

Putting Aside the Pious Lies about the Israel-Palestinian Conflict

By Moshe Arens

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The U.S. shouldn't be neutral.

Now that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has made it clear, for all the world to hear, where he stands, it is time to clear up some of the “politically correct” hypocrisy that for years, ever since the ill-fated Oslo Accords, has muddled the debate on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in Israel and abroad.

The United States cannot be, and has never been, neutral in mediating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is the leader of the world's democratic community of nations and cannot assume a neutral position between democratic Israel and the Palestinians, whether represented by an autocratic leadership that glorifies acts of terror or by Islamic fundamentalists who carry out acts of terror.

The motivation for U.S. involvement over the years had been the assumption that its primary interest was maintaining good relations with the Arab world and assuring the continued supply of oil, and that as long as the Palestinian issue remained unresolved Israel was an encumbrance to the U.S.-Arab relationship.

In recent years the tectonic shifts in the Arab world, the lower price of oil and the decreased importance attached to the Palestinian issue in much of the region, have essentially removed the main incentive the United States had in past years to stay involved in the conflict. The involvement during the eight years of Barack Obama's presidency was the result of his ideological convictions that included the need to reach out to the Muslim world and his belief in the “two-state solution.”

With Donald Trump's election as the president of the United States, all that is gone and does not seem likely to return. Now, what has become clear, as should have been clear all along, is that resolving the conflict requires direct negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian representatives. There is no substitute for that. Not Abbas' call for mediation by the European Union nor his reliance on the anti-Israel majority in the United Nations.

Despite the conventional wisdom that the core issues — such as Jerusalem or the fate of Israeli settlements beyond the 1949 armistice lines — are the major stumbling blocks to an agreement, the issue for which there seems to be no solution in sight at the moment is making sure that

any Israel military withdrawal will not result in rockets being launched against Israel's population centers from areas that are turned over to the Palestinians.

Israel cannot allow a repetition of what happened after the withdrawal from Gaza Strip. Neither Abbas nor the Hamas leadership can provide any assurances on this point. Until such time as this issue is laid to rest there will be no meaningful progress.

Does that mean that Israel is left with a choice between a state with a Palestinian majority or an apartheid state, as claimed by Israel's left? This imaginary dilemma is based on a deterministic theory of history, which disregards all other possible alternatives in the years to come, and on questionable demographic predictions.

What the left is really saying is this: better rockets on Tel Aviv than a continuation of Israeli military control over Judea and Samaria. There is little support in Israel for that view. Those who support that position in the world are not particularly concerned for the security of Israel's citizens. The insistence by the left that polls show that the majority of Israelis favor a “two-state” solution distorts the views of that majority. Most Israelis do not favor an Israeli withdrawal from Judea and Samaria at this time, but rather express their desire to be rid of as many Palestinians as possible in due time.

As for Israeli settlements in Judea and Samaria, the lesson learned from the forceful uprooting of the settlers from Gush Katif and the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip is that there will be no repetition of such acts in the future. Nor will any Israeli government, present or future, prevent Israelis from settling in Judea and Samaria. Jews in these areas of the Land of Israel are there to stay. They should not be an obstacle to the establishment of a Palestinian State if and when that step is part of the resolution of the Israeli-Arab conflict.

A democratic Palestinian state that adopts Western values would see a Jewish minority within its borders as an asset that can contribute to the economy of a state that will face difficult economic problems.

So where do we go from here? Direct negotiations, of course. But it will take time — a lot of time.

Britain, and the EU, Must End the Appeasement of Hizballah

By Richard Kemp

thetimes.co.uk

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The false distinction between “military” and “political” wings.

Hezbollah is the most powerful terrorist organisation in the world. Yet Britain has proscribed only part of it: its military wing. This Thursday the MP Joan Ryan will lead a parliamentary debate aimed at designating the whole

organisation, as the US, Canada and the Netherlands already do. Her chances are slim. The film Darkest Hour has reminded us of British ministers' penchant for appeasement and, like Churchill, that is what she's up against.

Hezbollah, the creation of Iran, emerged onto the world stage in Beirut in 1983, killing 241 US Marines and 58 French paratroopers in the most devastating terrorist attack before 9/11. Since then it has attacked in Latin America, Europe and the Middle East and planned strikes from Cyprus to Singapore. Last summer US authorities charged two Hezbollah terrorists with planning attacks in New York and Panama. Hezbollah is fighting to keep Assad in power in Syria and maintains an arsenal of 100,000 rockets in Lebanon, pointed at Israel.

During the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hezbollah was involved in Iranian-directed bombings that killed well over 1,000 British and US servicemen. Despite this, in Britain and elsewhere in Europe Hezbollah can freely raise funds for terrorism. Its supporters flaunt their assault rifle-emblazoned flags on our streets. They maintain sleeper cells in this country: planning, preparing and lying in wait for orders to attack.

When I worked for the Joint Intelligence Committee I monitored Hezbollah's activities. I knew there was no division into peaceful and warlike elements. The regional

states don't buy it either; the Arab League designates the entire organisation. Even Hezbollah's leaders don't make any such pretence. In 2009 its deputy secretary-general confirmed that it was one unified organisation.

British intelligence knows this and so do the prime minister and home secretary. So why maintain this dangerous fiction? The Foreign Office deludes itself that by appeasing Hezbollah it can influence the organisation. And that it will do its killing elsewhere. Instead this gives legitimacy to Hezbollah. Piling appeasement on appeasement, Britain and the rest of the EU hope to mollify Iran, the biggest state supporter of terrorism. They know designating Hezbollah would enrage the ayatollahs.

