

Saudi Game-Changing Head-Chopping

Exclusive: Saudi Arabia likes to distinguish itself from the head-choppers of the Islamic State but the recent mass executions, including decapitating a top Shiite dissident, reveals the Saudi royals to be just better-dressed jihadists, while creating an opening for a U.S. realignment in the Mideast, says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

For generations, U.S. officials have averted their eyes from Saudi Arabia's grotesque monarchy which oppresses women, spreads jihadism and slaughters dissidents in a crude trade-off of Saudi oil for American weapons and U.S. security guarantees. It is a deal with the devil that may finally be coming due.

The increasingly undeniable reality is that the Saudis along with other oil sheikhs are the biggest backers of Al Qaeda and various terrorist groups helping these killers as long as they spread their mayhem in other countries and not bother the spoiled playboys of the Persian Gulf.

President George W. Bush and then President Barack Obama may have suppressed the 28 pages of the congressional 9/11 report describing Saudi support for Al Qaeda and its hijackers but the cat is thoroughly out of the bag. Mealy-mouthed comments from the State Department spokesmen can no longer hide the grim truth that U.S. "allies" are really civilization's enemies.

The big question that remains, however, is: Will Official Washington's dominant neocon/liberal-interventionist clique continue to protect the Saudis who have built a regional alliance of convenience with Israel over their shared hatred of Iran?

Inside Official Washington's bubble where the neocons and liberal hawks hold sway there is a determination to make the "designated villains," the Iranians, the Syrian government, Lebanon's Hezbollah and the Russians. This list of "villains" matches up quite well with Israeli and Saudi interests and thus endless demonization of these "villains" remains the order of the day.

But the Saudis and indeed the Israelis are showing what they're really made of. Israel has removed its humanistic mask as it ruthlessly suppresses Palestinians and mounts periodic "grass mowing" operations, using high-tech munitions to slaughter thousands of nearly defenseless people in Gaza and the West Bank while no longer even pretending to want a peaceful resolution of the long-simmering conflict. Israel's choice now seems to be apartheid or genocide.

Meanwhile, the Saudis though long-haired in Official Washington as “moderates” are showing what a farcical description that has always been as the royals now supply U.S.-made TOW missiles and other sophisticated weapons to Sunni jihadists in Syria, fighting alongside Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front.

Using advanced U.S.-supplied warplanes, the Saudis also have been pulverizing poverty-stricken Yemen after exaggerating the level of Iranian support to the Houthis, who have been fighting both a Saudi-backed regime and Al Qaeda’s Yemeni affiliate. Amid the Saudi-inflicted humanitarian crisis, Al Qaeda’s forces have expanded their territory.

And, at the start of the New Year, the Saudi monarchy butchered 47 prisoners, including prominent Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr for his offense of criticizing the royals, or as the Saudis like to say without a touch of irony supporting “terrorism.” By chopping off Nimr’s head as well as shooting and decapitating the others the Saudis demonstrated that there is very little qualitative difference between them and the head-choppers of the Islamic State.

The Usual Suspects

Yes, the usual suspects in Official Washington have sought to muddle the blood-soaked picture by condemning angry Iranian protesters for ransacking the Saudi embassy in Tehran before the government security forces intervened. And there will surely be an escalation of condemnations of anyone who suggests normalizing relations with Iran.

But the issue for the neocons and their liberal-interventionist sidekicks is whether they can continue to spin obviously false narratives about the nobility of these Middle East “allies,” including Israel. Is there a limit to what they can put over on the American people? At some point, will they risk losing whatever shreds of credibility that they still have? Or perhaps the calculation will be that public credibility is irrelevant, power and control are everything.

A similar choice must be made by politicians, including those running for the White House.

Some Republican candidates, most notably Sen. Marco Rubio, have gone all-in with the neocons, hoping to secure largesse from casino tycoon Sheldon Adelson and other staunch supporters of Israel’s right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. On the other hand, real-estate magnate Donald Trump has distanced himself from neocon orthodoxy, even welcoming Russia’s entry into the Syrian conflict to fight the Islamic State, heresy in Official Washington.

On the Democratic side, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is the most closely associated with the neocons and the liberal hawks and she has dug in on

the issue of their beloved “regime change” strategy, which she insists must be applied to Syria.

She appears to have learned nothing from her misguided support for the Iraq War, nor from her participation in overthrowing Muammar Gaddafi’s secular regime in Libya, both of which created vacuums that the Islamic State and other extremists filled. (British special forces are being deployed to Libya as part of an offensive to reclaim Libyan oil fields from the Islamic State.)

A Sanders Opportunity

The Saudi decision to chop off Sheikh Nimr’s head and slaughter 46 other people in one mass execution also puts Sen. Bernie Sanders on the spot over his glib call for the Saudis “to get their hands dirty” and intervene militarily across the region.

That may have been a clever talking point, calling on the rich Saudis to put some skin in the game, but it missed the point that even before the Nimr execution the Saudis’ hands were very dirty, indeed covered in blood.

For Sanders to see the Saudis as part of the solution to the Mideast chaos ignores the reality that they are a big part of the problem. Not only has Saudi Arabia funded the extreme, fundamentalist Wahhabi version of Sunni Islam building mosques and schools around the Muslim world but Al Qaeda and many other jihadist groups are, in essence, Saudi paramilitary forces dispatched to undermine governments on Riyadh’s hit list.

That has been the case since the 1980s when the Saudis along with the Reagan administration invested billions of dollars in support of the brutal mujahedeen in Afghanistan with the goal of overthrowing a secular, Soviet-backed government in Kabul.

Though the “regime change” worked the secular leader Najibullah was castrated and his body hung from a light pole in Kabul the eventual outcome was the emergence of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, led by a Saudi scion, Osama bin Laden.

Though Sanders has resisted articulating a detailed foreign policy instead seeking to turn questions back to his preferred topic of income inequality the latest Saudi barbarism gives him a new chance to distinguish himself from front-runner Clinton. He could show courage and call for a realignment based on reality, not propaganda.

President Obama, too, has a final chance to refashion the outdated and counter-productive U.S. alliances in the Middle East. At least he could rebalance them to allow a pragmatic relationship with Iran and Russia to stabilize Syria and

neutralize the Saudi-backed jihadists.

Standing Up, Not Bowing Down

Instead of being supplicants to Saudi riches and oil, the West could apply stern measures against the Saudi royals to compel their acquiescence to a real anti-terrorist coalition. If they don't comply immediately, their assets could be frozen and seized; they could be barred from foreign travel; they could be isolated until they agreed to behave in a civilized manner, including setting aside ancient animosities between Sunni and Shiite Islam.

It seems the European public is beginning to move in this direction, in part, because the Saudi-led destabilization of Syria has dumped millions of desperate refugees on the European Union's doorstep. If a new course isn't taken, the E.U. itself might split apart.

But the power of the neocon/liberal-hawk establishment in Official Washington remains strong and has prevented the American people from achieving anything close to a full understanding of what is going on in the Middle East.

The ultimate barrier to an informed U.S. public may also be the enormous power of the Israel Lobby, which operates what amounts to a blacklist against anyone who dares criticize Israeli behavior and harbors hopes of ever holding a confirmable government position or for that matter a prominent job in the mainstream media.

It would be a test of true political courage and patriotism for some major politician or prominent pundit to finally take on these intimidating forces. That likely won't happen, but Saudi Arabia's latest head-choppings have created the possibility, finally, for a game-changing realignment.

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](#)).

Neocons Protest US Spying on Israel

U.S. neocons are livid over a report that U.S. intelligence spied on Israeli efforts to sabotage the Iran nuclear talks, though they are curiously silent on evidence that Israel spies on the U.S. Ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar says it would be a mistake to let this pressure blind U.S. leaders on what

Israel is up to.

By Paul R. Pillar

An article in the *Wall Street Journal* about what the journalists describe as U.S. interception of communications of Israeli leaders has caused a stir, especially among those habitually quickest to leap to the defense of Israeli policies. We in the public do not know how much of the article's content is true; it represents one stream of reporting by one newspaper's correspondents.

The administration and the intelligence agencies, quite understandably and appropriately, are not confirming or denying any of this. But worthy of comment are some of the reactions to the report, as well as what U.S. intelligence *should* be doing in this direction regardless of what it is or is not doing right now.

U.S. intelligence agencies have responsibility to collect, within the limits of applicable laws and regulations, information on whatever is going on overseas, including whatever is going on inside foreign governments, that will help provide U.S. policymakers with the most complete and accurate picture of situations that they will have to deal with and that bear on important U.S. national interests. The policymakers in turn have responsibility for availing themselves of such information, for not impeding the proper collection and analysis of it, and for being as well-informed as they can be as they make decisions and conduct foreign relations.

Unquestionably the activities of the Israeli government fall within the bucket of things going on overseas that bear on important U.S. interests and thus are important for U.S. policymakers to be fully informed about. Israel is a major player in the Middle East and has been at the center of wars, debilitating occupations, and much else that makes for instability and controversy and that unavoidably have been major policy preoccupations for Washington.

The impact of Israeli actions on U.S. interests has been made all the greater because of the close association in the eyes of the world between the United States and Israel and thus the opprobrium that the former suffers because of actions of the latter.

The impact of Israeli policies and actions on U.S. interests has included much that is damaging and destructive, which is the kind of impact that ought to be among the highest priorities for the collection of intelligence. Recently, in connection with negotiation of the multilateral agreement to restrict the Iranian nuclear program, the Israeli government did everything it could to sabotage and frustrate an important foreign policy initiative of the United

States and its Western allies.

The *Journal* story states that intelligence collection enabled U.S. policymakers to learn details of Israel's leaking of information about the negotiation, information Israel had obtained in confidential briefings by the United States or through what the *Journal* has reported as Israel's own spying on the negotiations. This is certainly the kind of information it would be very useful for any policymaker to have in determining how to manage both a negotiation and any briefings of outside countries about the negotiation.

One thing this whole story is *not* about is "domestic spying", not even to the same degree as the controversial matter of bulk collection of telephone metadata. It is common for intelligence collection aimed at foreign actors to involve conversations or other interactions with U.S. actors. This pattern is a natural consequence of the foreign actor being an important intelligence target precisely because of the impact or potential impact on important U.S. interests.

This is true of a foreign terrorist group seeking collaborators for an armed attack inside the United States. It is true of a foreign government searching for entry points for a cyber-attack against U.S. infrastructure. And it is true of a foreign government endeavoring to sabotage U.S. foreign policy.

The rules and procedures that the National Security Agency observes in handling intercepted communications that involve any U.S. persons or organizations are longstanding, well established, and extremely strict. Basically those rules involve not disseminating anywhere, even as highly classified material and even to other members of the intelligence community, any identifying information about any U.S. persons or institutions, and no information at all beyond what could not be excised without rendering the intelligence about the foreign subject meaningless and useless.

The rules also involve a clear understanding that information obtained about any U.S. persons can be picked up only as an unavoidable by-product of collecting against a foreign target, and can never itself be the objective of collection.

One of those who was quick to comment on this story, Elliott Abrams, pays no attention at all to these aspects of how such intelligence reporting is handled, as he professes to be scandalized by the *Journal's* report. He thus tries to portray the matter as something else it is not, which is some kind of improper encroachment of the executive branch on the legislative branch.

Abrams also declares that the United States should never monitor the communications of "close allies." Setting aside the general question of why there should be such forbearance when even close allies have some interests that

differ from those of the United States, this is another instance of the familiar practice of overlooking or excusing much that Israel does by simply applying to it the label "ally."

This practice involves mere labeling, and rather arbitrary and questionable labeling at that, taking precedence over careful consideration of U.S. interests. Unlike all of the other countries that Abrams names as "close allies" (Britain, Germany, France, Japan, Australia, and Canada), Israel has no treaty of alliance with the United States, which is a good thing, given the kind of scrapes that Israel gets into.

And none of those true allies (in their current incarnations, not as a former Revolutionary War foe or a fascist empire) has caused the United States anything like the problems the current incarnation of Israel does.

Although Abrams considers any intelligence collection by the United States aimed at Israel to be a scandal, he doesn't say anything about Israel's espionage against its "close ally" the United States. In addition to what the *Journal* reports to be recent such espionage regarding the Iran nuclear negotiations, there is the reminder we got earlier this year of the larger history involved when Jonathan Pollard was back in the news upon the occasion of his parole.

The Pollard case still is one of the biggest episodes of espionage, in terms of the sheer volume of U.S. secrets stolen and the damage to U.S. security, that the United States has ever suffered. The damage is especially severe in light of what Israel has done with U.S. defense-related information, including what it has done recently, when it has gotten its hands on such information.

The Israeli government initially lied to the United States by denying any involvement in Pollard, just as it is denying any involvement in leaking details of the negotiations with Iran. Whatever the United States has found out about these matters evidently has come from its own resources, not conversation with its Israeli "ally."

One additional issue raised by the *Journal's* story concerns the expectations habitually placed on U.S. intelligence, especially in hindsight after perceived failures. The Middle East, and especially untoward events such as wars there, have figured prominently in this record. The outbreak of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, for example, is high on most lists of U.S. intelligence failures.

