Commentary...

How the Embassy Move Signals Big Changes to the Iran Deal
By Evelyn Gordon

When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with President Donald Trump last week, he had two main items on his agenda: thanking Trump for his decision to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem and urging U.S. action on Iran. At first glance, these items seem unrelated. In fact, they’re closely intertwined. The decision to relocate the U.S. embassy has turned out to be a strategic building block in Trump’s effort to renegotiate the nuclear deal with Iran.

To understand why, consider the dilemma facing his administration when it first took office. Without a serious American threat to scrap the nuclear deal, there was no chance that even America’s allies—much less Russia, China and Iran—would agree to negotiate a fix for some of the deal’s biggest flaws. Yet conventional wisdom held that the administration would never dare flout the whole rest of the world, along with virtually the entire U.S. policy community, by withdrawing from the deal. So how was it possible to make the threat seem credible short of actually walking away from the deal?

Enter the embassy issue. Here, too, conventional wisdom held that the administration would never dare flout the whole rest of the world, along with virtually the entire U.S. policy community, by moving the embassy. Moreover, the embassy issue shared an important structural similarity with the Iran deal: Just as the president must sign periodic waivers to keep the Iran deal alive, he must sign periodic waivers to keep the embassy in Tel Aviv.

Consequently, this turned out to be the perfect issue to show that Trump really would defy the world and mix the Iran deal if it isn’t revised to his satisfaction. In fact, the process he followed with the embassy almost perfectly mimics the process he has so far followed on the Iran deal.

The first time the embassy waiver came up for review last June, Trump signed it. He vowed, however, that he wouldn’t keep doing so forever. The second time, in December, he officially announced the embassy move, but said it would take several years to find a site in Jerusalem and construct the new building. So, in the meantime, he signed the waiver again. Then, last month, Trump announced that the embassy would officially relocate to temporary quarters in the existing U.S. consulate in Jerusalem in May. In other words, there will be no third signing of the waiver.

The Iran waivers have so far followed a similar pattern. The first time the deal came up for review, Trump issued the requisite certification that Iran was in compliance and that the deal served America’s national interests, but vowed he wouldn’t keep doing so forever. The second time, he formally decertified the deal, but once again signed the waiver that prevents sanctions on Iran from being reinstated. The third time, he signed the waiver once again, but explicitly threatened that this would be the last time.

If it weren’t for the embassy move, this threat would be treated in capitals around the world as so much bluster. Instead, world leaders are quickly discovering that his popularity is waning.

This means that European leaders, who initially refused even to discuss the deal up entirely. Last month, for instance, French President Emmanuel Macron threw his support behind a plan to impose surveillance and cosmetic tweaks. Yet there would be no chance at all if it weren’t for the credible threat created by the embassy move. And if anything meaningful does come of this effort—even if only a modest improvement, like cracking down on Iran’s ballistic missiles—it will be largely because Trump did the right thing on Jerusalem. (CommentaryMagazine.com Mar 12)

Public Interest Won
By Amnon Lord

To understand the political game played by Yisrael Beytenu leader Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman in recent days, we must carefully consider how he weighs public interests against his own interests.

Preserving economic stability aside, Lieberman has an interest in remaining in the coalition, and even more so – remaining the defense minister, as there are important tasks ahead, most notably naming the next chief of staff and ensuring the defense establishment is ready for whatever security crisis may unfold next year.

Lieberman is a capable defense minister, even better than his predecessors Moshe Ya’alon and Ehud Barak, both former chiefs of staff. The solution to the coalition crisis, sparked by the ultra-Orthodox parties demand to pass a new conscription bill, affords Lieberman another year and a half in office and the opportunity to move the military in the direction it needs to go to stay at the top of its game.

With all this in mind, there is a growing assessment that Yisrael Beytenu is heading toward an electoral disaster in the next election. If this is true, by the time Lieberman implements changes in the IDF, his party may disappear off the political map. This may teach us something about the importance of having a deep political bench. Lieberman is now the only recognizable figure in his party after MK Orly Levy-Abekasis left Yisrael Beytenu once it became clear it would join the coalition in 2016.