What would EU-wide proscription do to Hezbollah? We know that from the words of its secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah: "The sources of our funding will dry up and the sources of moral, political and material support will be destroyed."

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American Policy Would Benefit from Keeping in Mind Who in the Middle East Blesses the U.S., and Who Curses It

By Yoram Hazony

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A tale of two speeches.

President Donald Trump has promised that in the Middle East under his presidency, "there are many things that can happen now that would never have happened before." Two speeches of the last ten days offer dramatic confirmation of the emerging reconfiguration of America's relationship with Israel and the Middle East under his leadership.

In a two-hour speech before the Council of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) last week, Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, denounced the British, Dutch, French, and Americans for having conspired, ever since the 1650s, to create a Jewish colonial outpost that would "erase the Palestinians from Palestine." As Abbas tells it, all this reached a climax on the eve of World War I, when the West realized that it was on the verge of collapse and that the Islamic world was "poised to inherit European civilization." To put an end to this threat, the Western nations went about carving up the Muslim world so that it would be forever "divided, backward, and engulfed in infighting." As for the United States, it has been "playing games" of this sort ever since then, importing, for example, the disastrous Arab Spring into Middle East.

Abbas summed up by demanding an apology and reparations from Britain for the Balfour Declaration and denying that the United States can serve as a mediator in the Mideast. Finally, he went to the trouble of cursing both President Trump and the U.S. Congress: Yehrab beitak ("May your house be razed"), he said.

I have been following the speeches of the PLO and its supporters in the Arab world for 30 years. Nothing here is

new. These are the same things that Yasser Arafat, Abbas, and the mainline PLO leadership have always believed. It is a worldview that reflects an abiding hatred for the West, blaming Christians and Jews not only for the founding of Israel but for every calamity that has befallen the Muslim and Arab world for centuries.

What should be one's policy toward an organization committed to such an ideology? One option is to sympathize with the shame and outrage to which the PLO gives voice, and to try to mitigate it with grants of territory, authority, prestige, and large-scale ongoing funding. American administrations have pursued this option, seeking to make a peace partner out of the PLO, since President Ronald Reagan announced a dialogue with it in December 1988. Israel, too, has pursued this option, since 1993.

But in the ensuing 30 years of talk, the only major agreements signed have been those the PLO leadership could find a way to fit into its narrative: Agreements such as the 1993 Oslo Accords, which could be portrayed as inflicting a bitter defeat on Israel and the West — and as a step on the road to ultimate triumph.

President Trump, Vice President Pence, and United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley are pioneering an alternative policy, which can be summed up in Haley's words: "We're not going to pay to be abused." If players like the PLO, North Korea, Pakistan, and Iran (hopefully, Turkey gets added to this list soon) want to cultivate a civilizational hatred of America, double-talking while they give aid to global terrorism and conjure diplomatic scandals at the U.N. — well, then they don't get to be allies. They don't get funded. They don't get grants of land,

authority, and prestige. Those things will be reserved for actual allies.

What this looks like was already on display when Trump became the first serving U.S. president to visit the kotel (the Western Wall) in Jerusalem in May, shredding the longstanding diplomatic taboo against making it look as though the holiest site in Judaism is in fact part of the State of Israel. Since then, Trump and Haley have taken on UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, which regularly disseminate the PLO's view of history and current affairs. The Trump administration has cut in half America's massive financial support of UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East), an organization whose purpose is to maintain generations of unabsorbed descendants of Palestinian Arab refugees, inculcating them in Abbas-style grievances against Israel and the West.

Mike Pence's address on Monday to Israel's parliament, the Knesset, continued this trajectory. But he also responded to Abbas's history lesson with some tasteful but potent narrative-weaving of his own. In addition to the traditional script pointing to the shared interests of the United States and Israel as democracies, Pence emphasized that it was significant to him as an American that "our founders turned to the Hebrew Bible for direction" in establishing their country and that Israel's story "inspired my forebears to create . . . a new birth of freedom." He returned repeatedly to the way in which the story of the Jewish people holding fast to God's promise to return them to their land "shows the power of faith." Pence even said the traditional Jewish shehehianu blessing (in Hebrew!), thanking God for bringing us to see this day in which the Jewish people have been restored to their land.

On policy, Pence said that Trump "righted a 70-year wrong" in recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and that the U.S. embassy would be in the city "by the end of next year." He promised Israel that "the United States will never allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon." As for the PLO, Pence gave eloquent and persuasive voice to his country's desire for peace. But his bottom line also marked a significant shift from previous American administrations: The U.S., Pence said, would support a PLO state "if both sides agree." In other words, whether there will be such a state is Israel's call to make. Which puts American policy light years away from the heyday of George W. Bush's "road map," and his breathy "vision of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace."

For a change, there was no daylight between the views Pence outlined in the Knesset and those of his Israeli hosts. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem would go down in Jewish history together with the Balfour Declaration in 1917 and Truman's recognition of Israel in 1948. Isaac Herzog (Labor), the leader of the opposition, pointed out that it is "the love of the Bible that connects us to one another." Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein (Likud) spoke of the Jewish state "fulfilling the words of the prophets" and of "the United States, more than any other country in the world, as Israel's faithful partner" in this effort.

As for the curses that Abbas called down on President Trump's house, the Israelis responded by blessing him: Netanyahu told Pence it is "our deepest hope that President Trump and you will succeed in strengthening the United States, . . . so that America will continue to be the greatest power in the world for generations to come." And Edelstein said that from Israel he would only hear the blessing Bneh Beitcha ("May your house be built up").