Six years earlier was another war, the Israelis started this one, that is seen as a U.S. intelligence success. The Johnson administration was unable to prevent the 1967 war, but it had all the information it needed on what was about to happen, and it tried hard to prevent it. The 1967 war was especially damaging in

that it marked the beginning of an occupation, now nearly half a century old, that has been a central issue in the Middle East and one of the most persistent problems there for the United States.

Surprise attacks and warfare in the Middle East will continue to be major concerns for the United States, and it thus behooves the United States to use all available intelligence resources to find out as much as it can about such things, including whatever aspects of them involve Israeli intentions.

Along this line, we should note how often has arisen the threat of Israel militarily attacking Iran, and of how this threat is related to the subject of the nuclear negotiations that have been the target of Israeli sabotage attempts and reported Israeli espionage.

If the United States is surprised by a new war in the Middle East, if the surprise is due to the United States abstaining from collecting intelligence on Israel, and if that abstinence is due to political pressure not to spy on an "ally," then we will know who ought to be blamed for the failure, and it won't be U.S. intelligence agencies.

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How Obama Enables Atrocities

Exclusive: President Obama seems so scared of offending the Saudis and their Israeli allies that he will tolerate almost any outrage, including Saudi Arabia's mass beheadings and/or shootings of the regime's enemies including a Shiite political leader who dared criticize the monarchy, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As the New Year dawns, the neocons and their liberal interventionist sidekicks remain firmly in control of Official Washington's storylines on Syria, Russia and elsewhere even as their policies continue to wreak havoc across the Mideast and threaten the stability of Europe and indeed the future of civilization.

The latest proof of this dangerous reality came when Saudi Arabia's repressive Sunni monarchy executed prominent Shiite political leader Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr for criticizing the nation's kings and princes. Before the killing, the Obama

administration held its tongue in public so as not to antagonize the Saudi royals. (Nimr's nephew awaits Saudi "crucifixion" for his role as a teenager in Arab Spring protests.)

After the Nimr execution, the State Department issued a mild protest toward the Saudis while blurring the guilt by twinning it with criticism of Iran where outraged protesters damaged the Saudi embassy, which led to Saudi Arabia's retaliatory breaking of relations with Iran.

"We believe that diplomatic engagement and direct conversations remain essential in working through differences," State Department spokesman John Kirby said meekly on Sunday, while some senior U.S. officials reportedly seethed in private over the latest Saudi provocation.

"This is a dangerous game they are playing," one official told The Washington Post's Karen DeYoung while insisting on anonymity to discuss U.S.-Saudi relations.

But the fact that the Obama administration could not voice its revulsion over the Saudi mass head-chopping (along with some firing squads) for 47 men, including Nimr, over the weekend speaks volumes. President Barack Obama and other insiders continue to tip-toe around the unsavory U.S. "alliances" in the Mideast.

Over the past several years, Saudi Arabia sealed its impervious protection from U.S. government criticism by forming an undeclared alliance with Israel around their mutual hatred of Shiite-ruled Iran and its Shiite allies, a cause picked up by American neocons and shared by the career-oriented liberal interventionists.

Some more "realist-oriented" U.S. officials, reportedly including Obama and some national security aides, recognize the havoc that neocon/liberal-hawk strategies continue to wreak across the region and now spreading into Europe, but they act powerless to do anything bold to stop it.

With Israel's lobby siding with the Sunni states in their bloody rivalry with Shiite states, most U.S. politicians and pundits have scrambled to defend each recurring outrage by the Saudis, Qataris and Turks by trying to flip the script and somehow put the blame on Iran, Syria and Russia.

Getting a Pass

Thus, the Saudis, Qataris and Turks get mostly a pass for arming and enabling radical jihadists, including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Israel also provides assistance to Al Qaeda's Nusra Front along the Golan Heights and bombs

allies of the Syrian government and, of course, faces no official U.S. criticism.

In 2014, when Vice President Joe Biden blurted out the truth about Saudi support for Islamic terrorism inside Syria, he was the one who had to apologize. [Quote at 53:20 of clip.] In 2015, when Saudi Arabia invaded and bombed Yemen after hyping Iran's support for Houthi rebels, the Obama administration sided with the Saudis even as their wanton attacks on poverty-stricken Yemen killed thousands of civilians and created a humanitarian crisis.

For more than a year after President Obama announced his air war against the Islamic State in summer 2014, Turkey continued to let the terror group run an industrial-style oil smuggling operation from Syria and Iraq through Turkey. Only when Russia entered the conflict last fall was the U.S. government shamed into joining in bombing raids to destroy the truck convoys. Yet, Obama still defended Turkey and bought its promises about finally trying to seal a 100-kilometer gap in its border.

Then, when Turkey retaliated against the Russian anti-terrorist bombing raids inside Syria by willfully shooting down a Russian Su-24 plane whose pilot was murdered after bailing out, Obama again sided with the Turks even though their claim that the Russian plane had violated Turkish air space was dubious at best. By their account, the plane had intruded over a sliver of Turkish territory for 17 seconds.

In other words, whatever these U.S. "allies" do no matter how brutal and reckless the Obama administration at least publicly rushes to their defense. Otherwise, the neocon/liberal-hawk "group think" would be offended and many angry editorials and columns would follow.

While this strange reality may make sense inside Official Washington where careerism is intense and offending the Israel Lobby is a sure career killer this pusillanimous approach to these grave problems is endangering U.S. national interests as well as the world's future.

Not only has the neocon/liberal-interventionist obsession with "regime change" turned the Middle East into a vast killing field but it has now spread instability into Europe, where the fabric of the European Union is being shredded by dissension over how to handle millions of Syrian refugees.

The United Kingdom may vote to leave the E.U., removing one of the original anchors of the European project which – for all its faults – has deservedly gotten credit for replacing a history of European blood-soaked conflicts with peaceful cooperation.

The spreading disorder has had political repercussions in the United States, too, where panic over terrorism is reshaping the presidential race.

Yet, instead of practical solutions such as pressuring all rational sides in the Syrian conflict to engage in peace talks and hold free elections that give the Syrian people the power to decide who their future leaders will be, Official Washington instead generates “talking points,” such as calling Syrian President Bashar al-Assad a “magnet for terrorism” who “must go” although his forces have done the most to stop an outright victory by Al Qaeda and Islamic State.

If one buys this “magnet” theory, then you’d also have to seek “regime change” in every country that’s been attacked by terrorists, including the United States, France, United Kingdom, Spain, etc. In the case of Syria, what’s remarkable is that the sponsorship of terrorism by U.S. “allies” and indeed by the U.S. government itself has been so blatant. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Climbing into Bed with Al Qaeda.”](#)]

However, as far as Official Washington is concerned, it doesn’t really matter [what Assad has or hasn’t done.](#) What’s important is that “regime change” in Syria has been on the neocons’ to-do list since at least the mid-1990s along with the brilliant idea of “regime change” in Iraq. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“How Israel Out-Foxed US Presidents.”](#)].

The Infallible Neocons

And since the neocons are infallible as far as they’re concerned the goal can’t be changed. The only option is to escalate the “regime change” planning to include other countries that get in the way, including Iran and now nuclear-armed Russia.

Yes, that’s the ultimate neocon idea make the Russian economy scream, overthrow the calculating Vladimir Putin and risk having him replaced by some extreme and unstable nationalist with his or her hand on the nuclear button. That may be how life on the planet ends but there will be evermore “group thinks” and “talking points” right up to the moment of Armageddon. The neocons can never stop generating false narratives.

Meanwhile, the “liberal interventionists” can boast of their own “regime change” in Libya, a policy promoted by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who [delighted at the gruesome torture-murder](#) of Muammar Gaddafi “we came, we saw, he died,” she laughed after having ignored his warnings that the overthrow of his secular government would open the oil-rich country to chaos from radical jihadists, a prediction that has been fulfilled.

Yet, despite this record of spreading chaos and death around the world, the grip

that the neocons and liberal hawks have on Official Washington remains almost absolute. They control most of the think tanks from the Brookings Institution to the American Enterprise Institute as well as the editorial pages of The Washington Post and The New York Times and pretty much the rest of the mainstream media.

In case you haven't noticed, the Times' "news" coverage of the Middle East and Russia has been consistently slanted to favor neocon/liberal-hawk positions. Just as the Times eagerly joined President George W. Bush's bogus case for invading Iraq in 2003, "the newspaper of record" has peddled false and misleading articles about the crises in Syria and Ukraine as well as promoting anti-Russian propaganda.

In this climate of manufactured "reality," any old-fashioned foreign policy "realist" especially one who has criticized Israel cannot expect to win Senate confirmation to any senior position, establishing what amounts to a blacklist against "realists," such as happened to ex-U.S. Ambassador Chas Freeman whose intelligence appointment was dropped by Obama in his early days out of fear of offending the Israel Lobby and its many neocon backers.

As the rise of those neocons has played out since their emergence during the Reagan administration, the "realists" who were known for cold-hearted foreign policy calculations to protect American interests have aged, died out or otherwise disappeared. They have been largely replaced by ideologues, either neocons with their intense devotion to right-wing Israeli interests or liberal interventionists who almost invariably side with the neocons but cite "humanitarian" concerns to justify "regime change" wars.

Blocking Obama

No matter how foolhardy and deadly these policy prescriptions have been, there is almost no way to dislodge the neocons and liberal hawks inside Official Washington, since they monopolize almost all levers of political and media power.

Even when President Obama tried to collaborate under the table with President Putin to reduce tensions in Syria and Iran in 2013, Obama was quickly outmaneuvered by neocons and liberal hawks inside the State Department who pushed for the putsch in Ukraine in 2014 that effectively destroyed the Obama-Putin cooperation. [See Consortiumnews.com's "What Neocons Want from Ukraine Crisis."]]

I have long argued that the only way to begin to challenge the neocon/liberal-hawk "group thinks" is to release facts about pivotal events, such as the 2013

Syria-sarin case, the 2014 sniper attacks at Kiev's Maidan square, and the 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over Ukraine. The neocons/liberal hawks currently control all those narratives, using them as clubs to advance ideological agendas just as they did with the false claims about Iraq's WMD. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Power of False Narrative](#)."]]

But other evidence suggests very different scenarios. Obama and his national security team could either release evidence to confirm the accuracy of the "group thinks" or puncture that self-certainty. Instead Obama has chosen to withhold what the U.S. intelligence community knows about these events, all the better to protect the dominant propaganda narratives.

So, the Obama administration continues down a road of tolerating or condoning outrages by its Mideast "allies" as the President and his timid intelligence bureaucrats do nothing to empower the American people with the truth. It is a recipe for worldwide catastrophe.

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](#)).

The Misinformation Mess

Exclusive: As Americans approach Election Year 2016, the crisis of misinformation is growing more and more dangerous. On issues from foreign policy to the economy, almost none of the candidates in the race appears to be addressing the real world, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

New York Times columnist Paul Krugman marvels at the right-wing extremism prevalent in the Republican presidential race not just from the "outsider" candidates but from the "establishment" favorites as well, doubling down on President George W. Bush's economic prescriptions and foreign policies despite their record of disaster.

The media's obsession with Donald Trump's off-the-cuff candidacy "has in one way worked to the G.O.P. establishment's advantage: it has distracted pundits and the press from the hard right turn even conventional Republican candidates have taken, a turn whose radicalism would have seemed implausible not long ago," Krugman [wrote](#) on Monday.

From escalating U.S. military involvement in the Middle East to slashing taxes again for the rich, the supposedly “mainstream” Republicans, such as Florida Sen. Marco Rubio and former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, are acting as if the catastrophes under Bush-43 never happened.

It would be fair to say that the Democrats are suffering from a similar disconnect from the lessons of the last quarter century, with former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton bristling with hawkish rhetoric toward Syria and Russia while sending fawning salutations to Israel despite its contribution to the Mideast crisis by repressing the Palestinian people.

Even Clinton’s chief rival, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, can’t formulate a rational policy toward the Middle East, although to his credit he did oppose Bush’s bogus case for invading Iraq and favors prioritizing cooperation with Russia in defeating the Islamic State over demanding another “regime change” in Syria.

But Sanders simply wants to postpone the U.S. removal of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and he encourages Saudi Arabia to throw its military weight around more across the region, not noticing that the Saudis are backing many of the Sunni jihadists who have helped turn the Middle East into a killing field. Nor does Sanders explain why one would expect the Saudis to turn away from their obsession with fighting Shiites as they are currently doing in pulverizing Yemen because a Shiite rebel group, the Houthis, gained power in that impoverished nation.

In a rational world, Saudi Arabia would be viewed as a major part of the problem, not part of any solution.

On domestic policy, Sanders like Trump does seem to have touched a populist political nerve in their recognition that neo-liberalism (as preached since Bill Clinton’s presidency) has failed to protect America’s middle class. Though Sanders’s and Trump’s brands of populism offer sharply divergent remedies, they both speak to Main Street’s fear that it is being left behind by the high-tech globalized world that has diverted vast wealth to Wall Street and Silicon Valley.

The more traditional candidates whether Hillary Clinton or the establishment Republicans don’t address the heart of this problem. Instead, they choose to play it safe on the edges while embracing the “free market” orthodoxies that created the crisis.