Moreover, there has been a change in personal popularity trends with respect to the defense minister’s position. The days when defense was the most coveted portfolio in the government are long gone and Lieberman is quickly discovering that his popularity is waning.

Populism encourages robust electoral outcome much more than the staleness identified with the Defense Ministry, and it is safe to assume that the next election campaign will see Lieberman garnering support over issues such as burden equality and the death penalty for terrorists, which would keep him a viable political player.

Lieberman’s problem is that no one can guarantee he will be able to demand, let alone receive, the defense portfolio after the next elections. Habayit Hayehudi leader Naftali Bennett, despite his irresponsible lambasting of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is qualified to assume this role and implement the necessary changes in the defense establishment.

As far as Netanyahu is concerned, his personal interests concerning early elections are consistent with national interests, and this is exactly where Bennett went wrong. There is an actual need to curtail the anti-democratic agenda by which the police, the State Attorney’s Office and the media seek to control the public narrative and become a major political force.

Netanyahu and Lieberman both arrived at the same conclusion – polls are only a part of the story, and the public’s disinterest in elections at this time must prevail. It is more important that the public does not really want to go to elections. If the public sought early elections with any sense of urgency, it would be for the sole reason of unseating Netanyahu, and that is not the case.

Netanyahu successfully drove this point home, proving that even when the opposition was handed an opportunity to usurp him via elections, it was incapable of capitalizing on it. Opposition parties know that the public supports the prime minister and that the political system lacks the will to both parties have repeatedly promised but never fulfilled. Above all, it’s because the reality is that Jerusalem is Israel’s capital, and it is ludicrous to keep pretending otherwise.

But it just goes to show that the right thing is also sometimes the smart thing. Granted, there’s no guarantee that Trump’s effort to fix the Iran deal will bear fruit; the Europeans are trying hard to foib him off with mere cosmetic tweaks. Yet there would be no chance at all if it weren’t for the credible threat created by the embassy move. And if anything meaningful does come of this effort—even if only a modest improvement, like cracking down on Iran’s ballistic missiles—it will be largely because Trump did the right thing on Jerusalem. (CommentaryMagazine.com Mar 12)
Ref ramming the Middle Eastern and Palestinian Refugee Crises

By Asaf Romirowsky and Alexander H. Joffe

There are two Middle Eastern refugee crises currently vying for resources and attention. One is nominally focused on Syria, but in fact extends from Libya to Afghanistan. The other crisis is Palestinian — and has supposedly been going on since 1948.

But a closer look at the causes of these crises shows the former to be primarily the result of the collapsing Arab state system and the rise of militant Islam, while the latter cannot be considered a crisis at all.

The history of international responses to wartime refugee crises over the past century demonstrates how anomalous the Palestinian situation is, particularly with regard to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, or UNRWA — a distinctively unique agency in the annals of international organizations.

UNRWA is the only “relief” effort aimed at a single population; it is seemingly permanent, if not eternal; and its mission is ever growing. It is the world’s only internationally funded “relief” organization that is run not only for — but by — its clients.

As a de facto health, education and welfare ministry, UNRWA both competes with and complements the Palestinian Authority (PA), thus relieving the PA from assuming responsibilities for crucial fields of activity that are the routinely exercised by normal, even aspiring states. And UNRWA’s existence is fundamental as a symbol within Palestinian society — a pivot around which key identity concepts revolve: the ideas of Palestinian victimhood and “refugee-ness,” and the (supposed) international responsibility for their fate.

By examining a number of dimensions related to UNRWA’s approach to the Palestinians, lessons can be learned for application to the broader Middle Eastern crises. Among these are the moral hazard of assigning responsibility for refugee relief to the international community, and the dangers of institutionalizing refugee relief in a dedicated organization, which can be captured by the population that it serves.

A New Bipartisan Consensus on Israel

By Stephen M. Flatow

J Street and the radical wing of the Democratic Party have worked hard in recent years to chip away at the party’s traditional support for Israel. And they’ve made some progress — to judge by recent public opinion polls — in the changes in the Democratic Party platform and the number of Democratic congressmen who have signed J Street’s letters criticizing Israel.