There is no shortage of commentators saying that this embrace of Israel is only going to harm the prospects for peace in the Middle East. That view reflects the consensus in Washington before President Trump got there. For long decades, Washington has crafted policies based on the tacit assumption that America needs the PLO if it is to bring peace to the Middle East. In its effort to "balance" the demands of this extremist organization against Israel's concerns, American policy inflated the PLO's importance, and it learned to tolerate and even embrace an organization whose views have always been profoundly anti-Western, not to mention anti-Semitic.

Meanwhile, the Biblical roots of America's alliance with Israel have been consistently downplayed for fear that mentioning them would upset Arab sensibilities. Even so elementary a move as recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, or cutting funding to chronically anti-Western and anti-Semitic organizations, became unthinkable.

These policies did not bring peace to the Middle East. But they severed the ties between American diplomacy in the region and common sense — to the point that more than a few U.S. officials ended up believing that not only the PLO, but even Iran, whose parliament regularly curses the United States, could be made a peace partner if it were paid handsomely enough. The Trump administration, on the other hand, appears to have good grasp of a principle that is under-rated but nonetheless quite useful in making sound policy: In the relations between nations, it matters who blesses you and who curses you.

No, Israel Isn't on the Brink of Fascism

By Ofir Haivry

The dangers of rhetorical hysteria.

There's a new meme afoot warning of an existential crisis threatening Israel. According to a growing number of home-bred critics, Israel is no longer a democracy. Nor, according to these people, is Israel in the category of other

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oppressive regimes, like Saudi Arabia or Iran. Israel has even surpassed merely racist regimes like Apartheid South Africa, and is now fast approaching the very heart of darkness: Nazi Germany.

While Israel has long been compared to Nazi Germany in fringe publications and on Twitter, we are now finding articles making these claims entering the mainstream. And it's deeply troubling.

Two recent pieces in Israel's left newspaper of record, Haaretz, are perfect examples of such claims about Israel, as well as of the degree to which are divorced from reality. The first piece, by Dina Kraft, reported that a group of liberal Israeli Rabbis has initiated "The Anne Frank Home Sanctuary" — a program calling on Israelis to hide in their homes illegal immigrants facing expulsion from Israel. The use of Anne Frank's name obviously intends to imply that Israeli immigration authorities are somehow equivalent to Nazis hunting Jews.

The second piece was an op-ed by Zeev Sternhell, an Emeritus Professor from the Hebrew University, who has authored several studies on Fascist ideas. Entitled "In Israel, Growing Fascism and a Racism Akin to Early Nazism," the piece looks at Israeli attitudes towards Palestinians and African illegal aliens, ultimately concluding that the way things are going in Israel, "This is how it was with the Nazis."

Strong stuff certainly. But it's also absolutely wrong. Sternhell's argument is based on a combination of hyperbole, hysteria, and category errors.

Sternhell's proof of Israel's "monstrosity" resides in the "actions" of second-tier Israeli MKs Miki Zohar and Bezalel Smotrich and in the "bills proposed by Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked."

On closer inspection, these "actions" turn out to be interviews given by Zohar and Smotrich. It's true, they have said some idiotic things. But as anyone familiar with politics will tell you, such interviews are not to be taken seriously. They certainly do not make laws or policies of governments, and the fact is that neither Zohar nor Smotrich has actually passed a single bill or Knesset committee resolution in this vein.

As for Shaked, her allegedly monstrous "Nation-state law", which determines Israel to be the nation state of the Jews, explicitly states Israel must be a democratic Jewish state "in the spirit of the principle of the Declaration of Independence."

These are the "monstrosities" branded by Sternhell as harbingers of "not just a growing Israeli fascism but racism akin to Nazism in its early stages." For Sternhell, it is clear that Zohar and Smotrich, as well as the Likud governing party and by extension the Israeli government and perhaps most Israelis, wish to deprive Palestinians of their "basic human rights, such as self-rule in their own state and freedom from oppression," or of "equal rights in case the territories are officially annexed to Israel."

But it has been a persistent policy of most Israeli governments, both Labor and Likud, to oppose a national right of self-determination to Arabs in the land of Israel — preferring to offer them individual civil rights as citizens or a degree of autonomy perhaps in a confederation with

Jordan. This was the view of Ben Gurion and Golda Meir, it was the view of Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon.

Were they all Fascists and Nazis?

Israel is certainly not a perfect place. Like any democratic state, it has its fair share of problems, conflicts and quirks. But a democratic society with problems is a far, far cry from a non-democratic one; and an even further cry from a fascistic one.

But this basic category error — that a democracy with a few problems is equivalent to fascism — is not Sternhell's invention. In fact, those who oppose democracy have often used a democracy's compromises to claim a moral equivalence between those democracies and the deliberate evil of dictatorships.

The actions of democracies during WW2, such as the British "area bombing" of German cities and the US internment of Japanese Americans, were and still are used quite often by spokesmen for dictatorships to allege a moral equivalence between the western democracies and the Nazis. Maybe, so the narrative goes, the Nazis weren't so bad if Churchill and Roosevelt were just as bad as Hitler?

This equivalence is not only a misunderstanding of history; it's a misunderstanding of what morality is.

To try and claim moral equivalence between the Nazis and even the most controversial actions taken by democracies defending themselves against mortal attacks — actions that however misguided are altogether of another order of magnitude than the deliberate planning and executing of genocide — is to erase the distinctions that make some humans into murderers.

