southern Iraq. Restive Shiite populations in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province and neighboring Bahrain provide further openings for Iranian subversion on the Arabian peninsula."□

Possibly so, except that Stephens might have noted that Saudi proxies, up to and including Al Qaeda, are active in the same countries and that Shi'ites in Bahrain and the Eastern Province might be a little less restive if Saudi repression were a little less savage.

Obama's Fault

Then Stephens gets to his main point, which is the nefarious role of Obama:

"Add to this an American president who is ambivalent about the House of Saud the way Jimmy Carter was about the Shah of Iran, and no wonder Riyadh is acting the way it is. If the administration is now unhappy about the Saudi war in Yemen or its execution of Shiite radicals, it has only itself to blame.

"All this means that the right U.S. policy toward the Saudis is to hold them

close and demonstrate serious support, lest they be tempted to continue freelancing their foreign policy in ways we might not like. It won't happen in this administration, but a serious commitment to overthrow the Assad regime would be the place to start."

In other words, if the Saudi monarchy chops off the heads of dissident Shi'ites and sentences liberal blogger Raif Badawi to a thousand lashes, it's because Obama doesn't show enough love. Ditto Yemen. If Saudi air raids have killed some 2,800 civilians according to the latest UN estimates, including more than 500 children, it's because Obama has allowed his affections to flag for the Saudi royals. If only he would hug the Saudi princes a little closer, they wouldn't feel so lonely and bereft and would therefore respond more gently to their neighbors in the south. No blame should be cast on the Saudi leaders. Their behavior can't be blamed on the contradictions between their playboy lifestyles and the ascetic extremes of Wahhabism or the baleful effects of raking in untold oil riches while doing no work in return. No, everything's the fault of Obama and his yuppie ways.

What can one say about reasoning like this? Only that it makes Donald Trump and Ted Cruz seem like paragons of mental stability. But given that *The Wall Street Journal* has long filled its editorial pages with such swamp gas, why dwell on the feverish exhalations of just one right-wing columnist?

The answer is that Stephens speaks not just for himself, but for an entire neocon establishment that is beside itself over the mess in the Persian Gulf and desperate to avoid blame for the chaos (which is now spreading into Europe). So, talking points must be developed to shift responsibility.

The Lost Saudi Cause

But the Saudis may be beyond saving. With Iran preparing to put a million more barrels on the world oil market per day, prices, down better than 75 percent since mid-2014, can only go lower. The Saudis, hemorrhaging money at the rate of \$100 billion a year, know that when the foreign currency runs out, their power runs out too. Hence, they fear winding up as yet another failed Middle Eastern state like Syria.

"Islamic State and other jihadist groups would flourish," Stephens observes, this time correctly. "Iran would seek to extend its reach in the Arabian peninsula. The kingdom's plentiful stores of advanced Western military equipment would also fall into dangerous hands."□

It's not a pretty picture, which is why the neocons are pointing the fingers at others, Obama first and foremost. As Jim Lobe recently observed, all the usual

suspects are pitching in in behalf of their Saudi friends, Elliott Abrams, Bill Kristol, Charles Krauthammer, and so on. All are furious at what Obama administration has done to their beloved petro-sheiks.

As neocon theorist Max Book put it at the *Commentary Magazine* website: "The American policy should be clear: We should stand with the Saudis, and the Egyptians, and the Jordanians, and the Emiratis, and the Turks, and the Israelis [sic], and all of our other allies, to stop the new Persian Empire. But the Obama administration, morally and strategically confused, is instead coddling Iran in the vain hope that it will somehow turn Tehran from enemy into friend."

Something else is also at work, however, the I-word. As Lobe notes, neocons have done an about-face with regard to the Saudis. Where Richard Perle once called on the Bush administration to include Riyadh on his post-9/11 hit list, the neocons are now firmly on the Saudis' side.

Why? The reason is Israel, which has decided since tangling with Hezbollah in the 2006 Lebanon War that the Shi'ites are its chief enemy and the Sunni petro-monarchies, comparatively speaking, its friend. Like Communists responding to the latest directive from Moscow, the neocons have turned on a dime as a consequence, churning out reams of propaganda in support of Arab countries they once loathed.