But a speech at the AIPAC conference, made by the senior US senator from New York, Chuck Schumer, has struck a powerful blow against those trends in his party.

As the Senate minority leader, Schumer is the most powerful figure in the Democratic Party today.

What he said to AIPAC has established 10 principles of a new American political consensus concerning Israel and the Palestinians. And J Street is far outside of it:

1. Tearing down Jewish settlements will not bring peace.

“Now, some say there are some who argue the settlements are the reason there’s not peace,” said Schumer. “But we all know what happened in Gaza. Israel voluntarily got rid of the settlements there, the Israelis soldiers dragged the settlers out of Netzarim, and three weeks later, the Palestinians threw rockets into Sderot. It’s sure not the settlements that are the blockage to peace.”

2. Giving more Israeli lands to the Palestinians will not bring peace.

“Some say it’s the borders,” Schumer told the AIPAC conference. “But they forget during the negotiations in 2000, Ehud Barak was making huge territorial concessions that most Israelis didn’t like, it was [Palestinian head Yasser] Arafat who rejected the settlement. It’s not the borders, either.”

3. Making concessions on Jerusalem will not bring peace.

Schumer: “And [the obstacle to peace is] certainly not because we’ve moved the embassy to where it should belong in Yerushalayim [Jerusalem]. It’s not that either.”

4. Most Palestinians do not accept Israel’s existence.

The reason “why we don’t have peace,” Schumer said, is “because the fact of the matter is that too many Palestinians and too many Arabs do not want any Jewish state in the Middle East.”

5. The Torah says that the Land of Israel belongs to the Jews.

It may not be politically correct to acknowledge Israel’s biblical right to the Jewish homeland. But it’s a fact that is acknowledged by millions of Jews and tens of millions of Bible-believing Christians. We don’t have to feel embarrassed to say it, just as the senator was not embarrassed to say: “Of course, we say it’s our land. The Torah says it.”

6. Israel remains vulnerable.

A generation that has grown up with an Israel that seems almost invincible has to be reminded that creation of a Palestinian state would reduce Israel to just nine miles wide, as it was before the 1967 Six-Day War.

Schumer recalled walking through the corridors of his high school in Brooklyn, his radio glued to his ear, “deeply worried that Israel would just be pushed into the sea by the Arab onslaught.” Now, the younger generation never experienced this. They haven’t lived through a time when Israel’s very existence was balanced on the edge of a knife.

7. The Palestinian Authority isn’t “moderate.”

The great myth of the Oslo era was that the Palestinian leadership genuinely made peace and rejected terrorism. “Too many believe that this Palestinian Authority is moderate and really wants peace.” But it does not, declared Schumer.

8. The Palestinian Authority (PA) actively supports terrorism.

It’s not just that the PA leaders are unreasonable and extreme; they directly support terrorism. “The dark truth,” Schumer said, “is the Palestinian Authority, every day, actively aids and abets terrorism.”

9. The PA’s payments to terrorists must cease.

The PA can’t disguise its payments to imprisoned terrorists and the families of dead terrorists. It can’t pretend they are “social welfare” payments. It cannot route them through a third party. What it must do, Schumer said, is to “cease making payments to the families of terrorists.”

10. The PA must stop glorifying terrorists.

It’s not a case of “we have our heroes, and they have theirs.” It’s not a matter of “what they do is their business.” Glorifying terrorists encourages more terrorism. “The PA has to stop calling them martyrs,” said Schumer, and “stop giving them parades.”

The leadership of the Democrats, as represented by Schumer, has now in effect joined hands with the leadership of the Republicans — and the majority of the American public — when it comes to Israel.

J Street and other harassers of the Jewish state have been left behind in the dust. A powerful new pro-Israel consensus has been reaffirmed. I hope it continues to grow.

Why Is Trump Betraying American and Jewish Terror Victims?

By Jonathan S. Tobin

It turns out that in some cases, the Trump administration can behave just like its predecessors.

