

Reform Judaism's Israeli Critique

Israel's nearly seven decades of repressing Palestinians has soured many ethical Jews on the idea that the Jewish state should get unqualified support for its behavior, including now Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the leader of U.S. Reform Judaism, as Lawrence Davidson describes.

By Lawrence Davidson

Something significant recently happened in the ongoing political-ethical drama that grips Israel and, by extension, Jewish communities worldwide. As reported by the *Jewish Daily Forward* on Nov. 6, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the president of the Union for Reform Judaism (a position that makes him the leader of the largest Jewish denomination in the United States), publicly broke with Israel's political and religious leadership.

In a major speech at the Union's biennial conference he said, "Asking Jews around the world only to wave the flag of Israel and to support even the most misguided policies of its leaders drives a wedge between the Jewish soul and the Jewish state."

Going public in this fashion is significant and welcome. However, as we shall see, this aspect of his critique has a long history.

Jacobs then got more specific: "the treatment of Israel's minorities" and the "way ultra-Orthodox views of Judaism are being enshrined in secular law" are indications that Israeli society is "broken" and that Reform Jews will not be quiet about this.

Jacobs offers the concept of *Tikkun olam* or "good works that benefit the wider community" and the "power and wisdom of pluralism" as antidotes that can help "repair" Israel. This is potentially powerful stuff for the situation here in the U.S., if not in Israel itself.

If Jacobs moves to mobilize America's Reform Jews behind a campaign opposing present Israeli behavior, it will constitute a major challenge to Zionist tribalism. It might also help liberate the U.S. Congress from its present role of accomplice to Israeli crimes.

Past as Prologue

While the Zionists will never admit it and it is unlikely that the great majority of Reform Jews are aware of it, Rabbi Jacobs's criticism is not new. Indeed, warnings and skepticism of what Zionism meant for the Jews and Judaism go back to the late Nineteenth Century and intensified with the announcement of

the Balfour Declaration in 1917.

I wrote a long essay on this subject in 2004. It is entitled "Zionism and the Attack on Jewish Values" and appeared in the online journal of ideas *Logos* (Vol. 3, No. 2, Spring 2004). Here are some excerpts:

,Ahad Ha-am (the pen name of the famous Jewish moralist Asher Ginzberg) noted as early as 1891 that Zionist settlers in Palestine had "an inclination to despotism. They treat the Arabs with hostility and cruelty, deprive them of their rights, offend them without cause, and even boast of these deeds; and no one among us opposes this despicable and dangerous inclination."

,In England, on May 24, 1917, the Joint Foreign Committee of two Jewish organizations, the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Anglo-Jewish Association, issued a statement which asserted, "the feature of the Zionist program objected to proposes to invest Jewish settlers in Palestine with special rights over others. This would prove a calamity to the whole Jewish people who hold that the principle of equal rights for all denominations is essential. The [Zionist program] is all the more inadmissible because it might involve them in most bitter feuds with their neighbors of other races and religion."

,Hannah Arendt, one of the most insightful Jewish political philosophers of the Twentieth Century, characterized the Zionist movement in a 1945 essay as a "German-inspired nationalism." The result of this was a modern form of tribal ethnocentrism that led to virulent, politicized racism. In 1948, she and 27 other prominent Jews living in the United States wrote a letter to the *New York Times* condemning the growth of right-wing political influences in the newly founded Israeli state.

,Toward the end of his life, Albert Einstein warned that "the attitude we adopt toward the Arab minority will provide the real test of our moral standards as a people." An investigation of the conclusions drawn by every human rights organization that has examined Israeli behavior toward the Palestinians over the last 50 years, leaves no doubt that the Zionists have failed Einstein's test.

Yet that is just the conclusion that today's Zionists cannot face. Any revival of these early and prescient objections as part of a contemporary critique of Zionism represents, to the ardent Zionist, the promotion of supposedly traitorous anachronisms that are not only an embarrassment, but also politically dangerous.

Jews who express such concerns are systematically denigrated and non-Jews who are critical of Zionism are slandered with charges of anti-Semitism.

Judaism Divided

Thus, Rabbi Rick Jacobs is the latest in a long line of important critics. Now that he has joined their ranks, the question is: Will Jacobs be able to popularize his critique while withstanding the enormous pressure that is certainly about to befall him?

He will be libeled and threatened in an effort to force him to back down. The movement of Reform Judaism might itself come under fire as subversive. After all, officially Israel doesn't even see Reform Jewry as real Jews.

Though an effort to discredit Jacobs and the Reform movement will be made, it will only make matters worse for the Zionists and Israel. Thanks to its racist policies and brutal aggressiveness, the Zionist state has become the most divisive issue for Jews throughout the Western world. Jacobs's pronouncement is a sure sign of this. A Zionist counterattack on Reform Jewry will make it more so.

The truth is that Zionism has always divided Jews. On one side have been those sensitive to humanitarian issues and the religion's traditional championship of egalitarianism and justice. And on the other side have been those who have committed themselves to a Jewish future defined in Zionist ideological terms.

Before World War II those on the humanitarian side were mainly outspoken intellectuals. At that time the Zionists were better organized than those who opposed them and they were politically savvy and assertive. However, apart from areas of Eastern Europe, the vast majority of ordinary Jews remained neutral. With the advent of Nazi persecution the entire balance shifted in favor of the Zionists, who saw vindication for their statist philosophy in the Holocaust. By 1948, few Jews said a word against Zionism and the state of Israel.

But that pro-Zionist balance could not last. Eventually Israel's combining of religion and state power produced the worst of both worlds. In the name of defending Judaism, Israel has conquered, persecuted and massacred, and it has self-righteously refused to acknowledge its own culpability for the ongoing tragedy of both itself and its victims. Now, more and more Jews are disgusted and alienated, or just mightily confused, by the ongoing malfeasance of a movement that was supposed to create their ultimate safe haven.