A Saudi Makeover

In the neocon domain, Saudi Arabia has undergone a wondrous makeover, transformed from a bastion of reaction and anti-Semitism to a country that is somehow peace-loving and progressive. Formerly an enemy of Washington, or at best a distasteful gang of business associates supplying lots of oil and buying lots of guns, Saudi Arabia has been re-invented as America's dearest friend in the Arab world.

People like Bret Stephens have done their bit in behalf of the cause, turning out article after article whose real purpose is hidden from view. Where neocons formerly scorned anyone who spoke well of the Saudis, they now denounce anyone who speaks ill.

The funny thing is that Obama *is* to blame for the disaster in the Middle East, not because he disregarded the latest *diktat* from the Washington neocon-dominated foreign-policy establishment, but because he has accepted its priorities all too dutifully. He stood by as Qatar steered hundreds of millions of dollars to Salafist jihadis in Libya and while the Saudis, Qataris, and other Gulf states did the same to Sunni fundamentalists in Syria.

Obama's response to Saudi Arabia's repression of Arab Spring protests in Bahrain

was muted, he refused to condemn the beheading of al-Nimr – the best the State Department could come up with was a statement declaring that the execution risked “exacerbating sectarian tensions at a time when they urgently need to be reduced” –and Obama has even given military support to the kingdom’s air assault on Yemen.

Yet now the neocons blame him for not doing enough to keep the Saudis happy.

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).

Democrats in ‘Group Think’ Land

Exclusive: When Sunday’s Democratic presidential debate turned to world affairs, the NBC correspondents and both Sen. Sanders and ex-Secretary Clinton fell in line behind “group thinks” about Syria, Iran and Russia that lack evidentiary support, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A curious reality about Official Washington is that to have “credibility” you must accept the dominant “group thinks” whether they have any truth to them or not, a rule that applies to both the mainstream news media and the political world, even to people who deviate from the pack on other topics.

For instance, Sen. Bernie Sanders may proudly declare himself a “democratic socialist” far outside the acceptable Washington norm but he will still echo the typical propaganda about Syria, Russia, Iran and other “designated villains.” Like other progressives who spend years in Washington, he gets what you might call “Senate-ized,” adopting that institution’s conventional wisdom about “enemies” even if he may differ on whether to bomb them or not.

That pattern goes in spades for former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other consciously “centrist” politicians as well as media stars, like NBC’s Andrea Mitchell and Lester Holt, who were the moderators of Sunday’s Democratic presidential debate. They know what they know based on what “everybody who’s important” says, regardless of the evidence or lack thereof.

So, you had Mitchell and Holt framing questions based on Official Washington’s “group thinks” and Sanders and Clinton responding accordingly.

Regarding Iran, Sanders may have gone as far as would be considered safe in this

political environment, welcoming the implementation of the agreement to restrain Iran's nuclear program but accepting the "group think" about Iran's "terrorism" and hesitant to call for resumption of diplomatic relations.

"Understanding that Iran's behavior in so many ways is something that we disagree with; their support of terrorism, the anti-American rhetoric that we're hearing from their leadership is something that is not acceptable," Sanders said. "Can I tell you that we should open an embassy in Tehran tomorrow? No, I don't think we should."

Blaming Iran

In her response, Clinton settled safely behind the Israeli-preferred position to lambaste Iran for supposedly fomenting the trouble in the Middle East, though more objective observers might say that the U.S. government and its "allies" including Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have wreaked much more regional havoc than Iran has.

"We have to go after them [the Iranians] on a lot of their other bad behavior in the region which is causing enormous problems in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and elsewhere," Clinton said.

Yet, how exactly Iran is responsible for "enormous problems" across the region doesn't get explained. Everybody just "knows" it to be true, since the claim is asserted by Israel's right-wing government and repeated by U.S. pols and pundits endlessly.

Yet, in Iraq, the chaos was not caused by Iran, but by the U.S. government's invasion in 2003, which then-Sen. Clinton supported (while Sen. Sanders opposed it). In Yemen, it is the Saudis and their Sunni coalition that created a humanitarian disaster by bombing the impoverished country after wildly exaggerating Iran's support for Houthi rebels.

In Syria, the core reason for the bloodshed is not Iran, but decisions of the Bush-43 administration last decade and the Obama administration this decade to seek another "regime change," ousting President Bashar al-Assad.

Supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni powers, this U.S.-backed "covert" intervention instigated both political unrest and terrorist violence inside Syria, including arming jihadist forces such as Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and its close ally, Ahrar al-Sham and to a lesser degree Al Qaeda's spinoff, the Islamic State. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Hidden Origins of Syria's Civil War.](#)"]

The desire of these Sunni powers – along with Israel and America's neoconservatives – was to shatter the so-called "Shiite crescent" that they saw

reaching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Since Assad is an Alawite, a branch of Shiite Islam, he had to be removed even though he was regarded as the principal protector of Syria's Christian, Shiite and Alawite minorities. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Did Money Seal Saudi-Israeli Alliance?](#)"]

However, while Israel and the Sunni powers get a pass for their role in the carnage, Iran is blamed for its assistance to the Syrian military in battling these jihadist groups. Official Washington's version of this tragedy is that the culprits are Assad, the Iranians and now the Russians, who also intervened to help the Syrian government resist the jihadists, both the Islamic State and Al Qaeda's various friends and associates. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Climbing into Bed with Al Qaeda.](#)"]

Blaming Assad

Official Washington also accepts as undeniably true that Assad is responsible for all 250,000 deaths in the Syrian civil war even those inflicted by the Sunni jihadists against the Syrian military and Syrian civilians a logic that would have accused President Abraham Lincoln of slaughtering all 750,000 or so people North and South who died in the U.S. Civil War.

The "group think" also holds that Assad was behind the sarin gas attack near Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, despite growing evidence that it was a jihadist group, possibly with the help of Turkish intelligence, that staged the outrage as a provocation to draw the U.S. military into the conflict against Syria's military by creating the appearance that Assad had crossed Obama's "red line" on using chemical weapons.

Mitchell cited Assad's presumed guilt in the sarin attack in asking Clinton: "Should the President have stuck to his red line once he drew it?"

Trying to defend President Obama in South Carolina where he is popular especially with the black community, Clinton dodged the implicit criticism of Obama but accepted Mitchell's premise.

"I know from my own experience as Secretary of State that we were deeply worried about Assad's forces using chemical weapons because it would have had not only a horrific effect on people in Syria, but it could very well have affected the surrounding states, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Turkey.

"If there is any blame to be spread around, it starts with the prime minister of Iraq, who sectarianized his military, setting Shia against Sunni. It is amplified by Assad, who has waged one of the bloodiest, most terrible attacks on his own people: 250,000-plus dead, millions fleeing. Causing this vacuum that has been filled unfortunately, by terrorist groups, including ISIS."

Clinton's account which ignores the central role that the U.S. invasion of Iraq and outside support for the jihadists in Syria played in creating ISIS represents a thoroughly twisted account of how the Mideast crisis evolved. But Sanders seconded Clinton's recitation of the "group think" on Syria, saying:

"I agree with most of what she said. And we all know, no argument, the Secretary is absolutely right, Assad is a butcher of his own people, man using chemical weapons against his own people. This is beyond disgusting. But I think in terms of our priorities in the region, our first priority must be the destruction of ISIS. Our second priority must be getting rid of Assad, through some political settlement, working with Iran, working with Russia." [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A Blind Eye Toward Turkey's Crimes.](#)"]

Sanders also repeated his talking point that Saudi Arabia and Qatar must "start putting some skin in the game" ignoring the fact that the Saudis and Qataris have been principal supporters of the Sunni jihadists inflicting much of the carnage in Syria. Those two rich countries have put plenty of "skin in the game" except it comes in the slaughter of Syrian Christians, Alawites, Shiites and other religious minorities.

Blaming Russia

NBC anchor Lester Holt then recited the "group think" about "Russian aggression" in Ukraine ignoring the U.S. role in instigating the Feb. 22, 2014 coup that overthrew elected President Viktor Yanukovych. Holt also asserted Moscow's guilt in the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 despite the lack of any solid evidence to support that claim.

Holt asked: "Secretary Clinton, you famously handed Russia's foreign minister a reset button in 2009. Since then, Russia has annexed Crimea, fomented a war in Ukraine, provided weapons that downed an airliner and launched operations, as we just did discuss, to support Assad in Syria. As president, would you hand Vladimir Putin a reset button?"