A Propagandized People

But is it really possible to expect that the American people (as propagandized

and misinformed as they are) could effect significant change through the electoral process, which is itself deeply compromised by vast sums of dark money from American oligarchs, while other super-rich Americans own the major media companies.

So, while there may be some logical responses to this combination of crises, the media/political system prevents them from being considered in any coherent way.

For instance, a rational approach to the Middle East would shift American alliances away from the reactionary Persian Gulf monarchies and Turkey and toward a more balanced approach that would invite greater involvement of Shiite-ruled Iran, which the Sunni-led monarchies view as their chief regional rival. There is little reason for the United States to take one side of a sectarian split within Islam that dates back to the Seventh Century.

By shedding its current pro-Saudi bias, the United States could finally get serious about resolving the Syrian crisis by shutting down the money and weapons going from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey to the extremists not just in the Islamic State but also in Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and its various jihadist allies.

Since summer 2014, President Barack Obama and his "coalition" have been fighting a half-hearted war that has failed to face down the U.S. "allies" aiding the Sunni jihadists in Syria. Only when shamed by Russia in fall 2015 did the U.S. coalition join in bombing trucks carrying the Islamic State's oil from Syria through Turkey's open borders for resale in the black market. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A Blind Eye Toward Turkey's Crimes.](#)"]

As for Syria's political future, a reasonable approach would be to leave the selection of national leaders up to the Syrian people through internationally organized democratic elections. The voters would be the ones to decide Assad's fate, not outsiders.

Yet, Official Washington finds itself in the crazy position of extending the bloody Syrian war and the resulting chaos across the region and into Europe because Obama and other Important People said "Assad must go!" and don't want to lose face by dropping that demand. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Neocons Object to Syrian Democracy.](#)"]

A realistic approach to the Middle East also requires finally standing up to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, rather than letting him dance U.S. political leaders around the world stage like puppets on a marionette's string. A balanced approach to the Middle East would allow for collaborating with Russia and Iran to apply pressure on the parties in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to

make the necessary concessions for a peace deal, imperfect though it would surely be.

The need to work with Russian President Vladimir Putin would also require rethinking the aggressive U.S. strategy regarding NATO and Ukraine. Instead of insisting that everything is “Putin’s fault,” the U.S. government could acknowledge its hand in exacerbating the political crisis in Ukraine in 2013-14 and admit that the U.S.-backed *putsch* on Feb. 22, 2014, was not the simple story of “our good guys vs. their bad guys” that was sold to the American public.

As part of all this reassessment, there needs to be a coming-clean with the American people regarding what U.S. intelligence knows about a variety of key events, including but not limited to the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin attack outside Damascus, Syria; the Feb. 20, 2014 sniper attack in Kiev, Ukraine, which set the stage for the coup; and the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine.

The fact that such events have been exploited for propaganda reasons to blame U.S. “adversaries” while the detailed knowledge of the U.S. intelligence agencies is hidden from the American people has deprived the public of an ability to make rational assessments about the larger policies. U.S. positions are driven by false or faulty perceptions, not reality.

The Disappearing Middle Class

Along with bringing rationality and reason back to U.S. foreign policy, a similar process of truth-telling could take place domestically. The core problem of America’s disappearing middle class is not just technology and globalization; it is that the super-profits from those developments have gone overwhelmingly to the extremely rich, rather than equitably shared with the population.

Thus, we see the rapid shrinking of the Great American Middle Class, a development that is destructive and dangerous because a prosperous middle class serves as ballast for an economy, preventing it from suddenly capsizing.

Plus, if most people can’t afford to buy the products that technology produces, then eventually the investment in that technology becomes unprofitable, a lesson well known since the days of Henry Ford who wanted his workers to earn enough to afford to buy his cars.

There is the trick question about what is the value of all the properties and hotels in “Monopoly” once one player has won by bankrupting all the other players. The answer is zero because no one has any money to visit the properties or stay at the hotels. They thus have no monetary value. A similar reality holds true in the real-world economy. Over-concentration of wealth is a threat.

The answer to this conundrum is also clear: since it is impossible to stop technological advancement and risky to start trade wars, the alternative is to tax the super-profits of the rich and recycle the money in the form of jobs to build infrastructure, educate the young, protect the environment, research ways to improve health, etc.

There is nothing wrong with having machines do more of the drudgery and give humans more time to enjoy life. The problem comes when the benefits accrue to a tiny minority and the rest of us are forced to work harder or face declining living standards.

But what prevents us from making the sensible move i.e., dramatically increase taxes on the rich and put that money to use putting people to work on worthy projects is Ronald Reagan's propaganda message that "government is the problem." The Right has built onto that theme the idea that government promoting the common good is against the U.S. Constitution.

Thus, you have extremists such as Texas Sen. Ted Cruz posing as "constitutionalists" as they ignore the fact that the chief authors of the Constitution the Federalists inserted a clear mandate for the U.S. government to "provide for the general Welfare." That authority was cited in both the Preamble and Article I, Section 8, which enumerates the government's powers. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Right's Made-up Constitution.](#)"]

In other words, the "originalist" meaning of the U.S. Constitution was in favor of a robust and activist federal government. But few Americans know and understand that history. They have been sold on a false rendition that serves the interests of the rich who understandably don't want the government to use its taxing powers on behalf of the broader population.

The Heart of the Matter

Which get us to the heart of the matter: Why is the American political debate so ill-informed and misinformed? Why was there virtually no accountability in the mainstream U.S. news media when nearly every important foreign-policy journalist and pundit bought into the WMD lies that justified the Iraq War? Why are the same kinds of "group thinks" continuing to prevail, with U.S. government propaganda accepted rather than questioned?

The answer to that conundrum is that Official Washington is dominated on foreign policy by neoconservatives and their liberal-interventionist sidekicks and on domestic policy by neo-liberals and government-hating conservatives. The old days when there were foreign policy "realists" who acted more from a perspective of American interests and politicians who remembered the Great Depression and

the New Deal are gone.

The neoconservatives, who emerged as pro-Vietnam War Democrats in the 1970s and switched over to Reagan Republicans in the 1980s, have proved to be a formidable and effective force for a propaganda-driven foreign policy that sees American interests as indistinguishable from Israel's and treats the American people like cattle to be herded.

That is why real information is as dangerous to neocons as water was to the Wicked Witch of the West. It is also why they have concentrated so much on getting control of the flow of news to the American people. If all the public gets is propaganda and if honest journalists and scholars are marginalized and silenced then the people will either support the latest neocon/liberal-hawk cause or end up in confused disarray, not sure what to believe.

The truth is that the neocons and their liberal-hawk allies now control virtually the entire mainstream news media, from The New York Times and The Washington Post to NPR and the major networks to Fox News and most of right-wing talk radio. Even esteemed journalist Seymour Hersh now must go overseas to the London Review of Books to get his important reporting published when it challenges the "group think" on Syria and other topics.

'Free Market' Capitalism

A similar situation exists regarding "free market" capitalism that is embraced by both neo-liberals and right-wing economists. For decades, in the major U.S. news media, it has been hard to hear a discouraging word about "free trade" deals even though labor leaders and some populist politicians warned presciently that these deals would cost millions of middle-class factory jobs.

Today, there is more skepticism about "free trade" as the social and economic impact has become undeniable but, again, there was no accountability for the misleading advocates of these agreements nor a serious effort to rewrite the deals. Renegotiation of the trade deals has been one of Donald Trump's major proposals and applause lines.

But most Republican candidates favor more of the same: more unrestrained capitalism and less taxation on the wealthy. Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton positions herself as a centrist, promising no "middle class" tax increases on people making \$250,000 or less, a redefinition of the "middle class" to include families making about five times the median income.

Despite their other shortcomings, Trump and Sanders are the only candidates seriously addressing some of these key economic issues. For his part, Sanders advocates much higher taxes especially on the wealthy and the stock speculators

to fund a broad range of social programs, such as Medicare for all, and to finance massive infrastructure rebuilding.

Yet, the central challenge for a possible political transformation in America rests on reliable information getting to the people, especially given all the sources of misinformation and the many barriers to the truth. That battle restoring the life-blood of democracy, an informed electorate remains the challenge of our time.

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](#)).

Congress' Off-Point Iran-Bashing

The U.S. Congress, still in thrall to Israeli leaders and the neocons, cited Islamic State terrorism as an excuse to clamp down on travel to Iran even though Iran has nothing to do with ISIS or other Sunni jihadists, unlike Saudi Arabia and Persian Gulf states that were left off the list, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The Obama administration has expressed its intention to make a needed correction, albeit only a partial one, to a badly flawed and misdirected piece of legislation that was an emotional response to fears about terrorism and that will do little or nothing to achieve its stated objective. The legislation, which was a rider on an omnibus spending bill that President Obama signed into law a week ago Friday, selectively reverses part of the visa waiver program under which citizens of some countries do not need to go through the time-consuming process of obtaining a visa before visiting the United States for tourism or business.

Iran is not one of those countries, but its economic interests will be indirectly affected. Secretary of State Kerry has told Iran in [a letter](#) to the Iranian foreign minister that the administration will use its waiver authority and other lawful tools to prevent the new visa rules from contradicting the sanctions-relief provisions of the recent agreement to restrict Iran's nuclear program.

About the only good thing about the new legislation is that it implicitly

recognizes that the earlier hysteria over refugees and the fear of terrorists in their midst was misplaced. None of the known foreign terrorists who have entered the United States came here as refugees.

But then one has to note immediately that neither were any of those terrorists kept out by having to apply for a visa. This is true of, among others, the woman involved in the San Bernardino shootings, the incident that probably has contributed more than any other to the current emotions and fears in the United States about terrorism.

The visa law is another of the measures that get implemented from time to time as a pendulum of public emotion swings back and forth according to how long it has been since the last scary terrorist incident. If such an incident is recent, then politicians rush to enact measures in the name of security even if they compromise other values such as civil liberties or equal treatment under the law.

As more time goes by without an incident, values such as privacy and free movement get reasserted. The result is the same sort of pendulum-swinging inconsistency that we also see with the political treatment of surveillance and collection of communication data.

Even if visa applications had shown themselves to be a much better means to screen out terrorists than they in fact have been, the new legislation is aiming in the wrong direction. The measure removes visa-free travel to the United States for people who have visited, or have citizenship in (which might be in addition to U.S. citizenship) Iran, Iraq, Sudan or Syria.

To see how misdirected this list is, we can remind ourselves of where the 9/11 hijackers came from. Fifteen of them were from Saudi Arabia, two from the United Arab Emirates, and one each from Egypt and Lebanon. Both of the San Bernardino shooters had family origins in Pakistan, and the woman, the one who was not a U.S. citizen, evidently had spent radicalizing time in Saudi Arabia.

Thomas Erdbrink, in an article on the measure in the *New York Times*, appropriately remarks, "Precisely why Iran was included on the list is unclear, since it is a foe of the Islamic State, the militant extremist group accused of organizing or fomenting the attacks" that underlie the current fears.

Perhaps one could try to construct a rationale based on the official list of state sponsors of terrorism, with the addition of Iraq because that is a home of the so-called Islamic State or ISIS. But state sponsorship of terrorism is not the problem involved here. The pattern of past terrorists coming from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, or the UAE, none of which are on the list, has much less to do

with any direct sponsorship of terrorism by governments than with radicalizing influences found within the societies in those countries.

Besides, the U.S. list of state sponsors has long been a politically corrupted statement in which countries get moved on or off the list for reasons that have little or nothing to do with terrorism. Cuba, for example, was removed from the list only this year, as an accompaniment to the restoration of diplomatic relations with the United States, even though it had been many years since Cuba had done anything that could plausibly be described as sponsorship of terrorism.

Iran no longer engages in the sort of extraterritorial activities that once legitimately earned it a spot on the list; the rationale for keeping it there has to do mainly with Iran's relations with certain groups that are on what Washington considers to be the wrong side of certain regional conflicts and that certainly have no monopoly on the use of terrorism related to those conflicts.

Given how reciprocity works in the waiving of visa requirements, the impact of the new law will be felt well beyond the particular groups directly named in the legislation. Because European citizens who have traveled to one of the named countries, or who also hold citizenship with one of those countries, will lose their visa-free privilege to travel to the United States, European governments can be expected to withdraw the corresponding privilege from U.S. citizens who fall in the same categories.

That means U.S. citizens with family ties to Iran, Iraq, Sudan or Syria who may have traveled there to visit with relatives will face visa requirements that their fellow citizens do not. And that in effect means different treatment of different U.S. citizens because of their ethnic backgrounds.

Then there is the issue of possibly violating the nuclear agreement with Iran. It is quite likely that, unless the U.S. administration can use its authorities to implement the law in a way that will negate this effect, many European and Asian business people will eschew travel to Iran, notwithstanding the attractiveness of potential business deals there, if such travel would mean losing their current ability to travel visa-free to the United States and thereby impairing their ability to reach even bigger deals here.

This effect would occur even without the reciprocity factor kicking in. The economic implications for Iran, for which the conclusion of deals with foreign business interests are an important part of its hopes for economic recovery, are serious.