As the journalist Laurie Goodstein noted in a Sept. 22, 2014 article in the international edition of the *New York Times*, ever greater numbers of younger American Jews are turning against Zionism and Israel. However, older and more conservative Jews still remain ardent Zionists. These are the big donors not only at their local congregational level, but also when it comes to politics.

They will continue to try to intimidate Jewish skeptics into silence and to sway members of Congress. Hopefully, the efforts of men like Rabbi Jacobs will make it easier for those Jews who support more progressive and humane policies to stand up and compete for influence.

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The Progressives' Green Party Dilemma

Many progressives struggle with the "lesser-evil" dilemma. They may sympathize with Green Party positions but fear that voting for Green candidates will give right-wing Republicans control of the U.S. government, as in getting George W. Bush close enough to steal Election 2000 from Al Gore, notes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

The presumptive presidential candidate for the U.S. Green Party, Dr. Jill Stein, has long held definite ideas of what the party's position should be on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And, despite some past skepticism from Palestinian advocates, Stein's position is, from the progressive point of view, as near perfect as one is likely to get from an American politician. She has stated in a position paper the following:

"United States policy regarding Israel and Palestine must be revised to make international law, peace and human rights the central priorities. The United States has encouraged the worst tendencies of the Israeli government as it pursues policies of occupation, apartheid, assassination, illegal settlements, blockades, building nuclear bombs, indefinite detention, collective punishment, and defiance of international law. We must reset U.S. policy regarding Israel and Palestine, as part of a broader revision of U.S. policy towards the Middle East."

Stein has government actions in mind to make this policy change real, including the withholding of material support and the diplomatic and economic isolation of those who consistently violate human rights and international law.

If Stein prevails as the party leader and carries through her position into the party platform, it should be enough to cause every supporter of justice in the Middle East (and in other areas as well, for the party's positions on many

issues, domestic and foreign, are consistently progressive) to give serious consideration to supporting the Green Party's national candidates.

Certainly the Greens deserve to be on the ballot in every state and have enough supporters to make their candidacy a serious one.

Of course, the actual election of the Green Party, with or without Stein, is an unlikely event. Modern American politics has never been congenial for third parties. On a national level the best the U.S. Greens have done was 2.74 percent of the vote when Ralph Nader ran as their presidential candidate in 2000, a result I will consider more closely below.

The mass media gives the party almost no attention and, while the Green Party presidential candidate in 2012, Stein was not invited to any of the televised debates.

Even so, it is interesting to speculate what would happen if American progressives and others rallied around the Green Party and it actually attained power and moved to implement Jill Stein's position paper on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

What If?

First, we have to mention the actual role of position papers as well as party platforms. They are statements of "what we *might* do if we had sufficient power." And indeed, it is rare that presidents are elected with such power – that is, with their party also in control of both houses of Congress. Nonetheless, Stein is a principled person and I have no doubt that, given the opportunity, she would attempt to turn these theoretical positions into practice.

Second, the Green Party president would have to monitor carefully the government bureaucracy attached to the Executive Branch to make sure its leaders actually did what she instructed it to do. This would require a lot of shifting around at the upper levels, where the State Department (including some embassy staff), Department of the Treasury, Department of Defense and some others are staffed with pro-Israeli appointees. After these reassignments are carried through the middle-echelon civil service bureaucrats would probably be fairly reliable and responsive.

Third, the Green Party president would find herself in a battle royal with Congress (assuming the Greens did not take control here too) over questions of aid and structurally created ties with Israel that lay outside of the president's hands. For instance, much of the infamous \$3 billion "aid" package given to the Zionist state yearly can only be altered by Congress. I think such

a battle, carried out publicly, would be very beneficial for the country as a whole, but it also might end with a Green Party president having to compromise.

The Progressive's Dilemma

The dream of a successful Green Party sounds great and it is heartening that there is actually a political party out there with the courage and wisdom to take a stand for international law, peace and justice. But, given the present political state of things, Jill Stein may run for office, but she really cannot win.

And, that sets up the progressive's dilemma – the question whether, under these circumstances, progressives should actually vote for the Green Party's national ticket candidates.

The dilemma was first made apparent in the year 2000 when Ralph Nader, running for president on the Green Party ticket, got close to 3 million votes. The other two candidates in that race were the Democrat Al Gore and the Republican George W. Bush. The race proved close enough that some have seen Nader's campaign as a "spoiler" drawing off enough otherwise Democratic votes to throw the race to Bush.

Actually, I cannot resolve this dilemma, but I can tell you that it begs the question of why the most reasonable and rational political party, the one with positions that actually deal with both the nation's and the planet's worsening problems, remains at best a marginal player here in the United States.

The answer to this question probably has to do with the way most Americans, confined as they are within their local venues, have been acculturated to see the world – a range of perception that, over the decades, has melded with the range of propaganda put out by the two major parties.

This has left the more rational positions expressed by the Green Party vulnerable to the charge of naive idealism. In other words, most Americans, at least those who bother to vote, see the world through indoctrinated eyes and this makes it psychologically comfortable to vote for Democrats or Republicans even though doing so perpetuates old and deepening problems.

Heading off in new directions means going beyond politically conditioned perceptual views. And, even if it is demonstrably more reasonable and promising to do so, such a change causes a lot of discomfort.

So are we stuck in a self-destructive rut here? Quite likely. And, if history acts as a guide, the most likely thing to kick the U.S. out of the rut is catastrophe – something even worse than the fiascos of Vietnam and Iraq, and the

economic time-bombs of ongoing bank scandals.

That is a really sad conclusion, especially since such a catastrophe could lead the nation toward the hard right rather than the progressive left. However, it just may be the truth of the matter.