While noting some positive achievements from the Russian "reset" such as a new nuclear weapons treaty, help resupplying U.S. troops in Afghanistan and assistance in the nuclear deal with Iran, Clinton quickly returned to Official Washington's bash-Putin imperative:

"When Putin came back in the fall of 2011, it was very clear he came back with a mission. And I began speaking out as soon as that happened because there were some fraudulent elections held, and Russians poured out into the streets to demand their freedom, and he cracked down. And in fact, accused me of fomenting it. So we now know that he has a mixed record to say the least and we have to

figure out how to deal with him.

“And I know that he’s someone that you have to continually stand up to because, like many bullies, he is somebody who will take as much as he possibly can unless you do. And we need to get the Europeans to be more willing to stand up, I was pleased they put sanctions on after Crimea and eastern Ukraine and the downing of the airliner, but we’ve got to be more united in preventing Putin from taking a more aggressive stance in Europe and the Middle East.”

In such situations, with millions of Americans watching, no one in Official Washington would think to challenge the premises behind these “group thinks,” not even Bernie Sanders. No one would note that the U.S. government hasn’t provided a single verifiable fact to support its claims blaming Assad for the sarin attack or Putin for the plane shoot-down. No one would dare question the absurdity of blaming Assad for every death in Syria’s civil war or Putin for all the tensions in Ukraine. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com’s “[MH-17’s Unnecessary Mystery](#).”]

Those dubious “group thinks” are simply accepted as true regardless of the absence of evidence or the presence of significant counter-evidence.

The two possibilities for such behavior are both scary: either these people, including prospective presidents, believe the propaganda or that they are so cynical and cowardly that they won’t demand proof of serious charges that could lead the United States and the world into more war and devastation.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

Toward a More Subtle US Foreign Policy

Largely because Israel’s right-wing government now considers Iran the great enemy and has a fonder view of Saudi Arabia, U.S. politicians and media have followed that lead, decrying Iranians and tolerating Saudis, but such simplistic thinking does not serve American interests well, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

The dramatic and fast-moving events in U.S.-Iranian relations over the past few days underscore, among other lessons, the following two. One is that results matter. No matter how hard the naysayers have striven to say nay, they have offered no alternative to actual U.S. policy that could have yielded results as favorable.

And it's not as if there hasn't been ample experience to test what alternatives might have done. With regard to Iran's nuclear program, years of nothing but pressure and sanctions brought only years of an expanding program with ever more centrifuges spinning. It was only through engagement, negotiation and compromise that the most strenuous restrictions on, and monitoring of, a national nuclear program that have ever been negotiated were achieved.

As for Iranian-Americans who were unjustly imprisoned, they and perhaps others as well would have been imprisoned whether or not U.S.-Iranian relations were in a deep freeze. (A couple of the men just released by Iran had been arrested before the nuclear negotiations even began.) They were freed only because the relationship thawed.

As for the naval encounter in the Persian Gulf, despite the erroneous attempts by critics of the administration to depict as an Iranian provocation an incident that instead consisted of U.S. Navy craft making a still not fully explained incursion into Iranian territorial waters, it is hard to imagine an outcome as favorable as the one that ensued if there were not the diplomatic channel, established in the course of the nuclear negotiations, to achieve that outcome. Again, past experience strongly suggests that with a frozen relationship the outcome would have been worse.

A second major lesson concerns the mistake of treating relations with any country customarily labeled as an adversary as if the entire relationship were zero-sum, leading to policies that try to oppose the other country at every turn, no matter what that country is doing and no matter how what it is doing actually does or does not relate to U.S. interests.

This mistake has arisen regarding U.S. policies toward some other countries besides Iran. Joshua Kurlantzick of the Council on Foreign Relations makes a thoughtful argument in a recent article that the Obama administration has committed this mistake in its policy toward China, in which the administration's "Asia strategy has been to fear and combat nearly every move by China to flex its muscles."

The ill-advised nature of such a strategy is illustrated by the feckless U.S. attempt to dissuade other states from participating in the new China-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. A better strategy, says Kurlantzick, would

be to save opposition to China for those issues on which Beijing's behavior really does run up against important U.S. interests, such as the unjustified Chinese attempt to stake vast territorial claims in the South China Sea.

On Iran, the corresponding mistake has been made not by the Obama administration but instead by its critics who believe that Iran ought to be opposed everywhere, all the time, no matter what it is doing, thus treating anything in Iran's interests as if it were by definition against U.S. interests.