President Donald Trump has been rightly accused of smashing precedents as the commander-in-chief, and many of his subordinates have behaved, spoken and tweeted in ways unlike anything we’ve seen before.

Some of this unorthodox behavior is indeed troubling. But other decisions, including his willingness to buck the foreign-policy establishment on issues like the status of Jerusalem and trying to hold the Palestinian Authority responsible for its support of terrorism, have been a long overdue breath of fresh air.

On one significant legal issue, however, it appears that Trump has gone establishment. Yet rather than cheer it as a rare sign of maturity or stability, this decision is a regrettable reversion to the same sort of failed policies of the past that Trump has rejected in other instances.

The issue at hand is the decision of the US solicitor general to side with the Palestine Liberation Organization in a dispute with those seeking to hold it accountable for its crimes — as required by US law.

American victims of Palestinian terror attacks, as well as the family members of those who were killed in such attacks, originally filed the case of Sokolow v. Palestine Liberation Organization in 2004. They sued under the Anti-Terrorism Act passed by Congress in 1992, which allows US nationals to sue international terror groups for damages in US Federal district courts.

The Sokolow case stems from six specific shootings and bombings carried out by Palestinians in Jerusalem from 2002 to 2004, during the Second Intifada — a terrorist war of attrition orchestrated by the Palestinian Authority — the political arm of the PLO. A jury in a federal district court heard voluminous evidence of the gruesome crimes carried out by the Palestinians, as well as the clear proof that these acts were committed at the behest of their leaders. The jury ruled for the survivors and their families in a 2015 decision that awarded them $656 million in damages.

But a year later, an appeals court overturned that decision when it ruled that US courts didn’t have jurisdiction in the case — and claimed that the Palestinians hadn’t specifically targeted Americans. That caused the terrorists to cheer, and it brought great relief to the Obama administration, which had opposed any effort to punish the PLO. It felt that anything that undermined the PA was, by definition, a blow to the
Palestinian Textbooks Teach War Not Peace  By Earl Cox

If Israel and the Palestinians are ever to forge an agreement meaningful to both sides, Palestinian educational reform must be a linchpin. Palestinian schools, including those run by UNRWA, model radical Islamic madrassas (religious schools), incubators of violence and terrorism that exploit education to indoctrinate the next generation.

Billions in foreign aid, and numerous past efforts to reform education by the United States, the European Union and others ended in stalemate. Why?

Two primary fault lines – Palestinian leaders’ economic strategies and military perspectives – are deeply entangled in the Palestinian educational agenda. High youth unemployment – 58% in Gaza alone – is one result. The dismal employment outlook of Palestinian youth helps feed the illusion that an early death is their best hope.

Though the link between strong economies and a modern, knowledge-based economic model is well known, Palestinian leaders’ current economic strategy are unsustainable. Economic progress has been sabotaged by over-dependence on massive foreign aid combined with woefully inadequate oversight. Billions of dollars and euros from the US, the EU and other international donors have slipped through the safety net and into the pockets and political agendas of corrupt leaders, their families and cronies.

Doomsday Will Have to Wait  By Reuven Berko

Earlier this week, a friend of mine from Hebron told me that recent developments in the Middle East – the collapse of Arab states, the millions dead and displaced, everyone warring with everyone within Islam – have sparked imaginative debates among Muslims concerning how the omens of our time foreshadow the imminent fulfillment of doomsday prophesy, specifically the anticipated coming of the Mahdi (the “guided one” who will rule over the Muslims and bring justice in the years before Judgment Day, identified in Shiite Islam as the rightful heir to the Prophet Muhammad), Gog and Magog and the other prophecies concerning the end of days.

Fueling these speculations is the rise of the Iranian evil empire, which poses a threat to the Arabs, on one side, and Israel’s unprecedented strength on the other, on a collision course with each other.

It’s worth following Palestinian President Donald Trump’s foreign policy (gaining him the nickname “Big Satan” in Iran), particularly surrounding the relocation of the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the angry Palestinians, who had banked on international pressure on Israel, are now calling the redheaded president a false messiah. In Islam, this figure is called the “Dajjal,” cursed with copper-colored face and hair according to
the Shiite mystic book “Al-Jaf,” attributed to the fourth caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib, who was Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. This is an image of Harms and Islam are certainly ready to adopt.