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Fighting a Cultural Boycott of Israel

Cultural and economic boycotts helped isolate white-supremacist South Africa and encouraged a shift to multi-racial democracy – and a similar strategy has ratcheted up pressure on Israel to reach a peace deal with Palestinians – but there is a new pushback against that strategy, notes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

There is a new British organization called Culture for Coexistence with the aim of ending the cultural boycott of Israel, which has been relatively effective in raising public awareness of oppressive Zionist policies, and replace it with “open dialogue” and “cultural engagement.” A “galaxy of 150 British artists and authors” signed an open letter published in the *Guardian* newspaper on Oct. 22 announcing the group’s position:

“Cultural boycotts singling out Israel are divisive and discriminatory and will not further peace,” while “open dialogue and interaction promote greater understanding and mutual acceptance and it is through such understanding and acceptance that movement can be made towards a resolution of the conflict.”

While concepts such as open dialogue and cultural interaction are, in principle, hard to disagree with, their efficacy as agents of conflict resolution has to be judged within a historical context. In other words, such approaches are effective when circumstances dictate that all parties seriously dialogue and interact meaningfully – in a manner that actually promotes “mutual acceptance.”

Is this the case when it comes to Israel? The burden of proof here is on Culture for Coexistence because they are the ones asking the Palestinians and their supporters to put aside a strategy (boycott) that is actually putting pressure on Israel to negotiate seriously.

The Culture for Coexistence signatories do not address this question of efficacy. Instead they make the simple assertion that cultural boycotts are bad and won't help resolve the conflict while cultural interaction is good and will work to that end. How do they know this? Without evidence of its workability, such an assertion is merely an idealization of cultural engagement that ignores that pursuit's historical futility during a nearly century long conflict.

Do Israeli Leaders Want a Just Peace?

Cultural interaction with Israel went on for decades before the boycott effort got going. It had no impact on the issue of conflict resolution. Such cultural activity certainly did not change the fact that Israel's leaders have never shown interest in negotiating a resolution with the Palestinians except solely on Israeli terms.

And, that stubbornness is a major part of the reason why peace talks (and also the Oslo agreements) never worked. There is a whole set of histories, written by Israelis and based on archival research that support the claim that Israel has not sought a just resolution to the conflict. Here I would recommend the Culture for Coexistence signatories read the books of the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé.

Given this historical Zionist attitude, what sort of "greater understanding and mutual acceptance" does Culture and Coexistence expect to accomplish by swapping the boycott for "cultural engagement"? It is a question the signatories of the open letter might address to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who just recently was reported to have proclaimed that Israel will control all Palestinian land indefinitely.

The "galaxy of British artists and authors" aligned with Culture for Coexistence seems oblivious to all these contextual issues. Of course, there is a good chance that some of them are more interested in undermining the boycott of Israel than in the alleged promotion of peace through "cultural engagement."

As the Guardian article discussing the group notes, "Some of the network's supporters are closely aligned with Israel," including individuals associated with Conservative Friends of Israel and Labour Friends of Israel.

Does Cultural Contact Lead to Peace?

There is another, more generic misunderstanding exhibited in the group's statement. It is found in the letter's closing assertion that "cultural engagement builds bridges, nurtures freedom and positive movement for change" – a position reiterated when Loraine da Costa, chairperson of the new

organization, told the *Guardian* that “culture has a unique ability to bring people together and bridge division.”

No matter how you want to define culture, high or low, there is no evidence for this position except on the level of individuals or small groups. On the level of larger or whole populations, the assertion that “cultural engagement builds bridges” is another naive idealization that is belied by historical practice. Historically, culture has always divided people (both across borders and across classes) and acted as a barrier to understanding. At a popular level, most people are uninterested in, or suspicious of, foreign cultures and are unwilling to try to pursue cultural interaction.

Israel is a very good example of this cultural xenophobia. Historically, the European Jews who established the state despised Arab culture. They tried to eradicate it among the Mizrahi Jews who came to Israel from Arab lands. This intra-Jewish Israeli prejudice is still a problem today. What aspects of Arab culture (mostly having to do with cuisine) Israeli Jews are attracted to they try to repackage as “Israeli.”

There are two final considerations here: First is the need to be serious and clear in the use of language. One can, of course, say “culture has a unique ability to bring people together” but is this a statement that has any real meaning or is it just a platitude?

And second: If you are going to give advice about a century-old conflict you should know enough about its history to be sensible in your offering. Thus, in this case, if you know that high or low cultural intercourse with Israel (and, as suggested above, there has been plenty of it since the founding of the state in 1948), has actually improved the prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace, you should lay out the evidence. However, if one is just offering a banal cliché, well, only the ignorant can take that seriously.

Those who first proposed the cultural boycott did not do it out of some anti-Semitic dislike for Israeli artworks, music, literature or theater. They did it because cultural interaction with Israel had not only failed to promote an equitable peace, but in fact camouflaged the policies of a nation-state that practices ethnic cleansing and other destructive policies against non-Jews.

The logical conclusion was drawn that if you want to pressure the Israelis to change their ways, you withdraw from cultural contact and make any reconnection a condition of their getting serious about conflict resolution.

How is it that the 150 artists and authors who signed the Culture for Coexistence open letter do not know the relevant facts? Setting aside the

confirmed Zionists, whose ulterior motive is pretty clear, do these people take this stand because it “*feels right*” – that is, because they believe cultural interaction *ought to*, or even *must*, promote conflict resolution? Alas, this is wishful thinking and, taking history seriously, Palestine may go extinct before such an approach actually helps lead to a just peace.

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The Lost Cause of Israeli Justice

When Israel was founded, there was hope among progressive Jews that the new country could rely on the best traditions of Judaism and teach the world how to navigate the shoals of bigotry and injustice, a vision that remains unfulfilled, as Lawrence Davidson describes.