Israel is often pushed to take unappealing measures to fight threats to its civilian population. These actions sometimes cause discomfort and even suffering to the Arab population of Gaza and the West Bank. But these discomforts are for security purposes. Military actions or even restrictions on supplies to the Gaza strip have as their only goal stopping the indiscriminate attacks on Jews and Arabs in Israel. And even while it is repeatedly attacked, Israel still goes to extraordinary lengths to avoid civilian casualties, and whenever there is a chance, it tries to ease the lot of civilian suffering.

Rather than increasing its fascistic treatment of its minorities, Israel only continues to do better and better in this regard. From its very first day, the Jewish state had to contend with almost impossible conditions, which it did successfully, though at a price. For the first 18 years of its existence, following a hard-fought independence war and continued threats to its existence, Arabs who were left under Israeli rule received citizenship but were subjected to military rule, which was only discontinued in 1966. Moreover, as the young state devoted all its resources to its defense and to absorbing the tide of Jewish refugees from Arab countries, which doubled the population in a few short years, Israel's Arabs were short-changed in many economic and social aspects.

But the last two decades there have seen growing efforts and investments by the government to better the lot of Israel's Arab citizens. For example, the Council for Higher Education (of which I am a member), has led a successful effort to massively increase the percentage of Israeli Arabs in higher education, especially women. Meanwhile, the Israeli government has put into place various affirmative-action programs devised to increase the number of Arabs in civil service and in various government boards and bodies.

Nazis, anyone?

As for Israel's policy towards illegal aliens (often termed refugees or asylum-seekers, though only about 10% of them have ever requested refugee status) mainly from Africa, it is in fact quite in line with what governments in many western countries are implementing, including the US and Britain. You might like it or you might not, but it is ludicrous to regard it as Nazism or as somehow peculiar to Israel. If so, we might ask, why are there not "Anne Frank Home" sanctuary initiatives in the US or Britain?

But by far the worst claim Sternhell makes is one oft repeated by others using the "Nazi" clickbait articles to describe Israel: the claim that the views and actions of

Israelis are "eroding the moral legitimacy of their existence as a sovereign entity."

In other words, Sternhell and others believe that the very legitimacy and existence of the Jewish State might be put into question by its policies. The argument that a country would lose the very legitimacy of its existence in such circumstances is not only ludicrous, it is immoral when raised only in the case of Israel, as if the Jewish state has some kind of special taint that has to be atoned for, before it is allowed "legitimacy".

I like to assume that underneath it all, the intentions of Sternhell and his ilk are good, and it is only in service of his apprehension for Israel's future that he misarticulated his claim about the Jewish state losing legitimacy for existence, intending only the danger we face from those who bear us ill will.

Nevertheless, it is to be hoped that it will dawn on Sternhell et al where the road he is paving with his good intentions, leads to.

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The Trump Administration Has Said the Right Things about Syria, but Words Are Not Enough

By Jennifer Cafarella

foxnews.com

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The U.S. must act to restrain Russia, Iran, and al-Qaeda.

The Trump administration inherited a bad situation in Syria, but it has managed to make matters even worse. There is no better illustration of the problem than the fact that Turkey, a NATO ally, sought permission from NATO's chief adversary, Russia, to attack America's local partner in Syria despite U.S. pressure not to do so.

It's time to do more than try to manage this particular crisis. It's time to rethink the fundamental policies that got us here.

The Trump administration has good big ideas. It rightly seeks, for example, to pivot way from Obama's single-minded focus on ISIS, and refusal to recognize the Iranian threat in Syria.

The Trump White House identifies Iran as a primary threat. It has verbally committed to the departure from power of Bashar al Assad. It claims to prioritize repairing relations with Turkey; seeks to destroy al Qaeda; and wants to refocus the U.S. on Syria's humanitarian catastrophe.

These are the correct goals for which American policy should strive. In fact they are the minimum essential goals the U.S. must achieve to secure its vital national interests in the Middle East and as part of a global strategy.

The U.S. must recognize the threat Russia poses. It must acknowledge the limits of its current partners on the ground. It cannot put faith in a diplomatic charade. It must implement a real strategy against al Qaeda and Iran. And it

must recognize the value of American action over American rhetoric.

The problem is that the strategy Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has outlined will not accomplish these goals. The U.S. must rapidly change how it is executing policy in five key areas.

- Russian military bases. The administration has tacitly surrendered to Vladimir Putin the most important thing he has ever sought in Syria—permanent Russian air and naval bases on the eastern Mediterranean. Those bases force NATO to develop new plans for scenarios that include a Russian move to deny access to key maritime routes and the airspace over the Middle East. The U.S. and its allies will need air and naval forces prepared to defend the eastern Mediterranean, which has been a NATO lake for more than 25 years. Contesting these bases may not be an appropriate near term goal, but the administration's refusal to say they are unacceptable is tacit acceptance of one of the most significant geostrategic reversals since the end of the Cold War.
- Acceptance of Bashar al-Assad. American policy in Syria is to accept Assad and his regime de facto, regardless of any tough administration statements. Tillerson argues that the sustained deployment of American forces to areas held by the opposition

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) puts the U.S. on a path toward Assad's departure. The opposite is true. The Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which dominates the SDF, controls territory only in northern and eastern Syria, generally far away from the Syrian heartland that matters most to the regime and the opposition. It never meaningfully fought the regime and did not intend to depose Assad even before Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan set about taking it apart by force.

