

**The U.S. Can, and Should, Close Down Iran's Air Corridor to Syria**

By Emanuele Ottolenghi

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**The Treasury Department has the power.**

Last month, an Iranian drone reportedly violated Israeli airspace after taking off from a base in Syria. Israel shot it down and then launched a wave of retaliatory strikes against both Iranian installations in Syria and Syria's own air defenses. Tehran's brazen provocation may have been surprising, yet is a natural extension of Iranian efforts to transform Syria into a forward base for aggression against Israel. There is still a chance, however, for the United States to limit the Iranian presence in Syria, by putting an end to the misguided policies that encouraged it in the first place.

Assessments of Iran's objectives in Syria often include the establishment of a land bridge — a continuous, unimpeded route over land from Tehran to the Mediterranean. This bridge would bind Syria and Lebanon to the regime in Tehran, ensuring their availability to serve as launching points for a war against Israel. Yet Iran does not need a land bridge: It already has an air corridor. Iran would derive additional benefits from control of the ground transport routes into Syria, yet airlifting tons of supplies and thousands of personnel to Damascus since 2011 has proven just as effective.

Conveniently for Tehran and Damascus, the United States completed its withdrawal from Iraq in the closing months of 2011, at the same time that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime was under increasing pressure from the insurgency that erupted after its bloody suppression of protests that spring. With U.S. influence in Baghdad eroding fast, it was only a matter of time before the Iraqi government opened its airspace to Iranian aircraft, allowing them passage on route to Syria.

Neither the Obama nor the Trump administrations did much to disrupt this air corridor. Through its airlift, Tehran has built up Hezbollah's arsenal to a point where it is much more heavily armed than it was on the eve of its 2006 war against Israel. Iran has also transferred the know-how and technology to establish missile factories, enhancing Hezbollah's military prowess and making another round of conflict between the terror group and Israel likelier.

The air corridor has also enabled Iran to import tens of thousands of Shiite militia fighters and their families to Syria over the years, supporting the regime's war effort and its ethnic cleansing of the Sunni countryside. Most importantly, through its steadfast and successful support of the Assad regime, Tehran has secured its hegemony over Damascus, making it possible for its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or IRGC, to permanently deploy within shooting range of Israel's border with Syria.

The opening of the air corridor to Syria and Lebanon represented a major improvement over the maritime

routes on which Iran had previously relied to equip its proxies. Ships leaving from Iranian ports take time to reach Syria and, due to an ongoing U.N. arms embargo against Iran, are at constant risk of interdiction in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. In January 2002, Israel seized an Iranian shipment of 50 tons of arms to Yasser Arafat's embattled Palestinian Liberation Organization at the height of the Second Intifada. In January 2009, U.S. forces seized arctic cargo ship MV Monceghorsk in the Red Sea. The ship was carrying 2,000 tons of weapons to Syria. In November of the same year, Israel intercepted 500 tons of weapons destined for Hezbollah, on the ship MV Francop.

Iran also sought to combine air, land, and sea routes to supply its proxies. Sometimes, it sent cargos by plane to regional airports, to be transported by truck across the Iraq-Syria border. Other shipments traveled by sea to Sudanese ports and then by truck further up the coast where they could cross into the Sinai Peninsula on small smuggling ships. But Israel repeatedly disrupted that supply route by bombing convoys. Finally, when Baghdad opened its airspace in 2011, Iranian arms shipments could reach Damascus more quickly, safely, and directly than ever before.

Iran immediately took advantage and launched an airlift that continues to this day. In June and October 2011, the U.S. Department of Treasury sanctioned Iran's two largest airlines — Iran Air and Mahan Air — for their shipments of weapons to Iran's proxies abroad. Despite the sanctions, the planes kept flying.

Then, in the summer of 2015, the airlift suddenly escalated. At the time, Iran and six world powers led by Washington were negotiating the Iran nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA. Meanwhile rebel forces were pummeling Assad's army and Iran's. The commander of the IRGC's Quds Force, Qassem Suleimani, flew to Moscow to coordinate a strategy that would reverse the course of Syria's civil war. It critically relied on a massive increase in supplies of weapons and military personnel by Iran, which would be quickly deployed on the battlefield. The means of transportation would be hundreds of flights a year by Iranian and Syrian aircraft, most of which were chartered from commercial airliners.

Iran Air directly participated in the airlift, with more than 140 recorded flights to Damascus between January 2016 (when the JCPOA's implementation began) and May 2017, when its scheduled flights to Syria suddenly went dark. Mahan continues flying to this day, with 379 flights recorded since January 2016. So does Syria's national carrier, along with a Syrian private airline (Cham Wings), an IRGC-owned airline (Pouya Air), and two Iranian

Boeing 747s operated by the IRGC and the Iranian Air Force, totaling almost 1,500 flights since the airlift began.