By Lawrence Davidson

An ideologue is someone who sees the world in the limiting terms of a doctrine or dogma. It is limiting because the human world does not operate or evolve according to any one dogma. Therefore ideologues must wear blinders that result in tunnel vision – a tunnel which, like a Procrustean bed, tries to force the world to fit their chosen ideology.

There are hundreds of ideologies out there, both religious and secular, and in every case the resulting tunnel vision eventually results in absurdities – claims about the world that, seen from outside of the ideology, make little or no sense. So it is with the ideology of Zionism and the doctrinaire interpretations its adherents make about their own behavior and the behavior of others who oppose them.

One such proponent of Zionist ideology is David Harris, the Executive Director of the [American Jewish Committee](#) (AJC). The AJC describes its mission as “to enhance the well-being of the Jewish people and Israel.” This is a point of dogma for the Zionists – that the well-being of the Jewish people and Israel are bound together. I am often confronted with Harris’s ideological take on events because, curiously, he has me on his mailing list.

David Harris's View

On Oct. 11, Harris posted an essay on the ongoing violence in Israel-Palestine. It is entitled "Attacks Against Israelis: The World's Silence Is Deafening" and the entire piece can be found both on the *Huffington Post* and *The Times of Israel*. The essay seeks to promote a picture of Israeli victimhood. As such it opens up a clear window on the Zionist's view of the present situation and therefore is worth taking a look at.

What I am going to do is take representative segments from Harris's essay and show how the grievances he reserves for Israelis seem somehow wrong when considered from outside the Zionist perspective. Indeed, as Harris's complaint about the "world's silence" in the face of violence against Israelis suggests, for many people, his picture of Israeli victimhood is quite untenable. Because his ideology will not allow him to consider the possibility of Israel's responsibility for the present violence, the world's "silence" leaves him aggrieved and bewildered.

Here then are some representative parts of Mr. Harris's essay. He starts this way: "For days now, I have been watching in dismay as Israeli citizens face random attacks, some deadly, by Palestinian assailants on the streets of their cities and towns. Children have been orphaned, parents have lost children, and some survivors are doubtless scarred for life."

It is true that individual Israelis have been hurt or killed in the recent past in apparently random attacks by Palestinians. Unfortunately, this is as far as Harris's understanding goes. Thus, his tunnel vision renders invisible other perspectives, such as the possibility that dead and injured Israeli Jews, like the Palestinians themselves, are victims of the aggressive Zionist society and culture they live in, the government and laws they obey, and the racist policies they tolerate.

Given this perspective the present Palestinian violence becomes understandable as a product of anger and frustration caused by Israeli occupation and long-standing discrimination against Israeli Arabs. There has been no need for an indoctrination of hate by Hamas or any other religiously inspired group (a favorite red herring of Zionist ideologues) to explain Palestinian actions. Israeli policies and practices in and of themselves are quite sufficient.

Harris cannot perceive, much less understand, this perspective. Yet, in ever greater numbers, the people outside of Israel can see that any portrayal of Israeli victimhood is in conflict with an objective reading of the history of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle.

David Harris continues, "And I've been wondering, not for the first time, what it would take for the world to wake up and acknowledge that Israel, the lone liberal democracy in the Middle East, is facing violence that must be condemned unequivocally, and that it, like any other nation, has the obligation to defend itself."

This "wondering" is also a product of Mr. Harris's constricted view. There has never been any Zionist complaint, from Harris in particular, about the world's silence while the Palestinians experience "liberal" Israel's ethnic bias and occupation. Nor did he and his fellows take note of the world's silence when Palestine's own 2006 democratic election was suppressed by Israel and its American ally.

It is exactly this silence in the face of Palestinian suffering that has left Israeli power in place and allowed for its oppressive use. Yet this particular silence has no place in Harris's ideologically constructed world.

Harris goes on, "It's striking how some otherwise intelligent and thoughtful people in government, media, or think tanks, just shut down their critical faculties. Instead, they resort to a Pavlovian response mechanism that essentially rejects any possible legitimacy for the Israeli position and blindly defends whatever Palestinian narrative comes along."

As noted above, an ideological outlook usually leads to absurdities. The truth is that until recently the Zionist narrative on Israel-Palestine held a monopoly in the West. Now, finally, Israel's consistent apartheid-like practices are being noticed and as a result that monopoly is crumbling.

The best Harris can do is evoke a fictional "Pavlovian mechanism" to explain the responses to Israeli policies. Nonetheless, the weakening of the Zionist narrative is at an early stage, which means that, even now, it is often not the Israeli narrative that has to fight its way into the media, think tanks and government councils. It is the Palestinian one.

There is much more to Harris's missive, and almost every paragraph is shaped by the doctrinal demands of his ideology. The ersatz victimhood he claims for the Israelis is, in fact, a measure of the resulting distortion. For he, and his fellow Zionists, have stolen that depiction of suffering from their own victims, the Palestinians. Such is the power of ideological blinders.

To pull off this reversal of roles and posit the Israelis as victims of the Palestinians, Harris's essay must leave out the seminal fact that for the past 67 years Israel has possessed overwhelming power. With this power Israel has oppressively controlled almost every aspect of Palestinian life. The inevitable

result is the violence of resistance. Israelis who suffer from that violence should take this reality into consideration. But, few of them can do this.

The explanation for this inability brings us back to the problem of tunnel vision. Consider the following: many Palestinians can understand Western Jewish history, including the Holocaust, and recognize how it shapes, though ultimately cannot excuse, Zionist behavior. This ability to understand is facilitated by the fact that the Palestinians were not responsible for the suffering of Western Jewry.