- Syrian "de-escalation." The "de-escalation" agreement that President Trump signed in November 2017 with Russia is a surrender not only to Russia, but also to Iran. It heavily favors Assad. In that deal, Russia promised to compel Iran to withdraw its forces from southern Syria. It never happened. Pro-regime forces violate the de-escalation zone with impunity.
- The "peace" process. The diplomatic process in Syria has been a farce since at least 2015. Assad has never intended to grant serious concessions to his opposition and the U.S. has done nothing to compel him to do so. Russia has coopted the diplomatic track to keep Assad in power with limited U.S. resistance. The American goal appears to be an election. Assad will win: Putin will make sure of it.
- Iran and al Qaeda. Tillerson uses vague terms like "deny their dreams" to describe our strategy against Iran in Syria. He identifies no clear goal against which the U.S. can measure success. He

states that the U.S. must deliver an "enduring defeat" to al Qaeda—and we certainly must. Yet the U.S. Defense Department has offered no vision of how to do that. The strategy Tillerson outlines—and that the U.S. is pursuing—amounts to outsourcing the problem to Turkey, which is actually working with al Qaeda in Syria.

The good news is that when the U.S. acts in accord with reality, it achieves results. The President conducted a proportional strike in response to the Assad regime's use of sarin gas against civilians in April 2017. There have been no more sarin attacks. Even this success is qualified, however. The Assad regime still routinely uses chemicals against his population that are not strictly covered in the Geneva Conventions.

The U.S. must face reality in Syria. It must recognize the threat Russia poses. It must acknowledge the limits of its current partners on the ground. It cannot put faith in a diplomatic charade. It must implement a real strategy against al Qaeda and Iran. And it must recognize the value of American action over American rhetoric.

Two administrations have sought to substitute rhetoric for action and to outsource American interests to local partners. The U.S. must abandon this approach and recognize Syria's importance to American security.

It will take a long time and a hard struggle to achieve any outcome in Syria that the U.S. should be willing to live with. It is time to focus on it, devote resources to it, and prepare to do so for a long time.

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Saudi Arabia Acknowledges the Holocaust

By Robert Satloff

nydailynews.com

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An unexpected letter from a country that once exported anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial.

Saturday, the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp, is International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The UN resolution that established the commemoration urges all countries "to develop educational programs to instill the memory of the tragedy in future generations to prevent genocide from occurring again." To its credit, Saudi Arabia has taken an important first step toward fulfilling that charge.

Saudi Arabia? Land of religious purity, whose king (Faisal) once celebrated the Protocols of the Elders of Zion as historical fact, whose UN representative (Jamil Baroudy, 1976) once denounced Anne Frank's diary as a forgery and claimed the murder of millions of Jews by the Nazis was fiction? The country that not only counted among its countrymen 15 of 19 perpetrators of the Sept. 11 attacks but whose religious hierarchy exported bigotry and intolerance to mosques and madrasas around the

world for decades, fueling the hate on which Al Qaeda, ISIS, Hamas and all Islamist extremist movements thrived?

Yes, that Saudi Arabia. Here's the background.

In early December, I led a delegation of lay leaders of the foreign policy think tank I direct on a visit to Riyadh, the Saudi capital. Among the high-ranking officials we met during our three-day visit was Dr. Mohammed Al Issa, secretary-general of the Muslim World League.

This is the organization that has long been cited as the key facilitator of Saudi Arabia's global effort to export a radical, hate-filled, anti-West, anti-Semitic version of Islam. Just last year, a prominent British research institute labeled Saudi Arabia the main source of Islamic extremism in the United Kingdom and cited the MWL as a critical linchpin in that project.

In practice, the change inside MWL appears to have begun with the August 2016 appointment of Al Issa, a former Saudi justice minister. Taking his lead from Muhammad bin Salman, the current crown prince who has vowed to cleanse his country of extremism and return it to

“moderate Islam,” Al Issa seems to have a specific mandate to transform the MWL from an organization synonymous with extremism to one that preaches tolerance.

And, no less important, he has promised to remake the MWL into an organization focused solely on religion, taking it completely out of politics — except for the politics of countering extremism, that is.

I was skeptical. In Saudi Arabia, where the royal family counts protection of the holy sites of Mecca and Medina as main sources of legitimacy and public expression of non-Muslim prayer is prohibited, religion and politics are inherently connected.

But in our December meeting, Al Issa struck an impressive note. Not only did he underscore a decidedly un-Saudi commitment to religious outreach, speaking fondly of his recent visit to a Paris synagogue, but also he refused to take the bait when asked about President Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. If I expected any Saudi official to bang the table, sermonize about the Muslim connection to Al Quds and decry the President’s decision to recognize the sovereignty of the Jewish state anywhere in the city, it would have been the secretary-general of the Muslim World League. Instead, he politely declined comment, saying only that the League is committed to peace and is not a political body.

When I returned home, I wrote Al Issa, thanked him for our meeting and invited him to Washington to address my institute’s annual conference in May. But I added one more request: Should he come to our nation’s capital, I wrote, I urged him to tour the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and meet with its director, Sara Bloomfield.

For more than 15 years, one of my personal passions has been to engage Arabs and Muslims in a discussion of the Holocaust. This is based on my belief that tearing down the walls of Holocaust denial so widespread in Arab and Muslim culture is a critical element in the broader fight against the hatred and extremism at the heart of Islamist extremism.

I have been privileged to work with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in an ambitious effort to legitimize discussion of the Holocaust in Arab and Muslim countries and to help prevent future genocide by spreading the lessons of the Holocaust.

We have had some impressive success, especially in Morocco (where the king’s brother recently endorsed Holocaust education as an important tool in the battle against extremism) and in Tunisia (where civil society is holding a Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony this week).