The specific provision in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, i.e. the Iran nuclear agreement, in question is the obligation of the United States and the

Europeans to “refrain from any policy specifically intended to directly and adversely affect the normalization of trade and economic relations with Iran.”

A rationale, of course, for contending that the new law does not violate this obligation is that the intention of the new law is protection from terrorism, not the infliction of damage on trade and economic relations. But then that leads to the issue of why Iran was placed on the very short list of countries in the law even though there is no valid reason to believe there would be any association between prior travel to Iran and a greater chance of being a terrorist, and especially a greater chance than those who have traveled to many other countries not on the list.

The answer to the question Erdbrink raises is that Iran-bashing is still politically very much in vogue in Washington, just as it was in the years leading up to negotiation of the JCPOA and especially while the agreement was being negotiated. The stab at Iran in the visa legislation is another step in efforts to keep Iran isolated and economically crippled. The Iranians thus have a valid point about violation of the JCPOA.

This in turn raises the broader issue of the future of the nuclear agreement and how its enemies might yet destroy it. So far Iran has accumulated a strong record of compliance, not just with the JCPOA but with the preliminary agreement that preceded it, which means that the compliance record is already more than two years long.

Iran is moving with dispatch to fulfill its remaining obligations under the JCPOA in terms of dismantling infrastructure, reducing stockpiles, and so forth. The Iranian supreme leader has repeatedly given every indication that while he shares with Iran’s hardliners a concern about what a broader relationship with the West, with all the infusion of culture and ideas this would entail, will mean for the Islamic Republic, he will not let the hardliners kill the nuclear agreement itself.

One cannot speak with as much assurance about hardliners on our own side, which is where violations of the agreement are more likely to come from. The political forces in Washington, heavily influenced by another foreign government, that devoted enormous effort attempting to kill the agreement while its approval in Congress was still in the balance have not given up. They are still looking for ways to kill the agreement even after adoption.

One of the tactics for trying to do so is to play up Iranian activity in other areas. Tests of ballistic missiles has been one such area, even though such tests have nothing to do with obligations under the nuclear agreement, Iran lives in a neighborhood where, especially given its experience being on the

receiving end of missile salvos during the Iran-Iraq war, Iranian ballistic missiles will be an unavoidable reality, and as long as the nuclear agreement remains in force there will never be any nuclear warhead on any Iranian missile.

At least as large a tactic for opponents of the agreement will be to push for measures by the United States, especially economic sanctions or steps that, like the visa matter, also have damaging economic effects, that go so far in violating at least the spirit if not the letter of the agreement that at some point the Iranians will be so fed up that they will declare the accord null and void.

The Obama administration, if it does whatever it lawfully can do to prevent opponents from getting to that point, will be acting on behalf of nuclear nonproliferation and on behalf of U.S. security interests.

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 Murder of Yitzhak Rabin

Israel's decisive turn to the dark side of Jewish terrorism and religious-based repression of the Palestinians can be marked by the murder of Prime Minister Rabin by a right-wing Jewish extremist in 1995, a moment that also inflicted a fatal wound on the peace process, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar describes.

By Paul R. Pillar

The best chance for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appeared to arrive in the early 1990s. A combination of deft international diplomacy and political evolution in the two sides' leadership led in 1993 to a secretly negotiated agreement, the Oslo accord, between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization that established a partially autonomous transitional mechanism known as the Palestinian Authority.

The accord was supposed to lead within five years to the establishment of a Palestinian state recognized by Israel. It didn't. Instead, the two sides remain locked in a deadly embrace.

A central figure in the hopeful developments of the 1990s was the prime minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin. He had several attributes that qualified him well to

play this role. He was the first *sabra*, or native son, to become prime minister of Israel, having been born in Jerusalem when it was part of the British mandate of Palestine.

Rabin's successful military career, including fighting in Israel's war for independence, culminated in service as chief of the general staff, a position in which he oversaw Israel's rout of Arab armies in the Six Day War in 1967. He remained a military officer at heart even after entering politics, always more comfortable talking with generals about security matters than in the other interactions political leaders have to endure.

Succeeding Golda Meir as leader of the Labor Party, Rabin served a first stint as prime minister in the 1970s, when by his own later admission he was insufficiently experienced to do the job well. In 1977, he left office under the cloud of a minor financial scandal dating from earlier service as ambassador in Washington.

Then in 1992, more seasoned at age 70, he led his party to victory over Likud Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, the former Stern Gang terrorist whose electoral defeat was preceded by enough acrimony with the United States that the George H. W. Bush administration withheld loan guarantees to Israel. Over the next three years, Rabin led his country through the first steps of implementing the Oslo agreement.

Rabin, whom U.S. envoy Dennis Ross described as the most secular Israeli he had ever met, shared none of the belief held by many Israelis that possession of the territory conquered in 1967 was a fulfillment of Jewish destiny. He could argue that Israel would need parts of the West Bank for security purposes but not because of any sacred status of the land itself. He said that clinging to the territories would mean Israel losing its Jewish majority and, using a term few Israelis dared to speak at the time, turn it into an apartheid state.

Rabin had little patience for the settlers, who in turn saw him as a threat. Rabin's role as peacemaker, and possibly with him any real prospect for completing the process envisioned at Oslo, came to an abrupt end on the evening of Nov. 4, 1995, when a young right-wing Jewish fanatic murdered him after the Prime Minister addressed a massive pro-peace rally in Tel Aviv.

Journalist Dan Ephron has written a gripping account of the assassination and the political and social currents in Israel surrounding it. A former *Newsweek* correspondent who reported from Israel at the time, including covering the rally that would be Rabin's last public appearance, his story has been enriched by voluminous interviews in the subsequent years.

Killing a King is an objective and persuasive description of moods as well as facts. As the dual narratives of prime minister and assassin roll toward their convergence point at the site of the shooting, the book becomes a real page-turner.

Ephron begins with Rabin's trip to Washington for the signing of the Oslo accord, a ceremony featuring a carefully choreographed handshake with PLO leader Yasser Arafat. Ephron continues his story until six months past the assassination, when an Israeli election returned Likud to power. The story thus is not just of a single event, but also of a period of less than three years that marked the high tide of hopes for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The assassination itself was an inflection point: the end of the most significant progress there has ever been toward resolving the conflict (including completion of a detailed implementation agreement, known as Oslo II) and the beginning of the death of the peace process.

Even during that promising era, opposition in Israel to the departure represented by the Oslo agreement was intense. To obtain approval by the Knesset of the accord, Rabin had to rely on votes of Arab-Israeli members, a nettlesome fact that opponents raised ever after as supposedly rendering the decision, and thus the accord itself, less than legitimate.

Approval of Oslo II in October 1995 was even closer: a vote of 61-59 at 3:00 a.m. after a long and bitter session of the legislature. Opposition was most determined among, but went well beyond, settlers in the occupied territories. The opposition was impassioned and malevolent, with much of the enmity directed at Rabin himself.

Out of this lethal environment emerged the eventual murderer: a short, intelligent law student of Yemeni extraction named Yigal Amir. Amir's own extremism was rooted in the combination of an ultra-Orthodox education and day-to-day exposure to the secular side of Israeli society. The discord between these two aspects of his life appeared to radicalize rather than temper him, as explained by a clinical psychologist who examined him years later.

A sense of guilt over sensual and material longing curdled within him, providing some of the impetus for extreme acts. This syndrome was remarkably similar to that of another famous extremist son of Yemeni emigrants: Anwar al-Awlaki, who would become a leader of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and whose story is expertly told in Scott Shane's recent book *Objective Troy*.

Amir declined the exemption from military service then available to most ultra-Orthodox and did a stint in the Israeli army after completing high school. While

in the army his radicalism acquired a more activist tone, in which he disdained as too passive the teachings of his Haredi upbringing that God alone determines the fate of the Jews.

Amir had bigger ideas. He favored the idea that Jews needed to take the initiative in figuring out God's will and implementing it through their own actions. When Amir watched on television the handshake between Rabin and Arafat, he immediately concluded that the Oslo agreement was a disaster for Israel, that Rabin was committing treason by handing over to Palestinians land that God had promised to Jews and that action in response was required.

For the next two years Amir was obsessed with finding ways to undo that perceived act of treason. Some of his initial effort was aimed at assembling a militia, with his principal targets for recruitment being fellow students at Bar-Ilan University, that would disrupt the nascent peace process through attacks and sabotage in Palestinian areas.

Gradually his main focus shifted to killing Rabin. How and where to do so, but not whether to commit the crime, was a recurrent subject of conversations between Amir and his brother Hagai, who was more nerdy and technically minded than Yigal and contributed ideas about how a homemade bomb might do the trick.

The title of Ephron's book derives from a letter that Hagai, after being arrested as an accomplice to the assassination, wrote to his parents in which he self-servingly strove to place the murder in a Jewish tradition of rebellion against apostasy.

Yigal had thought even longer and harder than his brother about a religious justification for killing Rabin. He settled finally on a Talmudic principle called *rodef*, which refers to someone pursuing another person with intent to kill, making it permissible for a bystander to kill the pursuer to save the innocent victim.

According to Amir's logic, Rabin was a *rodef* because he was in effect killing Jewish settlers. In a further bit of twisted Talmudic interpretation, Amir also considered Rabin to be a *moser*, a person who turns Jews over to a hostile power and for whom the necessary penalty is death.

A more vivid inspiration for Amir came from the massacre that the American-born physician and settler Baruch Goldstein perpetrated in 1994 at a mosque in Hebron, where he murdered 29 Palestinian worshipers and injured over a hundred more. For hardcore opponents of the peace process, the killing spree demonstrated how even a lone gunman could disrupt that process.

Within weeks, Israeli public opinion swung against the idea of forcible removal

of settlers; some rabbis pronounced that it was permissible for Israeli soldiers to defy orders for any such removal, and Rabin had to back down from earlier ideas about evicting settlers from Hebron. Amir also saw that Goldstein was lauded in death by the rejectionist community.

Probably the central lesson of Ephron's book is that Amir, notwithstanding how his personal experiences helped to make him what he was, only happened to be the triggerman for something much larger than himself. The story of the assassination is not a tale of how a single extremist crossed the threshold into murder but instead of an entire movement that was so hateful and impassioned, and so sure of the justification for its hatred, that murder was a natural consequence.

As for the religious rationales, twisted though they may be, three prominent settler rabbis, including the rabbi of Hebron, who at Goldstein's funeral had praised him as a holy martyr, issued a letter that essentially agreed with Amir's concept of Rabin as a *rodef* and a *moser*. Amir was further emboldened.

As he later told the commission that investigated the assassination, "If I did not get the backing and I had not been representing many more people, I would not have acted."

In the months prior to the assassination, Amir spoke freely about killing the Prime Minister, and did so to a remarkably large circle of people. Many who heard these remarks, including an informant for Shin Bet, Israel's internal security service, who reported prolifically but did not report these comments from Amir, later said they did not think Amir would follow through.

The talk sounded like bluster that was not much different in tone and in underlying sentiment from what many others were saying even more loudly. The vitriolic talk became the stuff of large street demonstrations.

"It was now standard," writes Ephron, "to hear protesters chant, 'Rabin is a murderer,' over and over, in pulsating fury; to compare Rabin to Hitler or his government to ... the Jewish administrative bodies that enforced Nazi rule during World War II. The ugly invective," says Ephron, "came not just from the political margins but from the top echelons of the Likud Party."

An especially ugly event occurred a month before the assassination, in the form of a huge antigovernment demonstration at Zion Square in Jerusalem while the Knesset was considering the Oslo II agreement. Amid the chants of "death to Rabin" and the burning of pictures of the Prime Minister, other pictures were distributed through the crowd depicting Rabin's head atop the body of a dog or showing him in a Nazi uniform.

The frenzy did not end when the formal program did. Demonstrators marched on the Knesset, and for the first time in Israeli history the legislature seemed in danger of being overrun. When the Prime Minister's driver attempted to bring his limousine to the Knesset, the crowd swarmed the car, rocked it, pounded the roof, climbed on the hood and tore off the ornament.

Later a member of the extremist group Kach brandished the hood ornament during a televised interview and said, "People managed to remove the ornament from the car. And just as we got to the ornament, we can get to Rabin."

Ephron's account lends support to the belief in Rabin's family that responsibility for the lethal mood of this time must be shared by the ambitious and slippery politician who had been leader of Likud since 1993: Benjamin Netanyahu.

According to Ephron, "Netanyahu aligned himself with the hardliners, the settlers and the rabble-rousers, speaking at rallies across the country where crowds branded Rabin a traitor and a murderer, and consorting with rabbis who'd urged soldiers to disobey evacuation orders." At least once, Netanyahu gently scolded an audience for its rhetoric; "more often, he ignored it. Occasionally he seemed swept up in it."

At the frenzied demonstration in Zion Square, Netanyahu and other right-wing leaders stood on a balcony above the square for two hours "and watched as protestors came unhinged." Ephron writes that "Netanyahu seemed unfazed by the mayhem, even as protesters threw burning torches at the line of policemen. Any effort to call the crowd to order could well have turned the extremists against him, a risk Netanyahu evidently did not wish to take."