Trump indeed put the Palestinians in their rightful place – on the sidelines and margins of Armageddon – by declaring Jerusalem the capital of Israel. In doing this, he also quashed another blatantly anti-Semitic Palestinian-European lie by making a point of choosing a united Jerusalem as our capital, according to the ancient aspiration of redemption in the Bible.

When dreams don't come true, mysticism comes in and fills the void. That is precisely what happened to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who called for the destruction of Israel because of its “corruption” in his commentary of Surah 17. This surah, known as Surat al-Isra or Surat Bani Israil, is the chapter in the Quran that speaks about both the Isra, or the “nighttime journey” of the Muhammad to Al-Aqsa before his ascension to heaven, and the most critical and Islamic eschatology. Abbas’ new twist was that he interpreted the prophecy of Israel’s destruction (due to our corruption) as being delayed a bit.

At the end of the chapter, the Quran predicts the Israelites (Bani Isra'il) will be gathered in their land from all corners of the world for God to destroy them. The Muslims await this inevitability, refraining from bothering the Jews, allowing the Jews to “corrupt” Palestine. The Jews, left to their own devices, will build their own prison, as mandated by Allah.

Indeed, a glance at the relationship between Israel and Arab and Persian Gulf states shows that the Arab wish to destroy Israel has been put on hold for the time being. For now, all are focused on the shared enemy - Iran. From a mystical point of view, the Iranian threat – starting with Haman during the reign of Ahasuerus in ancient Persia to today’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei – is reason for the whole region to be concerned. The Arabs are no longer buying into Iran's lies. Their claims that they are building up their military power only “to liberate Jerusalem from the Zionists,” are not very credible. Furthermore, the repeated appeals to Jews for their support, and its aspirations for regional hegemony are part of an apocalyptic vision of annihilation, under the guidance of the Hidden Imam, that would unleash a nuclear confrontation as a means of “liberating” Mecca and ensuring the Shi'ite Mahdi global power.

In this fateful reality, the implication of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s recent messages in the U.S. is clear: The threat posed by Iran and its proxies is not just an existential issue for Israel, and Israel should not be combating it alone (thereby depopulating and weakening itself and exposing itself to renewing threats from its more “tolerant” neighbors). Fighting Iran should be an imperative for all the world’s Arabs as well.

In the meantime, the Palestinians are adhering to their interpretation of Surat al-Isra, awaiting the destruction of Israel and searching for signs of corruption as proof that it is imminent. Over the course of Muslim history, the Jews were described as “prophet killers” and persecutors of thousands of them. If so, this is already a sign of corruption. How is this reflected today?

The Palestinians observe the Israeli media and they see countless reports on corruption and how the Jews are turning on their own leaders. They find this extremely compelling. To them, the fact that Israelis are fighting rampant corruption is an indication that the corrupt Jews are going after their leaders despite whatever achievement and positive changes they have made, indicating the Jews imminent destruction. As the Arabs say, “When the camel falls, the knives multiply.”

At the moment, however, the Mahdi is still far off. While Iran’s atomic Shite train trudges on, powered by missiles on their dark “nighttime journey” toward the apocalyptic crossroads we now face, Israel’s controls remain in capable hands, despite the contempt from within and doomsday rhetoric from without.

Despite this danger, there are weak people among us who abide by the Arab saying: “In the absence of a noble warhorse, mount birds on dogs.” Both those abroad and at home will have to wait indefinitely for the end of days. (Israel Hayom Mar 13)

AIPAC Leadership Losing the Plot By Isi Leibler

The American Jewish leadership’s downward spiral has accelerated. This can be traced back to its cowardly silence when then-President Barack Obama began treating Israel as a rogue state and applied moral equivalence to Israeli defenders and Palestinian terrorists.

The leaders of the Reform and Conservative movements and the Anti-Defamation League have become adjuncts of the Democratic Party’s liberal wing. Many have an obsessive hatred of U.S. President Donald Trump that supersedes their support for Israel.