Never in my wildest dreams did I think Saudi Arabia would merit inclusion on that list of “progressive” countries.

But Al Issa surprised me. I soon received a reply welcoming my invitation and agreeing to visit the Museum.

While he wouldn’t be the first Muslim notable to visit the Museum, the secretary-general of the Muslim World League would be the highest-ranking Muslim religious official — an important step in the process of legitimizing Muslim discussion of the Holocaust.

A few days later, I had another “why not?” idea. With January 27 approaching, I wrote Al Issa asking whether he would send a letter to Bloomfield on the occasion of International Holocaust Remembrance Day that she could make public. The letter, I suggested, might reflect his and the MWL’s approach toward the Holocaust and the broader battle for tolerance and moderation.

At most, I expected a brief, sterile note. After all, Saudi officials don’t have much of a guidebook for how to write letters commemorating the Holocaust. But again, Al Issa surprised me. He wrote a lengthy missive, all 623 words of which has been posted, with the Holocaust Museum’s permission, on the Washington Institute’s website here. In it, he labeled the Holocaust “an incident that shook humanity to the core, and created an event whose horrors could not be denied or underrated by any fair-minded or peace-loving person.”

I will quote at length: “This Human tragedy perpetrated by evil Nazism won’t be forgotten by history, or meet the approval of anyone, except criminal Nazis or their genre. True Islam is against these crimes. It classifies them in the highest degree of penal sanctions and among the worst human atrocities ever.

“One would ask, who is in his right mind would accept, sympathize or even diminish the extent of this brutal crime. However, our solace is that the memory of history is fair and vivid; and a justice, free of any other inclinations, would mourn this crime on behalf of all humanity. The victims have sacrificed their innocent lives to pen a memorable reminder of freedom and determination, an example of the extent of Nazi hate which has sunk the world into wars and disasters.”

On Holocaust denial, Al Issa had particularly harsh words:

“History is indeed impartial no matter how hard forgers tried to tamper with or manipulate it. Hence, we consider any denial of the Holocaust or minimizing its effect, a crime to distort history, and an insult to the dignity of those innocent souls who have perished. It is also an affront to us all, since we share the same human soul and spiritual bonds.”

And unlike many Muslim interlocutors with whom I have discussed these issues over the years, Al Issa did not try to deflect potential criticism of engaging on the Holocaust by wrapping himself in the false equivalence of Israel’s “genocide” of Palestinians. To the contrary, he stayed away from the issue altogether and instead affirmed the apolitical policy enunciated in our Riyadh meeting: “The Muslim World League is entirely independent of any political aims, tendencies or otherwise. It does, however,

express its opinion with utter neutrality; an impartiality that doesn't carry any political tone at all."

All in all, it is a remarkable document — remarkable for its authorship, content, breadth and message.

I assume there are many reasons — some sacred, some less so — why the head of the Muslim World League took pen to paper to denounce Holocaust denial. As my teenage son likes to say, this is not my first rodeo. But action matters so much more than motive. And having been written, Al Issa's words cannot easily be undone.

Can Crazy Still Keep the Peace Between Israel and Iran?

By Thomas L. Friedman

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Who knew that the future of warfare would present itself with such serene beauty — like one of those warm 19th-century David Roberts landscapes of the Middle East.

How so? I'm traveling along the Israeli border road at the intersection of Lebanon, Syria and Israel, and off in the distance there's a freshly snow-capped Mount Hermon, begging for skiers. It's framed by Lebanese and Syrian villages nestled into terraced hillsides, crowned by minarets and crosses. The only sound you hear is the occasional rifle burst from Lebanese hunters.

But this is no Roberts painting. It's actually the second-most-dangerous spot on the planet — after the Korean Peninsula — and it's the idyllic backdrop to what 21st-century warfare looks like.

Because hidden in these villages, hillsides and pine forests you can find a state — Israel — trying to navigate a battlefield with a rival state's army (Syria), a rival regional superpower (Iran), a global superpower (Russia), super-empowered mercenaries and maniacs (Hezbollah and ISIS) and local tribes and sects (Druse and Christians).

I came to this crowded intersection because it could blow up at any moment. If the confrontations in Syria and Iraq between a broad global coalition and ISIS was the big story of 2017, the big story of 2018 will surely be the brewing confrontation between Israel and an Iranian/Hezbollah/Shiite coalition spanning the Syrian and Lebanese borders with Israel.

For the last two years 1,500 to 2,000 Iranian advisers operating out of Beirut and Damascus have been directing thousands of Lebanese pro-Iranian Shiite Hezbollah mercenaries, Syrian Army forces funded by Iran and some 10,000 pro-Iranian Shiite mercenaries from Afghanistan and Pakistan — to defeat Sunni Syrian rebels and ISIS in the Syrian civil war.

Personally, I am not anti-Iranian. I respect that Iran has legitimate security concerns in the Persian Gulf. But I have a couple questions: What the hell is Iran doing over here, helping to snuff out democracy in Lebanon and any hope for power-sharing in Syria, and now posing a direct threat to Israel? And how much is Russia, Iran's partner in crushing the uprising in Syria — but also a country with good relations with Israel — going to use its advanced S-

Thanks to him, this International Holocaust Remembrance Day will be recalled as the one in which Saudi Arabia — defender of Islam's two holiest sites — took a giant step toward joining the world in its recognition of the enormity of the Holocaust. Is more to be done? Absolutely. But let's give credit where credit is due.

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400 surface-to-air missiles, now covering Syria and Lebanon, to protect Iran and Hezbollah?