Unfortunately, the Zionists can't reciprocate by understanding the history that drives Palestinian behavior. They cannot do so because their ideology precludes the possibility that they are, in fact, responsible for Palestinian suffering. Ideologues are not known for their skill at self-criticism.

One of the most renowned Jewish journalists, I. F. Stone, once said, referring to his own Jewish brethren, "how we act toward the Arabs will determine what kind of people we become: either oppressors and racists in our turn like those from whom we have suffered, or a nobler race able to transcend the tribal xenophobias that afflict mankind."

Well, the verdict is in, at least for those Jews who adhere to the Zionist ideology. For them "oppression and racism" has won out. And so has denial – just read David Harris.

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Awash in Guns and Bloodshed

The U.S. and Israel stand apart from most of the developed world as modern societies awash in guns with powerful forces overriding large numbers of citizens, even majorities, alarmed at the rates of violence, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Here is the question: What two “modern” societies have cultures that allow and even idealize the possession of guns? Answer: the United States and Israel.

In the U.S., [there are 88 guns](#) floating around for every 100 people, which comes to about 300 million of these weapons in circulation. This includes military-style assault weapons, of which [it is estimated](#) there are about 3.75 million in private hands. This state of affairs makes the U.S. the most weaponized modern society on the planet.

This weaponized status is not because most Americans want it this way. As President Barack Obama has [pointed out](#), multiple national polls have shown that most Americans [want stricter gun control](#), but that seems not to matter. Why? Because most Americans are not sufficiently politically organized around this issue to out-lobby the minority who are – mostly in the form of the National Rifle Association (NRA).

We are here referring to a rather fanatical, though culturally decisive, minority who define freedom as, first and foremost, the right to “pack” a firearm or two, or ten, ad infinitum. They errantly believe that somehow owning a gun (almost any gun) is [“a birthright and an essential part of the nation’s heritage.”](#) They expend much energy on [misinterpreting the Second Amendment](#) of the Constitution so as to allegedly prove their point. In other words, for these folks, being armed with a gun is a cornerstone of American culture.

Isn't this somehow a corruption of the democratic process? Shouldn't that process demand that, in matters of national security (and this certainly is such a matter), the safety of the vast majority should prevail?

Unfortunately that is not the American way of democratic politics. In truth, the U.S. is not a democracy of individual citizens, but rather one of competing interest groups. The interest group that is the NRA is better funded and more politically influential than its opponents, and so, in the matter of gun legislation, it wins. And this is so despite the fact that its victories make society much more dangerous than it ought to be.

The NRA is in total denial of the fact that, ipso facto, to be armed is to be dangerous. They illogically deny that there is any connection between the publicly held 300 million firearms in the country and the fact that the U.S. has the highest gun-related homicide rate in the "developed" world.

You can find higher rates of gun-related murder, but you have to go to places like Honduras and El Salvador to see them. Indeed the best the NRA can do in the face of the deadly mayhem for which it is at least indirectly responsible, is the statement by Wayne LaPierre, the organization's executive vice president, who has declared that "the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun" – an absurdly simplistic assertion leading to the conclusion that what the nation needs is more guns and not fewer.

The Israeli Gun Culture

While the U.S. has evolved a self-destructive gun culture, it is not unique among the "modern" nations. There is also America's "partner" in so much that is violent, Israel. It is hard to know how many guns are loose among the Israeli Jewish population. I remember that the first time I went to Israel, back in the early 1970s, it seemed that everyone, both men and women, was draped with military assault rifles. In later trips these became less evident but that does not mean less available.

Near universal military service, followed by enlistment in the active reserves, means that most Jewish citizens over 18 have access to a gun. Some Israelis would qualify this assertion by pointing out that, unlike the U.S., Israel has "strict gun regulations," including a ban on assault weapons. In addition, "a person must also show genuine cause to carry a firearm, such as self-defense."

But Israel is a chronically insecure place due to its expansionist policies and oppression of Palestinians. So "self-defense" is in the forefront of a great majority of Israeli minds.

According to Liel Leibovitz, writing in the magazine Tablet, "It doesn't take

much of an expert to realize that these restrictions, in and of themselves, do not constitute much by the way of gun control." Every Israeli Jew can justify wanting a gun and many possess them.

So why don't we hear about killings in Israel similar to those in the United States? Well, *it is not* for the misleading reasons offered by Liel Leibovitz in his *Tablet* article: that Israelis are more responsible gun owners and, as a nation, Israel does a better job treating disturbed, potentially violent, individuals.

As to this last assertion, Leibovitz fails to account for the significant number of armed Israeli fanatics running loose in the country's illegal settlements. The truth is that we in the U.S. *do often hear* of the Israeli version of gun-related rampages. Unfortunately, most Americans don't recognize in these reports the same sort of chronic murder we have generated here at home.

While Americans most often use their guns on each other, the Israelis primarily use their guns on Palestinians. The result is the daily harassment, injury and murder of an entire ethnically specific population by Israeli soldiers, police, settlers and other armed civilians. As a result over 9,000 Palestinians have been killed and over 73,000 injured since 2000.

This is reported to the world as acts of self-defense on the part of Israelis. But is it? Such an assertion is hard to sustain when one sees the lopsided kill and injury ratio between Palestinian and Israeli victims. Indeed, the numbers averaging around 33 to 1, suggest ongoing collective punishment against Palestinians audacious enough to resist Israeli occupation.

Both the U.S. and Israel have historically rooted gun cultures. Perhaps this is because both societies matured against the backdrop of territorial conquest, delusions of racial superiority, and near-genocidal treatment of indigenous populations.

This sort of history has produced two related consequences: first, particularly among more conservative and traditionalist elements of the population, it has resulted in obsessive concerns with self-defense. Second, it has built up an association between the possession and use of deadly weapons and the image of the brave and independent citizen defending hearth and home.