Although Ephron repeatedly emphasizes the larger impact of Amir's act, it is easy to reach the conclusion that if Amir had not killed Rabin there is a good chance that someone else with similar sentiments would have done so. For all we know, and for all Shin Bet knows, there may have been other would-be assassins planning to do just that when Amir hit his target.

Some of the findings of the official investigation of the assassination were the sort of hindsight-driven conclusions, especially of the connect-the-dots variety, that are customary after such events. In this case, there was so much malicious and threatening noise directed against Rabin that the signals involving Amir's intentions would have been especially difficult to pick up and to interpret as significant.

What was inexcusable was the porous physical security for Rabin at the site of the rally where he gave his last speech. A parking lot that was supposed to be a

secure area never was properly secured. Amir had no trouble entering it through a gate and loitering there within steps of the prime minister's car for nearly three-quarters of an hour, all without being challenged.

Ephron is wisely noncommittal about whether the Oslo-based peace process would have survived if Rabin had also survived, although he seems to lean in the direction that it would have. The question is similar to countless counterfactual queries that have been posed elsewhere about whether a particular leader was indispensable for a particular result.

Speculation about Rabin and the peace process is aided by Ephron's informative treatment of the six months following the assassination. During that period the new prime minister, Shimon Peres, lost an initial large lead in the polls and ended up losing narrowly to Netanyahu in an election in May 1996.

Multiple reasons help to explain Peres's failure, some involving misjudgment and some involving luck. Syrian president Hafez al-Assad was reluctant to conclude a peace agreement when it was uncertain if the Israeli leader he concluded it with would be around very long. Peres was reluctant to involve Rabin's widow Leah in the election campaign, perhaps a reflection of the long-standing rivalry between Peres and Yitzhak Rabin, a recurrent sub-theme in Ephron's book.

An Israeli military operation in Lebanon may have led some disaffected Arab-Israeli voters to sit out the election. Most of all there was the Israeli assassination in January 1996 of Hamas master bomb-maker Yahya Ayyash, in an operation involving explosives hidden in a phone and detonated by remote control. This assassination almost certainly was the stimulus for a wave of retaliatory suicide bombings against Israel, ending what had been several months of calm. The bombings swung Israeli public opinion in favor of the hardliners and against the idea of territorial concessions to Palestinians.

To assess the counterfactual scenario of these same six months if Rabin were still alive, one must remember that Peres was at least as much committed to the peace process as was Rabin. As foreign minister, he shared the Nobel Peace Prize that also was awarded to Rabin and Arafat. Moreover, had Amir missed his target, Rabin would not have experienced the pro-Labor spike of public sympathy that Peres enjoyed in the first weeks after the assassination.

The outcome of the scenario would have depended most of all on the decision to kill Ayyash. One hypothesis is that for Shin Bet, which was responsible for protecting the Prime Minister and embarrassed by its failure to do so, taking out Ayyash was an opportunity to redeem itself and thus an operation that it pushed especially hard on Peres.

But Rabin might have been just as tempted as Peres to eliminate this important Hamas military figure. If Rabin had given the same green light to Shin Bet, the resulting security and political repercussions probably would have been largely the same as what actually occurred.

Regardless of who was prime minister, if a two-state solution was to be reached according to the Oslo agreement, it had to have been reached fairly quickly and certainly within the five-year interim period the accord specified. One reason was that the gradual, staged approach in the agreement, although it was intended to build mutual confidence, also was an opportunity for opponents on each side to mobilize against the accord.

The longer the process dragged on, the more likely that violent events would disrupt it. Yossi Beilin, a key Israeli negotiator who was one of the architects of the Oslo agreement, later came to have second thoughts about the gradual approach for this reason.

A larger and longer-term reason that time was not on the side of the peace process was that demographic change, creation of facts on the ground and the political consequences of each have pushed political power in Israel in the direction of holding on to the West Bank and stifling the birth of an official Palestinian state.

The impassioned opposition of the 1990s has morphed into an increasingly entrenched governing coalition. The same Netanyahu who stood on the balcony and looked without objection on the zealots in Zion Square is now the second-longest-serving prime minister in Israel's history, with little apparent prospect for being dislodged from power any time soon. He heads a government in which other major figures are even more direct and blunt than he is in rejecting any Palestinian state.

After being away from Israel for years, Ephron returned in 2010 as chief of *Newsweek's* Jerusalem bureau. The changes in mood and political atmosphere quickly became apparent to him. Israel was safer and more prosperous than what he had seen before, but the very fact that life in Israel was good despite the absence of peace implied that "there was little incentive to revive the process."

Ephron notes that between Rabin's assassination and his own return to Israel the settler population had more than doubled, greatly increasing its political power. The proportionate numbers and resulting political clout of traditionally hawkish Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews also had increased substantially. Israel has indeed been "remade" in the image of Rabin's detractors, as suggested by the book's subtitle.

The direction of Israeli sentiment also is reflected in attitudes toward the assassination itself. Members of the Amir family, far from being stigmatized, lead normal and successful lives. Hagai Amir, who was released after serving 16 ½ years in prison and is now a free man, told Ephron, "We have a lot of support. ... People come up to us on the street and say it clearly."

Yigal Amir is still imprisoned, but a quarter of Israelis favor commuting his sentence. He already has won significant privileges concerning conditions of his incarceration, including being permitted to marry and have conjugal visits.

Israeli views of Amir's act have been further softened by a variety of conspiracy theories that continue to have strong public support and that shift blame for the assassination away from the radical right wing and the individual from its ranks who actually killed Rabin. Certain tidbits from the crime scene feed those theories, such as an extra hole in Rabin's shirt that does not correspond to the direction from which Amir was shooting.

As Ephron was working on his book, Rabin's daughter Dalia entrusted him with carrying the bloodied clothing to the United States so that an independent forensic expert in Arizona could examine it. The expert determined that the hole was not the result of a bullet; most likely it was made in the hospital while doctors were frantically trying to save Rabin's life.

Ephron deserves great credit for carefully exploring the story of Rabin's murder and its aftermath. He unites a reporter's eye with keen analysis. His study offers a vivid portrait of forces and sentiments that not only destroyed one of Israel's finest leaders but also, for years, have been destroying the prospects for Israel to be a peaceful, Jewish and democratic state.

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.)

Twisting the Facts on Iran Nukes

Part of the credibility crisis afflicting the world's officialdom is the tendency to issue reports that start with the politically desired conclusion and then twist words and facts accordingly, a problem apparent in a U.N. report on Iran's alleged nuclear program, as Gareth Porter explains.

By Gareth Porter

Many government reports The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) assessment has cleared the way for the board of governors to end the Agency's extraordinary investigation into accusations of Iran's past nuclear weapons work. But a closer examination of the document reveals much more about the political role that the Agency has played in managing the Iran file.

Contrary to the supposed neutral and technical role that Director General Yukiya Amano has constantly invoked and the news media has long accepted without question, the Agency has actually been serving as prosecutor for the United States in making a case that Iran has had a nuclear weapons program.

The first signs of such an IAEA role appeared in 2008 after the George W. Bush administration insisted that the Agency make a mysterious collection of intelligence documents on a purported Iranian nuclear weapons research program the centerpiece of its Iran inquiry.

The Agency's partisan role was fully developed, however, only after Amano took charge in late 2009. Amano got U.S. political support for the top position in 2009 because he had enthusiastically supported the Bush administration's pressure on Mohammed ElBaradei on those documents when Amano was Japan's permanent representative to the IAEA in 2008.

Amano delivered the Agency's November 2011 report just when the Obama administration needed additional impetus for its campaign to line up international support for "crippling sanctions" on Iran. He continued to defend that hardline position and accuse Iran of failing to cooperate as the Obama administration sought to maximize the pressure on Iran from 2012 to 2015.

When the Obama administration's interests shifted from pressuring Iran to ensuring that the nuclear agreement with Iran would be completed and fully implemented, Amano's role suddenly shifted as well. In late June, according to Iranian officials involved in the Vienna negotiations, Secretary of State John Kerry reached agreement with both the Iranians and Amano that the "possible military dimensions" (PMD) issue would be resolved through a report by Amano before the end of the year.

Based on that agreement, Amano would write a report that would reach no definitive conclusion about the accusations of nuclear weapons work but nevertheless bring the PMD inquiry to an end. The report was still far from even-handed. It could not be, because Amano had embraced the intelligence documents that the United States and Israel had provided to the IAEA, around which the entire investigation had been organized.

Dodgy Intelligence Documents

Iran had insisted from the beginning that the intelligence documents given to the IAEA were fraudulent, and ElBaradei had repeatedly stated publicly from late 2005 through 2009 that the documents had not been authenticated. ElBaradei observes in his 2011 memoirs that he could never get a straight answer from the Bush administration about how the documents had been acquired.

Different cover stories had been leaked to the media over the years suggesting that either an Iranian scientist involved in the alleged weapons program or a German spy had managed to get the documents out of Iran.

But in 2013, former senior German foreign office official Karsten Voigt revealed to me in an interview that German intelligence had obtained the documents in 2004 from a sometime source whom they knew to be a member of the Mujahideen E-Khalq (MEK). A cult-like Iranian exile terrorist group, MEK had once carried out terror operations for the Saddam Hussein regime but later developed a patron-client relationship with Israeli intelligence.

Quite apart from the unsavory truth about the origins of the documents, the burden of proof in the IAEA inquiry should have been on the United States to make the case for their authenticity. There is a good reason why U.S. judicial rules of evidence require that “the proponent must produce evidence sufficient to support a finding that the item is what the proponent claims it is.”

But instead Amano has required Iran, in effect, to prove the negative. Since it is logically impossible for Iran to do so, that *de facto* demand has systematically skewed the entire IAEA investigation toward the conclusion that Iran is guilty of the covert activities charged in the intelligence documents.

And the Agency has reinforced that distorted frame in its final assessment by constantly making the point that Iran possesses technology that could have been used for the development of a nuclear weapon. Every time Iran produced evidence that a technology that the IAEA had suggested was being used for the development of nuclear weapons was actually for non-nuclear applications, the Agency cast that evidence in a suspicious light by arguing that it bore some characteristics that are “consistent with” or “relevant to” work on nuclear weapons.

The “final assessment” uses that same tactic to frame not only Iranian development of various technologies but its organizations, facilities and research activities as inherently suspicious regardless of evidence provided by Iran that they were for other purposes.

Another tactic the IAEA had used in the past to attack Iran’s credibility is the suggestion that the government actually made a partial confession. In May 2008, the IAEA had claimed in a quarterly report that Iran “did not dispute that some

of the information contained in the documents was factually accurate but said the events and activities concerned involved civil or conventional military applications.”

That statement had clearly conveyed the impression that Iran has admitted to details about activities shown in the documents. But in fact Iran had only confirmed information that was already publicly known, such as certain names, organizations and official addresses, as the IAEA itself acknowledged in 2011. Furthermore, Iran had also submitted a 117-page paper in which it had pointed out that “some of the organizations and individuals named in those documents were nonexistent.”

The IAEA resorted to the same kind of deceptive tactic in the final assessment’s discussion of “organizational structure.” It stated, “A significant proportion of the information available to the Agency on the existence of organizational structures was confirmed by Iran during implementation of the Road-map.”

That sentence implied that Iran had acknowledged facts about the organizations that supported the purported intelligence claims of a nuclear weapons research program. But it actually meant only that Iran confirmed the same kind of publicly available information as it had in 2008.

On the issue of whether an Iranian organization to carry out nuclear-weapons research and development had existed, the final assessment again uses suggestive but ultimately meaningless language: “[B]efore the end of 2003, an organizational structure was in place in Iran suitable for the coordination of a range of activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device.”

Similar language implying accusation without actually stating it directly can be found in most of the assessments in the document. In the section on “procurement activities,” the report refers to “indications of procurements and attempted procurements of items with relevance, inter alia, to the development of a nuclear device.”

That language actually means nothing more than that Iranians had sought to purchase dual-use items, but it preserves the illusion that the procurement is inherently suspicious.

EBW and MIP

The use of “relevance” language was, in fact, the IAEA’s favorite tactic for obscuring the fact that it had no real evidence of nuclear weapons work. On the issue of the purported intelligence documents showing that Iran had developed and experimented with Exploding Bridge-Wire (EBW) technology for the detonation of a nuclear weapon, Iran had gone to great lengths to prove that its work on

EBW technology was clearly focused on non-nuclear applications.

It provided detailed information about its development of the technology, including videos of activities it had carried out, to show that for the objective of the work was to develop safer conventional explosives.

The IAEA responded by saying “that the EBW detonators developed by Iran have characteristics relevant to a nuclear device.” By that same logic, of course, a prosecutor could name an individual as a suspect in a crime simply because his behavior showed “characteristics relevant” to that crime.

A similar tactic appears in the assessment of the “initiation of high explosives” issue. The 2011 IAEA report had recorded the intelligence passed on by the Israelis that Iran had done an experiment with a high explosives detonation technology called multipoint initiation (MIP) that the Agency said was “consistent with” a publication by a “foreign expert” who had worked in Iran.

That was a reference to the Ukrainian scientist Vyacheslav Danilenko, but he was an expert on producing nanodiamonds through explosives, not on nuclear weapons development. And the open-source publication by Danilenko was not about experiments related to nuclear weapons but only about measuring shock waves from explosions using fiber optic cables.