Both questions came to the fore this week. Listen to what Israel's prime minister, Bibi Netanyahu, who just met Vladimir Putin for the seventh time in two years, said after they met on Monday: Israel will not allow Iran to entrench itself in Syria and turn Lebanon into a "factory for precision missiles. ... I made clear to Putin that we will stop it if it doesn't stop by itself."

Yikes.

So far, the Israeli military command has played this 3-D chess game of 21st-century warfare extremely well — managing to stay out of Syria's civil war while also surgically bombing attempts by Iran and Hezbollah to upgrade their missile capability against Israel. But Israeli officers will tell you that Hezbollah and Iran have played their side of the board very well, too. And they keep trying to inch forward.

So what's Israel's strategy to keep its conflict with Hezbollah and Iran on a low flame? First and foremost, it's been to reinforce to Hezbollah and Iran, through many channels, that they can't out-crazy Israel. That is, if Hezbollah and Iran think they can place rocket launchers in densely populated Lebanese and Syrian villages and towns — and expect that Israel will not take them out if it requires large collateral civilian casualties — they are as wrong today as they were in 2006.

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Israeli military planners are more convinced than ever that the key reason Hezbollah has avoided major conflict with Israel since the big Israel-Hezbollah war in Lebanon in 2006 is that Israel's Air Force — without mercy or restraint — pounded Lebanese infrastructure, Hezbollah offices and military targets in the southern suburbs of Beirut — not to kill civilians but not to be deterred by them, either, if they were nested amid Hezbollah weapons or headquarters.

Yes, it was ugly and brutal, say Israeli planners, but it worked. This is not Scandinavia. "The reality here starts where your imagination ends," said one Israeli officer. Sometimes only crazy can stop crazy. And Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, definitely got the message. He

declared after the 2006 war that he never would have set off that conflict had he known beforehand that Israel would inflict that much damage on his Shiite supporters and their property — “absolutely not,” he said.

Israeli military planners hope he remembers that, and that Iran does, too. They say that if Tehran thinks it can launch a proxy war against Israel from Lebanon and Syria — while the Iranian home front is untouched — it should think again. Israel has not purchased Dolphin-class submarines that can operate in the Persian Gulf, and armed them with cruise missiles, for deep-sea fishing.

But Iran is a determined and wily foe. It has been perfecting its ability to convert dumb surface-to-air missiles, with 1970s technology, into smart, precise surface-to-surface rockets, by reconfiguring them with GPS links, inertial navigation systems, dynamic wings and smart cards. Iran’s ally in Yemen, the Houthis, has used these types of rockets in recent months.

The Israelis told Putin that they would not allow Iran to build such rocket facilities in Lebanon or to transfer such precision missiles to Hezbollah in Lebanon via any depots or factories in Syria, and that Russia should not interfere with Israeli operations against them. It’s not clear Putin made any promises.

This is no small matter. Today, if Hezbollah, with its less-precise area rockets, wanted to hit a specific Israeli military building or high-tech factory from Lebanon, it would probably have to launch 25 dumb missiles. By deploying the Iranian upgrades it would have to fire only one — with a very high probability of hitting the target

within 30 meters, meaning it could inflict heavy damage on Israel’s infrastructure in a very short period of time.

War is not inevitable. For the last 12 years, Israel, Hezbollah and Iran have been engaging in what one Israeli officer called a “kinetic dialogue,” where both sides try to contain the conflict and not humiliate the other. When, on Jan. 18, 2015, Israel killed an Iranian general and several Hezbollah fighters in Syria, Hezbollah responded by firing a missile at an Israeli Army vehicle along the border, killing two Israeli soldiers. It was the biggest escalation since the 2006 war.

But Israel, after careful thought, chose not to retaliate for the retaliation. Iran and Hezbollah, having made their point, stopped, too. That’s the kinetic dialogue in operation. But how long can that be trusted to work?

Israel, Iran and Hezbollah are all stronger than they were in 2006. But they each also have more to lose by a new rocket war. Israel’s “Silicon Wadi” — its vast network of high-tech companies along its coastal plain — has become a giant growth engine. And Hezbollah and Iran have now assumed virtual control over the Lebanese and Syrian states. No one wants to lose its gains.

That should be a source of optimism. But, alas, there are just too many chances for miscalculation on this crowded 3-D chessboard to be sanguine that the next 12 years will be as quiet as the last 12.

As one Israeli military officer on the Syrian-Israel border remarked to me, “We want to keep the temporary status quo forever, because everything else looks worse.”

This School Makes Film A Kosher Career Choice

By David D'Arcy

In "Srugin" (woven, as in a woven yarmulke), a young surgeon adrift in Orthodox Jerusalem's singles scene reads a newspaper outside his apartment's open bathroom door. It's the Sabbath, and the bathroom light is on all night so observant Jews won't break religious laws by turning it off and on.

Filmmaker Eliezer "Laizy" Shapiro, who created the popular television series -- second only to "Lost" in downloads in Israel -- says many secular Israeli Jews wouldn't get the Sabbath reading scene. Mr. Shapiro is a graduate of the Ma'ale School of Film and Television, barely known outside Jerusalem, which puts modern Orthodox Jews in front of and behind the camera. The 35-year-old son of American-born parents, who spent his teenage years in a West Bank settlement, is the star of its 200 alumni.

Their work ranges from probing family dramas to Mr. Shapiro's student film, a "settlement comedy" about a teenager, Eicha, who wants to change her unfashionable biblical name. "We're bringing a new visual language to Judaism," says Ma'ale's director since 2001, Neta Ariel. That new language, which leans toward its founders'

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political nationalism, is found both in Hebrew and English at www.maale.co.il.