These consequences are now underpinned by psychological states that are, apparently, impervious to counter-argument. Neither the NRA devotee nor the ardent Zionist is open to the proposition that their own ideas and actions have something to do with the dangers and insecurities they feel.

And, in both countries such fanatics seem to be politically dominant. That means

all citizens of these two “modern” and “developed” societies, even those rational enough to understand what is going on, are stuck within gun cultures and the explosive cycles of violence they produce.

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Reflections on ‘Deep Poverty’

The Constitution’s Framers set as one of the new government’s priorities providing for the “general Welfare,” but that progressive mandate was soon swept away by slaveholders and industrialists who shaped America into a “me-first” society amazingly tolerant of “deep poverty,” as Lawrence Davidson reflects.

By Lawrence Davidson

In the assessment of poverty in the United States there is a category known as “deep poverty,” defined in a recent article in the Philadelphia Inquirer as: “income of 50% or less of the poverty rate.” In other words, the current poverty level income for a U.S. family of four is \$24,000 a year, which means that the same family receiving only \$12,000 is in deep poverty. At this level, hopelessness prevails and one’s day-to-day goal is just staying alive.

The deep poverty rate for the United States as a whole is 6.8 percent of the population. Using the rounded-off 2014 census figure of 322 million residents, that comes to about 22 million men, women and children in deep poverty. This is a pretty shocking figure for what most regard as the richest country on earth.

It should come as no surprise that, according to the article, “deep poverty increased nationwide after 1996, when the welfare system was changed. The number of people on cash welfare was drastically reduced and the amount of time people could receive benefits was limited.” This was a public policy decision taken by elected officials at the national level. All at once, the “safety net” for the poor, and particularly for those at this deep level of poverty, all but disappeared.

Tradition of Not Caring

The Inquirer article of Sept. 30 goes on to state that “most Americans cannot fathom the level of privation that deep poverty represents.”

I am not sure this is the case. Deep poverty is very visible. Consider that at present 81 percent of Americans live in urban environments. In such environments it is easy to encounter the homeless and the beggars, most of whom are in deep poverty. So ubiquitous are they that a Hollywood movie has recently been made about them, entitled "Time Out of Mind" and starring Richard Gere.

Here is a quote from the Philadelphia Inquirer's Oct. 2 film review, "People talk on cell phones, run for the bus, head for meals almost uniformly indifferent" to the fate of the homeless man Gere portrays.

Also keep in mind that it was not that long ago that people had older relatives who lived through the Great Depression, a time when deep poverty was even more visible. That story is a big part of the nation's modern history.

Rather than pretending that Americans "cannot fathom" deep poverty, it is better to argue that popular perception is more complex. When the non-poor see that homeless person, they probably feel a bit of worry and disgust all at once. In the end, they turn aside and pretend not to see. And this denotes a collective sentiment of not caring enough about the problem to push for the policies needed to correct it policies which go way beyond welfare.

Why would this be the case? Here are a couple of reasons:

First, there is the fact that the people of the United States, perhaps more than any other Western country, are still influenced by the primitive outlook of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century capitalism. In those centuries both the middle and upper classes favored government restricted to three functions: 1. defense of the realm; 2. police, courts and the enforcement of contracts; 3. and upholding the sanctity of private property. Care for the poor was the responsibility of the churches.

This entire setup was designed to maximize individual freedom by keeping government small in both power and scope. Maintaining this status would also hold taxes down to a minimum.

You can easily see this attitude toward government in the ideology of the Tea Party and the conservative politicians who cater to that group's complaints. For instance, take the reason given by Ben Shapiro, a journalist and Tea Party advocate, why the Republican Party was successful in the 2010 congressional elections: "In 2010, Republicans soared to historic victory because the much-maligned Tea Party spearheaded mass resistance to Obama's takeover of the healthcare industry."

The statement is a gross exaggeration, at least as to the claim that the government had taken over the healthcare industry. It did no such thing, but

rather moved to work with private insurance companies so as to facilitate healthcare for the poor and uninsured. However, spending tax money on the poor only fed into the paranoia over big government that afflicts Shapiro and his lot.

Another angle on this sentiment can be found in the declaration of Michele Bachmann, another Tea Party advocate, that the Tea Party “stands for the fact that we are taxed enough already.” This statement is misleading at best. While it is true that those of moderate or low income are often highly taxed, those of high income are definitely not. In the U.S., the wealthy pay lower taxes than those of moderate income.

Finally, Elizabeth Warren, a liberal Democrat, has correctly concluded that the Tea Party is dedicated to “unraveling just about everything the federal government had ever built.” That is straight out of the playbook of primitive Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century capitalism.

Looking Out for Number One

There is a second reason why many non-poor Americans do not actively concern themselves with poverty, deep or not, and that has to do with what I call “natural localness” the generic tendency for all of us to concentrate foremost on our local sphere. Thus, caring, like charity, begins at home and usually does not go far beyond it.

We care for our family and friends, sometimes (though not always) for our neighbors, local co-religionists, co-workers or others in local social groups we might identify with. But we rarely actively care about strangers.

The primitive, yet still extant, capitalist ideology referred to above comes in here and reinforces this space between us and the stranger who happens to also be poor. This ideology teaches that poverty is a personal failing with moral implications. That is, if you are poor, it is your fault. It is because you are lazy and otherwise morally deficient.

The possibility that poverty, and particularly deep poverty, could be a structural problem of both capitalist and racial or ethnically biased economies is never considered in this interpretation. And, tax-wise, it is cheaper to blame the victim in this case, than pay out adequate welfare.

The argument given here, that not caring is an age-old tradition, should not be taken to mean that there are no individuals out there who do in fact actively care and advocate for strangers who are poor, oppressed and otherwise mistreated. These folks do exist.