The 2011 report also had referred to “information” from an unnamed member state that Iran had carried out the “large scale high explosives experiments” in question in the “region of Marivan.” In its final assessment, the Agency says it now believes that those experiments were carried out in a “location called ‘Marivan’,” rather than in the “region of Marivan.”

But although Iran has offered repeatedly to allow the IAEA to visit Marivan to determine whether such experiments were carried out, the IAEA has refused to carry out such an inspection and has offered no explanation for its refusal.

The Agency relies on its standard evasive language to cover its climb-down from the 2011 assessment. “The Agency assesses that the MPI technology developed by Iran has characteristics relevant to a nuclear device,” it said, “as well as to a small number of alternative applications.”

That wording, combined with its refusal to make any effort to check on the one specific claim of Iranian experiments at Marivan, makes it clear that the Agency knows very well that it has no real evidence of the alleged experiments but is unwilling to say so straightforwardly.

The Agency did the same thing in regard to the alleged “integration into a

missile delivery system.” A key set of purported intelligence documents had shown a series of efforts to integrate a “new spherical payload” into the existing payload chamber of the Shahab-3 missile.

The final assessment avoids mention of the technical errors in those studies, which were so significant that Sandia National Laboratories found through computer simulations that not a single one of the proposed redesign efforts would have worked. And it later became apparent that Iran had begun redesigning the entire missile system, including an entirely different reentry vehicle shape from the one shown in the drawings, well before the start date of the purported nuclear weapons work.

But the IAEA was only interested in whether the workshops portrayed in the purported intelligence were in fact workshops used by the Iranian government. Iran allowed the Agency to visit two of the workshops, and the final assessment declares that it has “verified that the workshops are those described in the alleged studies documentation” and that “the workshop’s features and capabilities are consistent with those described in the alleged studies documentation.”

Flawed Computer Modeling

One of the most egregious cover-ups in the assessment is its treatment of the alleged computer modeling of nuclear explosions. The agency recalled that it had “received information from Member States” that Iran had done modeling of “nuclear explosive configurations based on implosion technology.”

Unfortunately for the credibility of that “information,” soon after that 2011 report was published someone leaked a graph of one of the alleged computer modeling efforts attributed to Iran to Associated Press reporter George Jahn. The graph was so similar to one published in a scholarly journal in January 2009 that Scott Kemp, an assistant professor of nuclear science and engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), said he suspected the graph had been “adapted from the open literature.”

Furthermore the information in the graph turned out to be inaccurate by four orders of magnitude. In response to that revelation, a senior IAEA official told Jahn that the Agency knew that the graph was “flawed” as soon as it had obtained it but that IAEA officials “believe it remains important as a clue to Iranian intentions.”

In fact, the official revealed to Jahn that the Agency had come up with a bizarre theory that Iranian scientists deliberately falsified the diagram to sell the idea to government officials of a nuclear explosion far larger than any

by the United States or Russia.

That episode surely marks the apogee of the IAEA's contorted rationalizations of the highly suspect "information" the Agency had been fed by the Israelis. In the final report, the Agency ignores that embarrassing episode and "assesses that Iran conducted computer modeling of a nuclear explosive device prior to 2004 and between 2005 and 2009," even though it describes the modeling, enigmatically, as "incomplete and fragmentary."

The assessment further "notes some similarity between the Iranian open source publications and the studies featured in the information from Member States, in terms of textual matches, and certain dimensional and other parameters used."

Unless the Agency received the "information" from the unidentified states before the dates of the open-source publications, which one would expect to be noted if true, such similarities could be evidence of fraudulent intelligence rather than of Iranian wrongdoing. But the assessment provides no clarification of the issue.

Nuclear Material

On the issue it calls "nuclear material acquisition," however, the Agency makes a startling retreat from its previous position that has far-reaching implications for the entire collection of intelligence documents. In its 2011 report, the IAEA had presented a one-page flow sheet showing a process for converting "yellow cake" into "green salt" (i.e., uranium that can be enriched) as a scheme to "secure a source of uranium suitable for use in an undisclosed enrichment program."

But the final assessment explicitly rejects that conclusion, pronouncing the process design in question "technically flawed" and "of low quality in comparison with what was available to Iran as part of its declared nuclear fuel cycle."

In other words, Iran would have had no rational reason to try to seek an entirely new conversion process and then turn the project over to incompetent engineers. Those were precisely the arguments that Iran had made in 2008 to buttress its case that the documents were fabricated.

The assessment carefully avoids the obvious implication of these new findings, that the anomalies surrounding the "green salt" documents make it very likely that they have were fabricated. To acknowledge that fact would cast doubt on the entire collection. But the surprising backtracking on the "green salt" evidence underlines just how far the IAEA has gone in the past to cover up awkward questions about the intelligence at the center of the case.

Now that the Obama administration has settled on a nuclear agreement with Iran, the IAEA will no longer have to find contorted language to discuss Iran's past and present nuclear program.

Nevertheless, the Agency remains a highly political actor, and its role in monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the agreement may bring more occasions for official assessments that reflect the political interest of the U.S.-led dominant coalition in the IAEA board of governors rather than the objective reality of the issue under review.

Gareth Porter, an investigative journalist and historian specializing in U.S. "national security" policy and was the recipient of the Gellhorn Prize for journalism in 2012. His latest book, *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*, was published by Just World Books in 2014. [This story first appeared at LobeLog.]

America's Debt to Bradley Manning

From the Archive: The U.S. mainstream media is again embracing a U.N. report critical of Iran's alleged past work on a nuclear bomb, but leaks from Pvt. Bradley (now Chelsea) Manning exposed Yukiya Amano, the key U.N. official, as a front for U.S. and Israeli interests, as Robert Parry reported in 2011.

By Robert Parry (Originally published Dec. 24, 2011)

One criticism about the value of the information that Pvt. Bradley Manning gave to WikiLeaks is that most of it was known in some form and thus didn't justify the risks to sources who might be identified from the diplomatic and military cables. However, that complaint misses the importance of detailed "ground truth" in assessing issues of war and peace.

For instance, the prospects of war with Iran escalated in November 2011 because of a toughly worded report by the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency, which compiled some old and new evidence to argue that Iran continues to make progress toward a nuclear bomb. Immediately, the U.S. news media accepted the IAEA's report as the unquestioned truth and as further repudiation of the 2007 U.S. intelligence estimate that Iran had ceased work on a nuclear weapon in 2003.

One might note the irony in this flip on Iran. In the run-up to war with Iraq, the U.S. media embraced CIA reports of secret Iraqi WMD programs while

mocking the IAEA's doubts. Regarding Iran, the CIA and IAEA have traded places, with U.S. intelligence analysts chagrined over swallowing the bogus Iraq-WMD evidence being more skeptical of the Iran-nuke allegations, while the IAEA has taken the role as chief WMD exaggerator.

So, it was useful to examine the WikiLeaks documents regarding the election of the new IAEA leader in 2009 to understand why this flip may have occurred. What those classified State Department cables show is that the IAEA's new director general, Japanese diplomat Yukiya Amano, credited his victory largely to U.S. government support and promptly stuck his hand out for U.S. money.

Further, Amano left little doubt that he would side with the United States in its confrontation with Iran and that he would even meet secretly with Israeli officials regarding their purported evidence on Iran's nuclear program, despite the fact that Israel is arguably the world's preeminent rogue nuclear state and rejects IAEA inspections of its own nuclear sites.

According to U.S. embassy cables from Vienna, Austria, the site of IAEA's headquarters, American diplomats in 2009 were cheering the prospect that Amano would advance U.S. interests in ways that outgoing IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei wouldn't.

Cable Revelations

In a July 9, 2009, cable, American chargé Geoffrey Pyatt said Amano was thankful for U.S. support of his election. "Amano attributed his election to support from the U.S., Australia and France, and cited U.S. intervention with Argentina as particularly decisive," the cable said.

The appreciative Amano informed Pyatt that as IAEA director general, he would take a different "approach on Iran from that of ElBaradei" and he "saw his primary role as implementing safeguards and UNSC [United Nations Security Council]/Board resolutions," i.e. U.S.-driven sanctions and demands against Iran.

Amano also discussed how to restructure the senior ranks of the IAEA, including elimination of one top official and the retention of another. "We wholly agree with Amano's assessment of these two advisors and see these decisions as positive first signs," Pyatt commented.

In return, Pyatt made clear that Amano could expect strong U.S. financial support, stating that "the United States would do everything possible to support his successful tenure as Director General and, to that end, anticipated that continued U.S. voluntary contributions to the IAEA would be forthcoming. Amano offered that a 'reasonable increase' in the regular budget would be helpful."

Pyatt learned, too, that Amano had consulted with Israeli Ambassador Israel Michaeli “immediately after his appointment” and that Michaeli “was fully confident of the priority Amano accords verification issues.”

Michaeli added that he discounted some of Amano’s public remarks about there being “no evidence of Iran pursuing a nuclear weapons capability” as just words that Amano felt he had to say “to persuade those who did not support him about his ‘impartiality.’”

In private, Amano agreed to “consultations” with the head of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission, Pyatt reported. It is ironic indeed that Amano would have secret contacts with Israeli officials about Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons program, which has yet to yield a single bomb, when Israel possesses a large and undeclared nuclear arsenal. (Yes, it is the same Geoffrey Pyatt who was later promoted to Ambassador to Ukraine where he helped orchestrate the putsch that ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovich.)

In a subsequent cable dated Oct. 16, 2009, the U.S. mission in Vienna said Amano “took pains to emphasize his support for U.S. strategic objectives for the Agency. Amano reminded ambassador [Glyn Davies] on several occasions that he was solidly in the U.S. court on every key strategic decision, from high-level personnel appointments to the handling of Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons program.

“More candidly, Amano noted the importance of maintaining a certain ‘constructive ambiguity’ about his plans, at least until he took over for DG ElBaradei in December” 2009.

In other words, the emerging picture of Amano is of a bureaucrat eager to bend in directions favored by the United States and Israel, especially regarding Iran’s nuclear program. Amano’s behavior surely contrasts with how the more independent-minded ElBaradei resisted some of Bush’s key claims about Iraq’s supposed nuclear weapons program, denouncing some documents as forgeries.

Today, with some Republican presidential contenders falling over themselves to bond with Israel over its desire to attack Iran, this sort of detail puts the IAEA report into a fuller context that can help American voters judge whether another war is necessary or whether they’re being misled again by hyped allegations.

These cables, which Manning allegedly gave to WikiLeaks, were first spotlighted by the Guardian newspaper in the U.K. in 2010. However, because the full cables were posted on the Internet, I could dig through them to find additional details, such as Amano asking for more U.S. money.

Without this level of “ground truth,” Americans would be at the mercy of the major U.S. news media, which seems as much on board for a war with Iran as it was for war with Iraq. [For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Dāʿiyya Over Iran Nuke Charges”](#) and [“Big Media’s Double Standards on Iran.”](#)]

Slaughtering Iraqis

Another example of how the material allegedly leaked by Manning helped educate the American people was the infamous gun-barrel video of U.S. attack helicopters mowing down seemingly defenseless Iraqi men, including two Reuters journalists, as they walked down a Baghdad street.

Not only did a U.S. military helicopter gunship slaughter the men amid macho jokes and chuckling apparently after mistaking a couple of cameras for weapons but the American attackers then blew away several Iraqis who arrived in a van and tried to take one of the wounded newsmen to a hospital. Two children in the van were badly wounded.

“Well, it’s their fault for bringing their kids into a battle,” one American remarked.

The videotaped incident entitled [“Collateral Murder”](#) by Wikileaks occurred on July 12, 2007, in the midst of President George W. Bush’s much-heralded troop “surge,” which the U.S. news media has widely credited for reducing violence in Iraq and bringing something close to victory for the United States.

But the U.S. press corps rarely mentions that the “surge” represented one of the bloodiest periods of the war. Beyond the horrific and untallied death toll of Iraqis, about 1,000 U.S. soldiers died during Bush’s “surge” of an additional 30,000 troops into Iraq.

It’s also unclear that the “surge” deserves much if any credit for the gradual decline in Iraqi violence, which had already reached turning points in 2006 before the “surge” with the death of al-Qaeda leader Musab al-Zarqawi, the U.S.-funded Sunni Awakening against al-Qaeda in Iraq, and the de facto ethnic cleansing of Iraqi cities with Sunnis and Shiites moving into separate neighborhoods.

Further putting the sectarian killing on a downward path was [the Iran-brokered agreement](#) with militant Shiite leader Moktada al-Sadr to have his militia stand down in exchange for an Iraqi government commitment to insist on a firm timetable for total U.S. military withdrawal, a process that has just been completed.

However, the U.S. news media continues to repeat the conventional wisdom about

how U.S. troops protected Iraqis from violence through the “successful surge.” The “Collateral Murder” video puts the lie to that smug consensus, showing the “ground truth” of how the “surge” and indeed the entire Iraq War truly operated.