"You can see quite a lot of talent, hidden talent -- some great cinematographers, good writers. It's not clear that it would have come out otherwise," said Katriel Schory, who heads the Israel Film Fund, which gives out money collected from a tax on private TV channels. Israel produces about 20 feature films a year, with European attitudes toward sex and often with left-leaning antigovernment tilt, making Ma'ale a small phenomenon in a small industry.

An Orthodox Jewish film school was an improbable notion at Ma'ale's founding 19 years ago by four modern Orthodox "film fanatics," says one founder, Udi Lion, who disputes the view held widely among secular Israeli filmmakers that the school was established as a front for the National Religious movement. Israel's religious Jews, about 20% of the population, were unrepresented in film and television, despite their growing political power, Mr. Lion said. Their rare depiction was exotic or hostile, noted Moti Shiklar, another founder: "Settlers were always either praying or dancing. They weren't human."

Even with a staff rabbi to vet stories and scripts, film was seen as an unsuitable profession by parents of Orthodox men, so Ma'ale's first students were mostly female. "Their children are doing this funny thing called cinema, which is not very serious, but at least they know that they are in a safe haven, where they can't go wild," said Noemi Schory, head of film studies at Beit Berl College of Arts outside Tel-Aviv.

Then, as now, Ma'ale operated in a city-owned circa-1900 stone building near the border between East and West Jerusalem. In cramped quarters, with rudimentary electricity, plumbing and film equipment, no work was done on the Sabbath. Violence, sex and nudity in scripts were taboo. The students, who often came from West Bank settlements, were shaped less by Hollywood than secular Israelis were. "They had an innocence," said Doron Tsabari, a secular filmmaker who taught there, "It's as if they were saying, 'Feed us, feed us.'"

Israel is no Hollywood Babylon, yet cinema challenged the self-segregation of wary Orthodox Jews. Ma'ale's most qualified instructors were secular. So were the actors who played roles in films. And students raised on religious laws soon broke rules, especially in 1998, when Avital Livneh-Levy filmed an exercise with a housewife ironing, completely nude. The school's rabbi ordered her to burn the footage. Half the school's Orthodox staff quit. So did secular staff, when she was suspended and eventually left. Ma'ale almost closed.

The school survived, and students kept targeting delicate subjects. "If I hadn't done it, someone would have," said Ms. Livneh-Levy. Since then, Ma'ale films have been anything but Orthodox infomercials.

Last year came "And Thou Shalt Love." In Chaim Elbaum's poignant graduation film, a religious soldier's faith is tested when he falls in love with a handsome man in his unit. The autobiographical story's premiere coincided with Mr. Elbaum's public coming-out. Gay soldiers, nothing new in an Israeli film, were unprecedented for a Ma'ale production. Yet the school gave Mr. Elbaum its prize last year. "The only rabbis who criticized it were those who hadn't seen it," said Ms. Ariel, who approved the script and previewed the film for rabbinical audiences. They were won over by the film's sensitive approach to a subject that seemed anything but kosher.

"This is the mission of Ma'ale, to deal with religious conflicts," said the soft-spoken Mr. Elbaum, 28, who is making the 30-minute short into a feature. "They told

me that it's the most religious film ever made in Ma'ale."

The 2006 documentary "Sentenced to Marriage" got a cooler reception. Anat Zuria, a Ma'ale alumna, filmed women mistreated by rabbinical divorce courts. ("Willingly," a short drama about divorce, distributed by Ma'ale, focuses on a couple's unsatisfying bond, rather than on sexist rabbis.)

The school's best students suggest that Ma'ale's perspectives on Orthodox life are, if not critical, at least reliably idiosyncratic. And this chagrins some of the school's political supporters, says Joseph Cedar, a director and former Ma'ale teacher who was nominated for an Academy Award in 2007 for "Beaufort," his war drama about Israeli soldiers defending an ancient fortress in Lebanon. "It exploded in their face. The ones who did well are the ones who did not conform, and didn't see themselves committed to anything but the stories that they are working on," said Mr. Cedar, an observant Orthodox Jew who has criticized the West Bank settlements, the National Religious movement's political base and a major source of Ma'ale students.

And the peephole into a closed world is finding an audience, from secular Israelis to Jews wherever the Internet reaches, as downloads in Manhattan indicate. The sheer novelty helps, says Laizy Shapiro. "People are sick of seeing the same thing over and over again, so I have a chance to give people a peek into my world."

That modern religious world now has a firm footing in Israeli media, a "phenomenal success," says Ma'ale co-founder Udi Lion, who heads multicultural broadcasting for an Israeli commercial channel. Another Ma'ale founder, Moti Shiklar, is the director of the Israel Broadcasting Authority, the state radio and television conglomerate, where former Ma'ale renegade Avital Livneh-Levy now makes documentaries.

Behind that, the Israel Film Fund's Katriel Schory sees a political agenda: "This was a strategic decision, just as the fact that one third of the officers in the combat units are religious people."

"I'm a right-winger," Mr. Shapiro stated unapologetically.

Like a family, Ma'ale is pulled in different directions, with its students crossing Orthodox boundaries, its founders heading large and powerful institutions, and its films enabling Israelis to look inside religious life as religious people put it on the screen.

Ma'ale's response? It is now raising funds to double the size of its Jerusalem home.

Recent issues available at suburbanorthodox.org. Click on Israel Action tab.

If you see something, send something" –editor