There are individuals who actively advocate for the ultimate strangers people suffering on other continents. There are even those who dedicate their lives to giving solace to incarcerated murderers. The point is that these folks are a small minority amidst a sea of ultimate indifference. They are, if you will, counter-cultural, despite occasionally getting good press.

It might be the case that we could, over time, teach the nation's youth to be more caring of strangers in need. After all, being human means that we are not necessarily slaves to evolution-rooted tendencies like natural localness. But to do this would be to challenge tradition and wage a political struggle against narrow-minded school boards.

So, the odds are against it. It is easier to go with the indifference that just comes naturally.

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Decline of Western Ethnic States

The neocon-driven wars in the Middle East have unleashed a demographic tidal wave on Europe, the arrival of refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and other war-torn countries. Despite political resistance, this flood inevitably will reshape the Continent's ethnic character, says Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

If you were transported back to Europe in 1900 and asked educated citizens to describe the ideal political arrangement, what they would outline to you is a homogeneous nation-state: France for the French, Germany for the Germans, Italy for the Italians, and the like. They would note exceptions, but describe them as unstable.

For instance, at this time the Austro-Hungarian Empire was, ethnically, a very diverse place, but it was politically restless. Come World War I, ethnic desires for self-rule and independence would help tear this European-centered multinational empire apart. In truth, even those states that fancied themselves ethnically unified were made up of many regional outlooks and dialects, but the friction these caused was usually minor enough to allow the ideal of homogeneity to prevail. The ethnically unified nation-state was almost everyone's "ideal

state.”

This standard of homogeneity started to break down after World War II. After this war, the foreign empires run by many of Europe’s homogeneous states were in retreat and in their wake came a slew of new nations in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Simultaneously, the impact of the end of empire on the European nations was to have their own homogeneous status eroded.

For instance, when Great Britain set up the Commonwealth as a substitute for empire she allowed freer immigration into England for Commonwealth citizens. The result was an influx of people of color from former British colonies in Africa, India-Pakistan and the Caribbean.

A similar thing happened as the French empire crumbled. With its demise many North Africans, as well as Vietnamese Catholics, went to France. Later, Turks would go to Germany, a preference that reflected the close relations between Berlin and the defunct Ottoman Empire.

Then came the formation of the European Union (EU) in 1993, which facilitated the flow of labor across European borders. Now citizens of one EU state could go and work in any other member state. In other words, the 20 or 30 years following World War II marked the beginning of the end of the Western homogeneous state.

The Refugee Crisis

Now we may be witnessing the final stage of that demise. The present refugee crisis resulting from wars raging in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and Libya, among other places in the Middle East, has set in movement millions of displaced people. Many of these refugees are heading for Europe.

While initially most of the European Union leaders showed some willingness to take in substantial numbers of refugees, strong resistance from Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and the Czech Republic caused a pause in the effort. This was a predictable moment. All established populations, even relatively diverse ones, fear that their cultural norms and economic advantages will be threatened by large waves of new immigrants.

At the extreme, one finds ideologically and religiously defined nations such as the Arab Gulf states and the allegedly Westernized Israel (itself a product of an overwhelming refugee invasion of Palestine) refusing to take in any of the present refugees. Even in a country such as the United States, which is historically built upon the inflow of diverse populations, it is politically difficult to open borders to new refugees in need. Initially, announcing a willingness to allow an embarrassingly small number of 10,000 refugees to enter, Washington has increased that to 100,000 between now and 2017.

Getting back to the European scene, the pressures now building on the borders eventually resulted in a EU decision, allegedly binding on all its 28 member states, to speed up the intake screening process for refugees and distribute the accepted numbers across the EU countries. How many will ultimately be allowed into Europe is still unclear.

If the leaders of Europe are smart about it they will go beyond merely symbolic numbers. If they are not, then there will be concentration camps on their borders and eventual violence that will mark a dark period in their supposed civilized histories. Controlled or not, in the end, many of the refugees will probably find a way in.

Ironic Justice

There is ironic justice in this prospect. After all, the wars that have uprooted so many were triggered by Western intervention in the Middle East. One can thank George W. Bush and his neoconservative colleagues (along with British allies) for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. That action set loose the forces that have subsequently displaced the people who make up the bulk of today's refugees.

To this can be added the 2011 NATO intervention in the civil war in Libya, in which France, Italy and the U.S. led the way. This action has prolonged the anarchy in that country and is one of the reasons that 300,000 people attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea in the direction of Europe in 2015 alone. At least 2,500 of them died in the attempt.

It is a testimony to the fact that the average citizen has little knowledge and less interest in their nation's foreign policies that few in Europe and the U.S. recognize, much less acknowledge, responsibility for the present disaster.

The population in western and central Europe has been shifting in the direction of diversity for the last 70 years, and that of the United States more or less consistently since the nation's founding. Along with diversity comes a complementary, if perhaps more gradual, shift in culture.

Opposing this historical trend is the fact that anti-immigrant resistance among established national populations is almost a default position. However, this is like spitting in the wind. In the long term, the evolution of populations moves from homogeneity to diversity. It is just a matter of how long the process takes.

Thus, from every angle, ethical as well as historical, the way to approach the present refugee crisis is to allow, in a controlled but adequately responsive way, the inflow of those now running from the ravages of invasion and civil war.

In so doing we should accept the demise of the homogeneous state. Whether it is Germany, France, Hungary, Israel or Burma, the concept is historically untenable and neither raises nor even maintains our civilizational standards. Rather it grinds them down into the dust of an inhumane xenophobia.