Some of the chief underpinnings of this posture have to do with idiosyncrasies of current American politics: the influence of the right-wing Israeli government, which wants to keep Iran forever ostracized for reasons that do not correspond to U.S. interests; and the impulse in the Republican Party to oppose anything Obama proposes.

Also underlying the posture, however, is a more general American tendency to view the outside world in black-and-white terms with a rigid division between foes and friends. The Obama administration has pushed back against these tendencies with its nuclear diplomacy on Iran, but the tendencies are so strong that the administration still has had to bow to some of the Iran-is-always-bad mindset as a way of husbanding its political capital and protecting its most important achievements.

The oppose-an-adversary-everywhere approach is harmful to U.S. interests in several respects, starting with the fostering of a mistaken view of exactly what those interests are. They are not really zero-sum vis-a-vis China, Iran or any other country. The first step in upholding U.S. interests is to have a clear and undistorted view of the interests themselves.

The zero-sum approach impedes fruitful cooperation with the other country in question. This means not only the big initiatives (such as the Shanghai Communiqué with China and the nuclear agreement with Iran) but much else besides. The Obama administration, despite being overeager to counterpunch Beijing in Asia, has gotten some useful cooperation from China on climate change and the negotiation of the Iran agreement.

But there is plenty more such cooperation that is needed; the handling of North Korea probably tops the list. With Iran, beyond nuclear matters the most prominent current area of shared interest where cooperation is important is opposition to ISIS and similar violent Sunni extremism.

The inclination to oppose the other state across the map gets the United States into costly and disadvantageous commitments. Kurlantzick mentions, for example, some questionable U.S. policies in Southeast Asia that stem from the inclination

to oppose Chinese influence everywhere.

In the Middle East, the often-asserted and very incorrect theme that Iran is “destabilizing the region” and that its influence must be countered everywhere has led to such mistakes as U.S. support for the ineffective and destructive (and deplorable on humanitarian grounds) Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen.

Economic sanctions, as a favorite tool of those who want to take a uniformly negative approach to a country labeled as an adversary, have come to be treated as if they were a positive thing in their own right. It is as if schadenfreude were a U.S. national interest. It isn't.

The United States gains no benefit from economic weakness in Iran, China or elsewhere. (For a reminder, check what your stock portfolio has done since the start of the year.) In important respects the United States has an interest in healthy economies in those and other places. And U.S.-imposed sanctions inflict direct harm on the United States itself.

Lost sight of long ago in many discussions in the United States about sanctions against Iran is that they are of no good to the United States at all except insofar as they shape Iranian motivations to do something such as agree to major restrictions on Iran's nuclear program.

The prisoner exchange needs to be seen in this light. The men released by the United States were charged with no offense other than violation of U.S.-imposed economic sanctions against Iran, and in particular the nuclear-related sanctions, which have served their purpose with implementation of the nuclear agreement and are no longer of use. In this respect what the United States gave up in the swap was minimal indeed.

The zero-sum approach of opposing everything the other country does fails to take account of internal political competition in that country. Such disregard of the other side's domestic politics tends to work to the disadvantage of U.S. objectives.

In this respect, the prisoner release is an important statement about the state of play of political contests inside the Iranian regime. Strong forces that for their own reasons resist a thawing of the relationship with the United States are still part of that regime.

Those hardline elements, which have largely had control of the Iranian judiciary, were responsible for the original incarceration of the prisoners who were freed. Release of those prisoners indicates that the more moderate and progressive elements in the regime, including President Rouhani, have gained enough influence and won enough internal arguments to bring about the release.

Rouhani and his allies will be able to retain such influence only as long as they can demonstrate that cooperation with the United States rather than confrontation pays off for Iran.

If U.S. policy were to change in a direction that made it harder for the moderates to win such arguments, then we would see Iran taking more dual-national prisoners and releasing fewer of them.

Currently there does not appear to be a comparable internal political dynamic in China. Control and stifling of dissent seem to be watchwords of the regime under Xi Jinping. But perhaps someday, if political pressures in China catch up with economic change, the issue may be germane there, too. U.S. policy can matter, not in stoking counterrevolution but in helping to shape political evolution.

The black-and-white approach to foes and friends makes it seem easy to think about relationships that actually are complicated. And some primal urge gets satisfied by sticking it to someone we've decided we don't like. But that's a poor way to advance our own nation's interests.

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