Many Americans may want to put the unpleasant memories of the Iraq War behind them from “shock and awe” and the illegal invasion, to the leveling of Fallujah and the Abu Ghraib atrocities, to the incompetent U.S. occupation, the Haditha murders and the sectarian slaughters but a failure to face the reality honestly will only encourage future war crimes of similar or even greater magnitude.

Already, Republicans such as Newt Gingrich, Rick Perry, Michele Bachmann and Mitt Romney are speaking as casually about going to war with Iran as George W. Bush and Dick Cheney did about war with Iraq.

As Bradley Manning wrote as he struggled over his decision to leak evidence of war crimes and other machinations by the U.S. government, “God knows what happens now. Hopefully worldwide discussion, debates, and reforms. I want people to see the truth because without information, you cannot make informed decisions as a public.”

(In 2013, Manning was court-martialed and sentenced to 35 years in prison for disclosing this classified information to the public.) But his gift to America may be that he provided the nation the “ground truth” that could give meaning to debates about past and possibly future wars.

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](#)).

Chicago Police Adopt Israeli Tactics

Exclusive: The Chicago police slaying of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald, like other recent police killings of blacks, may resemble the actions of an occupation military, in part, because Chicago and other U.S. cities have learned from Israel’s occupation of Palestine, writes retired JAG Major Todd E. Pierce.

By Todd E. Pierce

After more than a year of stonewalling and what some might call obstructing justice, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel issued an apology for the horrific execution of Laquan McDonald by Chicago police officer Jason van Dyke. Laquan McDonald was

the black 17-year-old who was shot 16 times by the police officer on Oct. 20, 2014. The video showing the shooting was only released by Chicago officials when they were ordered to do so by a judge in late November 2015.

But apology or not, the underlying substantive issue is that the summary execution of McDonald was the sort of atrocity that one would expect to see in what the U.S. once called “police states.” In fact, one can imagine a death squad execution in El Salvador in the 1980s looking very similar on video to McDonald’s slaying.

“Police state” is a term which has fallen into disuse since 9/11 with the adoption of so many similar practices by the so-called “democracies” in their domestic policies. The term generally was applied to Fascist or Communist governments and described a country where the police and the military exercised martial law over citizens or military occupation powers that uses military force to control a civilian population.

Sometimes these arbitrary powers were enforced by summary executions, depending on how much the authorities could get away with in their “extreme measures.” This was the practice in countries such as Nazi Germany; Pinochet’s Chile; El Salvador and Guatemala during the Cold War; to a lesser degree, apartheid South Africa; and military occupied territories such as Tibet, Israeli-occupied Palestine, and Eastern Europe under the Soviet Union.

But Chicago isn’t under martial law or military occupation, is it? Nor is it an apartheid state, with apartheid enforced by domestic martial law and military force, is it? To a normal civilian-oriented mind, one would think it is not under military occupation or martial law.

Seeking Israeli Training

Yet, under Mayor Emanuel, a former Israeli Defense Force (IDF) volunteer, and Garry McCarthy, the now former Chicago Police Superintendent (Emanuel fired him Dec. 1), it seems that parts of Chicago were treated as if they were occupied territory under police or paramilitary rule.

That is, under arbitrary martial law, just like the repressive martial law regime of the IDF in the occupied territory of Palestine. Martial law or occupation law is arbitrary as it is not law, but is the manifestation of the occupying military commander’s “will.”

How could this be in the civilian government of Chicago? In part, because Police Superintendent McCarthy and the City of Chicago sought out and received training by Israeli occupation forces in “counter-terrorism” policing, that is, “pacifying” a population through aggressive intelligence gathering and the

application of military force. Counter-insurgency is the term used for when this doctrine is applied by military forces.

This collaboration between Israel and U.S. police agencies, including Chicago, emerged after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington. Since then, by one count, at least 300 high-ranking sheriffs and police from cities both large and small have received counter-terrorism training in Israel. For instance, in January 2003, 33 senior U.S. law enforcement officials from Chicago and other major American cities flew to Israel for sessions on "Law Enforcement in the Era of Global Terror."

In 2009, Israel's Midwest Consulate General co-sponsored "an intensive seminar" in Israel for senior Chicago police officials "on intelligence-led policing techniques."

Chicago Police Superintendent McCarthy was a key participant in this Israeli training. The Israel Trade & Economic Office of the U.S. Midwest Region invited police officials to "Join Chicago Police Superintendent Garry McCarthy & the Midwest Delegation to the Israel Homeland Security International Conference 2012, and be a part of an international gathering of public security officials and private technology companies."

In 2012, these "security officials" got to "experience demonstrations of breakthrough technologies from Israel" and "tour security infrastructure at the Old City of Jerusalem," a city under Israeli military occupation. It wasn't made clear if the "demonstrations of breakthrough technologies from Israel" would extend to live subjects in occupied Jerusalem.

In November 2014, Chicago's McCarthy "led a delegation of senior law enforcement officials to Israel" as part of a training mission "to engage directly with their Israeli counterparts to discuss best practices, unique strategies, and new technologies in a range of law enforcement areas," according to the same Israeli trade office.

"The visit also aimed to build a foundation for enhanced collaboration between the Chicago Police Department and the State of Israel." Included in the delegation was the Executive Director of Cook County's Homeland Security and Emergency Management Office, the Chief of Staff of the Chicago Police Department, as well as police officials from other large American cities. [The itinerary of the delegation is explained more here.]

In other words, over more than a decade, senior Chicago police officials have been studying Israel's militarized police practices for how best to maintain a repressive military control over an occupied population living under permanent,

strict martial, or occupation, law.

An Occupation Mentality

Why this matters is that Israel doesn't have a domestic civilian policing model but instead applies a counter-insurgency policing model intended for a population under military occupation, or otherwise considered as hostile under martial law.

This policing model is being sold by Israel's government to gullible or authoritarian-leaning U.S. police officials as a legitimate domestic policing model when, in fact, it is a military model of the sort used by militaristic, authoritarian regimes, customarily referred to as "fascist."

What many people fail to understand about Israel and the IDF is that since 1967, now going on half a century, the Palestinian civilians who "fell into [Israeli] hands" when the IDF conquered Palestinian territory have been kept in strict and harsh military captivity of the sort the U.S. condemned when the former Soviet Union did the same to its captive peoples.

This pattern continues even though the Israeli occupation has been repeatedly declared illegal under international law. Chicago police being trained by Israeli security police and occupation forces is analogous to, and merits the same condemnation as, a U.S. city sending its officials to receive "police" training from Soviet security police who maintained military occupation of Eastern Europe in the 1950s-1960s. Or to North Korea today.

But in this case, there is also the issue of colluding with Israeli occupation authorities in an illegal occupation. These U.S. police officials are put in what should be the awkward position of aiding and abetting illegality.

Of course, one killing by a Chicago police officer, though similar to some of the killings by the IDF of civilians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, and far below the scale of killing of the periodic "mowing the grass" that Israel undertakes in Gaza every couple of years, does not mean that illegal military occupation tactics are being practiced in Chicago. Or does it?

Secret Interrogations

In isolation, no. But while Chicago police have always had the reputation of being simply a rival gang to the many other gangs in Chicago's history, under Rahm Emanuel's regime, it has come to resemble an occupying military force down to a "secret interrogation facility," as reported by Britain's Guardian newspaper in August 2015: "At least 3,500 Americans have been detained inside a Chicago police warehouse described by some of its arrestees as a secretive

interrogation facility, newly uncovered records reveal.”

The Chicago Police Department maintained that the warehouse was not a secret facility “so much as an undercover police base operating in plain sight.” But, as the Guardian reported, people were shackled and held for hours or even days without access to attorneys in violation of the U.S. Constitution, but the sort of detention permitted of Palestinians under IDF occupation.

A Chicago civil rights activist said he was abducted by masked officers, shackled and held on false charges, “with no food, no water, no access to the outside world” at the behest of “covert operations.” In other words, he simply disappeared.

Another former “detainee,” Charles Jones, was told in the interrogation room that he would be allowed a phone call once booked and processed. But he said his requests for legal counsel were repeatedly denied during the six-to-eight hours he was held at Homan Square.

“The only reason you’re brought to Homan and Fillmore is to extract information,” Jones said, referring to the cross streets of the facility.

“The police probably feel they need those covert operations because that’s the only way to get the intel they need instead of doing the good work the hard work. . . . It’s easy to just go grab someone, throw ’em somewhere no food, no water, no access to the outside world, intimidating and threatening ’em,” he said.

That is similar to intelligence-driven techniques used in counter-insurgency warfare. Several ex-Homan Square detainees told the Guardian that their detentions “were out of proportion to their alleged crimes, if any but calibrated to pressure them into becoming informants.” This, in fact, is just like what U.S. forces did in occupied Iraq and Israeli forces do in Occupied Palestine. Indeed, that is what occupying armies do.

According to The Guardian, while the police data is incomplete, the disclosures “suggest an intensification of Homan Square usage under Emanuel. Approximately 70% of the Homan Square detentions the Chicago police acknowledge thus far have occurred under the current mayor.”

At the time of The Guardian article, then-Police Superintendent McCarthy was attending a meeting on violence and policing in Washington and was unavailable for comment.

After The Guardian’s initial Homan Square exposé in February 2015, protests were held and local politicians called for investigations. But Rahm Emanuel was

not among the concerned officials even though he was running for re-election in part on a platform of police reform. Instead, Emanuel took ownership of the unorthodox operation and “defended his police,” claiming, “we follow all the rules” at Homan Square and calling the reporting “not true.”

Israeli Comparisons

To Mayor Emanuel and former Superintendent McCarthy, it seemed, affluent sections of Chicago’s North Side are to Chicago’s South and West sides what Tel Aviv is to Occupied Palestine’s Jerusalem and Ramallah.

Emanuel and McCarthy seemed to have imported the Israeli military occupation ideology that just as Palestine must be kept “under the heavy heel of Israeli military occupation,” so must Chicago’s poorer areas be kept under the heavy heel of the Chicago police, acting as a paramilitary occupation force.

That Emanuel bears responsibility for all that has taken place in regard to the McDonald execution is shown in his role in making the Independent Police Review Authority (IPRA), the civilian agency that investigates allegations of excessive force by police, irrelevant.

The Chicago Tribune published an examination that found that of the 409 police shootings since IPRA was created in September 2007, only two allegations against police officers were deemed credible. (Emanuel has been mayor since May 16, 2011.)

This week, in announcing that former federal prosecutor Sharon Fairley would take charge of the IPRA after the resignation of her predecessor, neither Emanuel nor Fairley addressed how IPRA would improve “its woeful track record in investigating shootings,” as the Chicago Tribune described it.

Instead, Fairley stated: “the mission of IPRA will remain the same: thorough, fair and timely investigation of police officer misconduct.” Absurdly, that seems to be a statement asserting that nothing would change, allowing the police to continue operating with a sense of entitlement as they run roughshod over a population they are supposed to protect.

According to the Chicago Tribune, Chicago police officials under Emanuel stopped participating in meetings with the IPRA to discuss officer shootings, “a change that came with the knowledge of the mayor’s office.” Will that remain the same?

U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch was asked whether the federal investigation would extend to the mayor’s and state’s attorney’s offices. Notwithstanding Emanuel’s alleged role in shutting down police participation with the IPRA, Lynch said the investigation would focus on the Police Department’s practices.

That's not all that remarkable when one considers that the U.S. Justice Department and President Barack Obama declared they would take no action on the issue of "war on terror" torture by U.S. government officials involving the CIA and the military. As President Obama's former Chief of Staff, Emanuel seems to fall under a similar protective shield of impunity.

What is remarkable is that the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus "called for Lynch to expand her probe to include IPRA and the state's attorney's office, but it left out the mayor's office." That is remarkable because Mayor Emanuel appears to be the person who gave impunity for civil rights violations to Chicago police officers to the degree that they felt legally immune in summarily executing Laquan McDonald.

A Family History

If Mayor Rahm Emanuel seems to have brought a Fascist sensibility to Chicago and the police force, it can be said it's part of a family tradition. According to the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, Emanuel "is the son of a Jerusalem-born pediatrician who was a member of the Irgun (Etzel or IZL), a militant Zionist group that operated in Palestine between 1931 and 1948."

In addition, according to Emanuel's father, Benjamin, his son "is the namesake of Rahamim, a Lehi combatant who was killed" and was obviously a close friend or seen as a martyr. Both Lehi and the Irgun were terrorist organizations, not only in the eyes of the British and the Arabs in pre-Israel Palestine, but in the eyes of their fellow Jews, whom they also attacked.

Furthermore, the clandestine terror squads considered themselves Fascist organizations, not only in their tactics but in their ideology which had aligned them with Mussolini's Italy and other inter-war European Fascist parties.

In *The Road to Power: Herut Party in Israel*, author Yonathan Shapiro describes Irgun as the military wing of the Betar Movement. The two groups jointly published a paper, *Die Tat*. Shapiro writes: "Betar activists were swept up by the radical-right nationalism then at its height in Europe."

This was shown in the Betar press in Poland, where the Yiddish-language Betar-Irgun paper *Die Tat* was sympathetic to radical-right parties. The paper ran a series of articles in late 1938 and early 1939 entitled "The Third Europe," which Shapiro says "was the overall name given to radical-right movements such as the Nazis in Germany, the Fascists in Italy, the Iron Guard in Romania, and the Franco camp in Spain, and so forth."