Despite the turmoil, until now, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee had remained a jewel in an otherwise crumbling Jewish establishment.

One of AIPAC’s greatest challenges is to maintain bipartisan support for Israel. Unfortunately, its proposed solution could prove disastrous.

AIPAC has determined that, come what may, it must seduce liberals into its ranks. To do so, it has embarked on a policy of appeasement to progressives. It seeks to entice liberals by giving equal status to Jews committed to Israel and estranged liberals and the dissengaged, many of whom consider Israel’s security a low priority.

Such an approach will find AIPAC supporting policies that run counter to the positions of Israel’s democratically elected government and opposition parties Labor and Yesh Atid.

This new approach was proclaimed at the recent AIPAC conference by Executive Director Howard Kohr, who unambiguously committed AIPAC to a two-state solution.

This was endorsed by AIPAC President Mort Fridman, who added: “The progressive narrative for Israel is just as compelling and critical as the mainstream narrative.”

American Jews, like Israelis, are entitled to have varying views on the two-state solution. But in the face of the intensified Palestinian Authority campaign of terror and incitement, most Israelis, like myself, who once supported a two-state solution, now realize that it is impossible.

The Palestinians have one goal – Israel’s destruction. A nascent terrorist state in Judea and Samaria would be opposed by a clear majority of Israelis across the political spectrum. For diplomatic reasons, the government has not explicitly stated this but it has assiduously avoided endorsing a two-state solution. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu states that he supports a “state minus,” i.e., a framework separating Israelis from Palestinians, with Israel retaining security but providing the Palestinians a form of autonomy.

Israel seeks negotiations without preconditions. The Palestinians will not contemplate this unless the Americans are marginalized and anti-Israeli elements become arbitrators – which Israel would never accept.

The Trump administration has repeatedly announced that it would support any decision both parties endorsed and did not call for a two-state solution.

Thus, it is with incredible chutzpah that an organization purporting to act with Israel’s and America’s best interests in mind has formally adopted a two-state policy.

AIPAC is, in effect, pressuring Israel to move beyond what Trump himself has demanded, and is encouraging the administration and Congress to pressure Israel in this direction.

This outrageous behavior will not induce liberals to support AIPAC but may encourage our American supporters to view Israel as intransigent and press it to make further concessions.

If the price of bipartisanship is adopting lowest-common-denominator policies on Israel, AIPAC will be betraying its original mandate to support Israel’s democratically elected government and will alienate the bulk of its supporters, who loyally back Israel.

The conference’s 18,000 participants gave repeated, enthusiastic standing ovations when Netanyahu addressed them. If put to a vote, the overwhelming majority would resolutely reject any policy that contradicted the objectives of the Israeli government or the preferences of most Israelis.

To avoid further upheavals, AIPAC leaders should not take a position for or against a two-state solution. Individual members can make up their own minds.

The only way to strengthen Israel’s support among Democrats and liberals is to painstakingly explain the case for Israel, which is not difficult – if they are willing to listen.

AIPAC should follow the lead of Democratic Sen. Chuck Schumer, who, while expressing his own support for a two-state solution, concentrated on the fact that the Palestinians were responsible for the deadlock, condemned false moral equivalence and insisted that Jewish settlement building was not an obstacle to peace. He clearly stated that the problem lay in the Palestinian refusal to accept the existence of a Jewish state.

AIPAC should face the reality that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah gang are an evil group of terrorists promoting a culture of death. The PA has just announced an increase in its payments to terrorists and their families. AIPAC would do well to lobby for halting payments to the PA while it pursues such monstrous policies.

If AIPAC leaders continue promoting a Palestinian state, members should protest and condemn their action. If the organization stands to lose its hard-earned status as the umbrella conventionalists and it’s high-minded, self-appointed role of appeasers to deal with is likely to change their attitudes – it will be obliged to review its policy or face the likelihood of vast numbers of people resigning from its ranks. This could bring about AIPAC’s collapse – the tragic undoing of one of American Jewry’s finest institutions. (Israel Hayom Mar 13)