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US Confusion over the Syrian War

Official Washington is in a tizzy over Russia's decision to join the fight in Syria to defeat Al Qaeda and ISIS, though one might have thought the U.S. would welcome Moscow's help. But there are other factors, including the wishes of Israel and Saudi Arabia, complicating matters, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

On May 1, I wrote an analysis on "*Changing Alliances and the National Interest in the Middle East*." In this piece, I made the argument that, at least since September 2001 and the declaration of the "war on terror," the defeat of Al Qaeda and its affiliates has been a publicly stated national interest of the United States. This certainly has been the way it has been presented by almost continuous government pronouncements and media stories dedicated to this "war" over the years.

Given this goal, it logically follows that, with the evolution of Al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations such as the so-called Islamic State (aka ISIS or Daesh) and Jabhat al Nusra (aka Al Qaeda in Syria), those who also seek the destruction of such groups are America's de facto allies in the "war on terror" and warrant our assistance. Likewise, those who openly or clandestinely support these religious fanatics are opponents of a central U.S. national interest, and their relationship with the United States should at least be open to review.

Then came the shocker: Who has been and continues to actively oppose these al-Qaeda derivatives with soldiers on the ground? It turns out to be, among others – Iran, Hezbollah and Bashar al-Assad's Syrian government. And, who are clandestinely aiding the Al-Qaeda affiliates, the enemies of Washington? It turns out to be Israel and Saudi Arabia.

As I explain in my original analysis, this latter development has much to do

with the fact that both the Israelis and the Saudis have decided that regime change in Syria is a high priority, even if it means ISIS and al-Nusra end up taking over Syria and, as Robert Parry puts it in a Consortiumnews.com [article](#), ISIS “chopping off the heads of Christians, Alawites, Shiites and other ‘heretics’ and/or Al Qaeda having a major Mideast capital from which to plot more attacks on the West.”

Has the U.S. government, or for that matter the U.S. media, brought this anomalous situation to the attention of the general public? No. Has Washington altered its policies in the region so as to ally with the actual anti-al-Qaeda forces? Not at all. Why not? These are questions we will address below, but first we must look at a recent complicating factor.

Russia to the Rescue

This screwball situation has now taken yet another turn. The Russian government, which also sees Al Qaeda and its affiliates as a growing threat, has decided that the U.S. will not meaningfully act against the religious fanatics now threatening Syria – a country with which it, Russia, has strong ties. Having come to this conclusion, Moscow has decided to take the initiative and increase its military assistance to Damascus.

According to a *New York Times* article of Sept. 5, this includes bringing into Syria as many as a thousand military advisers and support staff. Russia already has a naval base at the port city of Tartus. Now it is establishing a presence at the main airbase outside the city of Latakia.

All of this has raised alarms in Washington. Secretary of State John Kerry, who has met several times with Russian officials about the Syrian civil war, was reported by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on Sept. 10 to have called his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, to tell him that the Russian moves will only increase the level of violence rather than help promote a negotiated settlement.

If this report is accurate, Kerry must have come across as rather lame. After over four years of protracted internecine slaughter, over 4 million refugees, and numerous failed attempts at a negotiated a settlement, all one has as a result is the growth of rampaging religious fanatics who now control much of Syria and part of Iraq as well.

It might just be the case that Moscow has come to the conclusion that a negotiated settlement is not possible, and what one really needs is a military victory that destroys organizations such as ISIS and al-Nusra. Oddly, the U.S. government seems to be alarmed at this prospect. No doubt this is because Moscow

sees no reason to displace its ally, Bashar al-Assad, while “regime change” is a cause celebre for U.S. and Israeli leaders.

Washington has gone so far as to request NATO-affiliated countries to deny Russian transport planes permission to overfly their territory on their way to Syria. At least one such country, Bulgaria, has done just that. Fortunately, this does not really hamper the Russian effort. Iran, another enemy of Al Qaeda, has granted permission for the over-flights, thus opening up a convenient and more or less direct route for the Russian supply line.

The goal of destroying Al-Qaeda-like organizations is, supposedly, what the “war on terror” is all about. Nonetheless, the U.S. government’s policies in this regard are inconsistent. Does the U.S. want to destroy Al Qaeda and its affiliates or not? The answer is, mostly, yes. However, something often holds the government back – something that the Russians don’t have to contend with.

That something breaks down into three parts: (1) longstanding, conservative Washington-based special interest lobbies, the most powerful of which is sponsored by Israel; (2) the pro-war neoconservative elements within American society that often cooperate with these lobbies; and (3) an American military bureaucracy parts of which are committed to maintaining a system of land, air and naval bases situated mostly in dictatorial Middle East states hostile to both Russia and Syria. It is this combination of forces that prevents meaningful changes even as evolving realities would seem to demand them.

In other words, while Israel and Saudi Arabia can act in ways they consider to be in their national interests, their agents and allies in Washington exercise enough influence to discourage U.S. policymakers from doing the same thing when it comes to the Middle East. That is why Washington is not pointing up the fact that two close “allies” are helping the same sort of people who attacked the World Trade Center, while simultaneously chastising the Russians for actually acting forcefully against those same terrorists.

The inability to adjust to changing realities is a sure sign of decline, particularly for a “great power.” And, unfortunately that seems to be the situation for the U.S. At least at this point, one can only conclude that the Obama administration’s ability to secure the Iran nuclear agreement is an isolated example of realism.

Current U.S. policy toward Syria shows that Washington has not made the turnaround leading to a permanent clear-sighted ability to assess national interests in the Middle East.

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Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America's National Interest*; *America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*; and *Islamic Fundamentalism*.

In Case You Missed...

Some of our special stories from August focused on the failure of the mainstream media to question prevailing “group thinks” on almost any topic, the bitter fight over the Iran nuclear deal, the hidden reality of U.S. allies aiding Al Qaeda in Syria, and the surprising surge of anti-Establishment candidates.

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