One article in the series explained that Hitler's attempted putsch in 1923 derailed "the German leadership from its track of havlagah – the same term that

Zionist leaders used for their policy of moderation in their dealings with the Arab nationalist movement in Palestine.” The implication was that the Jewish radical right had to do something similar to break the Jewish leaders from moderation in Palestine.

Another *Die Tat* writer who was based in Tel Aviv argued that anti-Semitism wasn't “an integral part of Naziism, which in the final analysis was a version of Fascism,” of which he approved. In an editorial entitled, “Hitler and Judaism,” a few weeks later, “the paper wrote that it did not reject Hitler's views, not even on the race issue. It only objected to the campaign that ‘in practice’ he was waging against the Jewish people, and its desire to establish an independent state.”

Lessons of Terror

In 1942, Menachem Begin arrived in “Eretz-Israel,” as Irgun members referred to Palestine. He was “offered command of the Irgun and leadership of Betar.” Begin refused leadership of Betar on the grounds that Ze'ev Jabotinsky, though dead, remained head of Betar, and Jabotinsky as the irreplaceable leader of Betar “came to symbolize the idea of the absolute leader.”

Begin, the future founder of Likud and prime minister of Israel, was his “pupil and successor,” who shared the view of other Fascist parties that “believed in the principle of the omnipotent leader.” These were the Fascist ideas that Rahm Emanuel's father imbibed and celebrated in his youth, and shared with his Lehi friend, Rahamim.

The distinction between the Irgun and Lehi was that the Irgun later called a truce with the British during World War II when it finally became apparent to them that Hitler represented a threat to Zionist interests, whereas Lehi saw Great Britain as much or more of the enemy than Hitler. Lehi continued terrorist attacks against Britain throughout the war.

Whatever the elder Emanuel's political thoughts are today, he seemed to retain his youthful Fascist-style contempt for Arabs as he commented when Rahm was named President Obama's Chief of Staff: “Obviously he'll influence the president to be pro-Israel. Why wouldn't he? What is he, an Arab? He's not going to be mopping floors at the White House,” as reported in the New York Times.

None of this is to suggest that Rahm Emanuel shares any of the Fascist ideas of his father's youthful associates in the Irgun or of his father in his youth. But if Rahm Emanuel is going to preside over secret interrogation and detention centers as the Mayor of Chicago and is responsible for a police force learning and using Fascist-style police tactics, people may begin to notice a resemblance

to the youthful Benjamin Emanuel and the ideology his Irgun associates.

Emanuel's Style

True to form in some people's eyes after the court-ordered release of the video revealing the murder of Laquan McDonald Mayor Emanuel didn't actually take responsibility for the cover-up except to acknowledge the obvious with his statement that it "happened on my watch." He didn't explain how the murder was swept under the carpet for over a year so, as some allege, it wouldn't interfere with his reelection.

NPR reported, "Emanuel acknowledged there is an underlying 'trust problem' that Chicago needs to address," and "the city now needs to begin the process of healing and restoring trust and confidence in the police department. ... Emanuel says supervision and leadership in the police department failed, and he promises to address 'the thin blue line' and 'the code of silence,' in which police officers ignore, deny and cover up the bad actions of a colleague."

However, as mayor, Emanuel bore ultimate responsibility for "supervision and leadership" of the police department and it wasn't the "thin blue line" that maintained the "code of silence" for over a year. It was the Mayor's Office.

Also, with Israel making its counter-insurgency police training a major export to U.S. police forces and with American cities such as Chicago eager to adopt that training, it is little wonder that minorities increasingly feel they are under repressive military-style occupation in their communities. They have good reason to feel that way since the police are getting training from a country that is expert at keeping a conquered people under an open-ended military occupation.

By contrast, the police of Scotland have offered a very different strategy to a delegation of top American police officials by demonstrating "the art of firearm-free policing." As The New York Times reported, "Most British police officers are unarmed, a distinction particularly pronounced ... in Scotland, where 98 percent of the country's officers do not carry guns. Rather than escalating a situation with weapons, easing it through talk is an essential policing tool."

The American police officials appeared dumbfounded by the concept of operating without weapons and pressed their Scottish counterparts with questions about how many Scottish police officers have been wounded or killed in the line of duty.

Bernard Higgins, an assistant chief constable who is Scotland's use-of-force expert, responded that his officers do take punches often but the last one killed died in 1994 from a stabbing. "There is poverty, crime and a 'pathological hatred of officers wearing our uniform' in pockets of Scotland, he

said, but constables live where they work and embrace their role as ‘guardians of the community,’ not warriors from a policing subculture,” according to the Times.

Higgins added, “We police from an absolute position of embracing democracy.”

Todd E. Pierce retired as a Major in the U.S. Army Judge Advocate General (JAG) Corps in November 2012. His most recent assignment was defense counsel in the Office of Chief Defense Counsel, Office of Military Commissions. In the course of that assignment, he researched and reviewed the complete records of military commissions held during the Civil War and stored at the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

Israel’s Moral Erosion

Amid global anger over militants citing the Koran as a defense for terrorism, less attention gets paid to Israel citing God’s will as expressed in the Bible as the moral justification for stealing Palestinian land, an ethical crisis that is eroding Israel’s world standing, writes Alon Ben-Meir.

By Alon Ben-Meir

I have long maintained that Israel’s occupation of the West Bank defies the moral principle behind the creation of the state. Contrary to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s assertion, the occupation erodes rather than buttresses Israel’s national security and cannot be justified on either security or moral grounds.

Unless Israel embraces a new moral path, no one can prevent it from unraveling from within only to become a pariah state that has lost its soul, wantonly abandoning the cherished dreams of its founding fathers.

There are four ethical theories, Kantian, utilitarian, virtue-based and religious, that demonstrate the lack of moral foundation in the continuing occupation, which imposes upon Israelis the responsibility to bring it to a decisive end.

The first moral theory is deontological ethics, whose greatest representative is Immanuel Kant. According to this theory, consequences are irrelevant to the moral rightness or wrongness of an action; what matters is whether the action is done for the sake of duty or out of respect for the moral law.

Kant provided several formulations of the moral law, which he refers to as the categorical imperative; for our purposes, what is most important are his first two formulations. The first is the principle that morality requires us to act only on those maxims we can universalize. As he puts it, "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." In short, never do anything that you couldn't will everybody else do at the same time.

The question is whether the Israeli occupation is a policy that can be universalized and pass this test of moral reasoning. The answer is clearly no; the policy of occupation is rationally inconsistent, as it requires Israel to exempt itself from moral and political norms that the rest of the international community recognizes (and which serve to protect Israel itself).

Israel is making an exception of itself which is the capital sin, according to Kant, as in effect Israel is saying: "We don't have to live by the same rules as everyone else." This is evident from the fact that Israel denies the Palestinians' right to self-determination and justifies that in the name of national security, even though the achievement of absolute security would invariably render the Palestinians absolutely vulnerable.

Whereas Israel has agreed to a two-state solution, it continues to usurp Palestinian land, thereby violating international agreements which Israel is signatory to (UN Resolution 242, the Oslo Accords). In doing so, Israel is clearly defying the first formulation of the categorical imperative, which as Kant showed, requires us to honor our agreements and contracts.

That is, Israel is acting on a maxim or policy of breaking its agreements to serve its self-interest, which cannot be universalized without contradiction because then the institution of reaching international agreements cannot be sustained.

Although many countries break international contracts, that does not affect Kant's argument as he knew full well that people lie, cheat and steal. His concern is with the principle of morality and what it requires regardless of whether these requirements are in fact met. By maintaining the occupation, Israel is flouting the moral law while expecting the Palestinians to uphold the same norms.

The second formulation is to never treat another person merely as a means, but always also as an end in themselves. In other words, what Kant is saying is that as free rational beings who can act in accordance with morality, each of us possesses intrinsic worth which implies that we must respect the inherent dignity of each individual.

In the case of the Palestinians who are under occupation, Israel is treating them as objects rather than persons who can rationally consent to the way they are being treated. Israel is coercing the Palestinians physically and psychologically by denying them human rights, through, for example, administrative detention, night raids, and expulsion, thereby robbing them of their dignity and denying them their autonomy.

The second moral theory is Utilitarianism, which in its modern form originated in England with the works of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. In contrast to Kantianism, this theory places all emphasis on the consequences of our actions. It states that an action is morally right if it produces the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people.

The moral evaluation of any policy depends on whether it maximizes utility. Utilitarianism agrees with Kant on one fundamental point, which is that morality prohibits making an exception of oneself. For obvious reasons, governments give greater priority to their own people. But does the occupation maximize the security and well-being of all Israelis?

In spite of the fact that Israel takes extraordinary measures to enhance its security, the occupation is in fact undermining the security of the state, as is evident from the repeated bloody clashes. Moreover, if Israel were to extend its moral considerations beyond its own people to include the Palestinians, then the policy of occupation still fails on utilitarian grounds even more acutely.

To be sure, while Israel resorts to utilitarian arguments to justify its treatment of the Palestinians, in the process Israel reveals the classic pitfall of utilitarian thinking, which is that it ultimately does not provide sufficient protection and respect for human rights. This contempt for human rights in fact directly erodes Israel's moral standing within the community of nations.

The third moral theory is virtue ethics, whose greatest advocate is still Aristotle. In virtue ethics, an act is moral if it is performed as a result of having a virtuous character. Virtue ethics is not primarily about codifying and applying moral principles, but developing the character from which moral actions arise. In this context, the Israeli occupation, while having a major adverse effect on the Palestinians, also has a morally corrupting influence on Israelis themselves.

Virtue ethics recognizes the importance of acquiring the habit to act ethically which involves moral upbringing; as Aristotle is to have said, "Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all."

The occupation is not educating Israeli youth towards moral virtues, but

hardening their hearts as they can live with regular prejudices, discrimination and dehumanization against the Palestinians. As such, the occupation fails to meet the principles of virtue ethics because it creates an environment which degrades the moral substance of the Israelis themselves. As a result, they continue to commit transgressions against the Palestinians without any sense of moral culpability.

One might argue from a certain Israeli perspective (i.e. the settlement movement) that the occupation engenders virtues such as national solidarity, social cohesiveness, loyalty, courage and perseverance. While this may appear to be true on the surface, the occupation is in fact tearing the Israelis' social and political fabric apart and undermining the conditions under which moral virtues such as caring, compassion, and magnanimity can grow and thrive.

Moreover, the longer the occupation persists, the greater the damage is to Israel's moral character, and Israel will become increasingly disposed to compromising its fundamental values and ideals as a democracy committed to human rights.

Finally, we need to consider the moral theory which says morality is acting in accordance with what divinity commands from us. There are two basic theories, both of which can be traced back to Plato's Euthyphro where Socrates raises the question: "whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods."

The first is the divine command theory, which states that what makes an action moral or right is the fact that God commands it and nothing else. The second theory, defended by Socrates, is that God commands us to do what is right because it is the right thing to do. In other words, morality precedes God's will and is irreducible to divine command.

In the context of this ancient debate, the usurpation and annexation of Palestinian land may appear to be defensible on the basis of the divine command theory because if God requires us to perform any set of actions, then by definition it would be the moral thing to do.

Many orthodox Jews hold to the divine command theory, as they interpret the concept of "mitzvah" (good deed) first and foremost as "command," the goodness of which cannot even be contemplated apart from the fact that this is what God has commanded us to do.

As such, those who take the Bible as the revelation of God's commands use it to justify the concept of Greater Israel. As a result, they view the Palestinian presence as an impediment God placed before them to test their resolve.

Therefore, their harsh treatment of the Palestinians becomes morally permissible because it is consistent with divine decree.

By adopting the command theory, they are ascribing to a position which has and continues to be used to justify acts which are blatantly immoral. The defender of this theory may counter that because God is good, he does not command anything which is immoral.

However, this argument is hollow because if morality is simply what God approves of, to say that God is good is merely to assert that he approves of himself and his own will. In this case, there is still no safeguard against the extremists who use the command theory to justify even the most heinous crimes.

Furthermore, if the command in question satisfies a deep seated psychological need, say, for a God-given Jewish homeland, then what humans ascribe to God eventually becomes "the will of God."

Another problem with the divine command theory is that, as the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz observed, it turns God into a kind of Tyrant unworthy of our love and devotion: "For why praise him for what he has done, if he would be equally praiseworthy for doing just the opposite?"

Turning to the theory that God commands us to do the good because it is good, what becomes clear is that any action must derive its moral worth independently of God's will. In that case, the Israeli policy toward the occupation will have to be morally justifiable without reference to some divine mandate.

We have already examined, however briefly, Israel's policy in light of deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics, and found that it comes up short and fails to meet the basic requirement of these theories. Therefore, it lacks independent moral justification on which God's commands could possibly be based on.

Israel's occupation cannot be defended on moral grounds or in terms of national security. Israel can defend itself and prevail over any of its enemies now and in the foreseeable future, but it is drowning in moral corruption that the continued occupation only deepens. It is that, the enemy from within, that poses the greatest danger Israel faces.

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