This is much faster, more efficient, and more cost effective than sending thousands of trucks on a lengthy journey through the desert. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Farzin Nadimi last year assessed that during a two-month period, the airlift brought 21,000 passengers and 5,000 tons of supplies to Damascus. Assuming these figures are accurate, over a two-year period and at a constant rate, that is more than 250,000 people — mostly militia fighters — and 60,000 tons of supplies.

The Obama administration refrained from confronting Tehran's airlift to Syria, in keeping with its efforts to secure the nuclear deal with Iran. President Donald Trump has voiced strong opposition to the nuclear deal, yet so far he has not taken action to disrupt Tehran's airlift either.

Admittedly, the president does not have good options. The United States cannot intercept, search, and seize Iranian aircraft, the way it has Iranian ships. Bombing the runways of Damascus International Airport may temporarily disrupt the airlift, but Syria has other civilian airports, like Latakia, and bombing those would certainly incur Moscow's wrath.

That's why new sanctions are the most promising alternative.

Thanks to the JCPOA, three decades of U.S. sanctions against Iran's civilian aviation came to an end. Tehran immediately went on a shopping spree to replace its aging commercial air fleet, signing numerous deals with Boeing and Airbus. Removed from the U.S. sanctions list despite its active role in the Syria airlift, Iran Air is in the front seat, with nine new aircraft already delivered, hundreds more expected, and still more being negotiated. All combined, Iranian carriers have negotiated and signed deals for more than 300 aircraft, plus spare parts, technical assistance, and maintenance, with the world's two largest aircraft manufacturers — Airbus and Boeing — as well as smaller producers such as Canada's Bombardier and Brazil's Embraer.

The United States could block almost all of these deals, which cannot proceed without export licenses from the Treasury Department. The JCPOA, after all, stated clearly that aircraft could be sold to Iran only if it was used exclusively for commercial aviation. Yet the deal contains a fatal flaw: An airline can use its old fleet for nefarious purposes, keep the new planes for commercial routes, and technically comply with the nuclear deal's civil aviation provisions. That's why re-sanctioning Iran Air is a critical step toward blocking the sale of aircraft.

There is good reason to believe that cancelling the deals would disrupt the air corridor, even though it has endured despite Iranian reliance on aging aircraft built in the 1980s and 1990s, because of the economic and political fallout of such a decision.

With the nuclear deal hanging by a thread and the international business community anxiously awaiting the president's May 12 decision about whether to pull out, credit lines to Tehran have been slow to materialize. The Airbus and Boeing deals, worth tens of billions of dollars, are the canary in the coal mine for Iran's economy. If the deals go forward, they will signal to the global financial market that Iran is finally open for business. But if the Trump administration cancelled them, it would kill Iranian prospects of real economic dividends from the deal, even if the JCPOA survives the May 12 deadline.

Put bluntly, no one would finance anything in Iran after the establishment of a precedent that companies and sectors delisted by the JCPOA could be re-sanctioned on different grounds — and material support for the Syrian slaughter seems an eminently sound reason to do that.

Trump should make it clear that the United States will only approve the aircraft deals if Iran puts a stop to its illegal airlift of weapons and fighters to Syria. Iranian aircraft are sustaining Syria's killing fields and setting the stage for escalation against Israel. Letting Iran buy Western manufactured airplanes, on the other hand, would be the clearest indication yet that the White House is powerless to disrupt Tehran's inexorable path to war.

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## After Mahmoud Abbas: A Bloodbath in the West Bank?

By Benny Avni

nypost.com

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**The Palestinian Game of Thrones is on.**

White House Mideast peace planner Jared Kushner's security clearance troubles and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's legal struggle may be all the rage among the region's watchers this week. But a Ramallah power play, conducted away from the media's prying eye, is brewing — and we ignore it at our peril.

As 83-year-old Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' health deteriorates, his would-be successors jockey for position.

Last week, Abbas made a UN speech in a shaky voice. His puffy face led many to speculate the heavy smoker is

heavily medicated. He checked into Maryland's Johns Hopkins Hospital the next day.

Palestinian officials said Abbas underwent an unspecified "routine checkup," and by this week he was back on his feet in Ramallah.

But his return didn't stem a stealth campaign among his would-be heirs.

Neighboring Arab leaders are starting to pick their favored horses in the race to succeed Abbas. A Palestinian official even predicted to me last week, that "this time it won't be decided by us, but by the leaders of the Arab states."

One of those leading candidates, the Fatah party secretary general Jibril Rajoub, went on the attack against his rival's backers this week. "It is not acceptable for Egypt to support Muhammad Dahlan," Rajoub told the BBC in a rare public airing of their rivalry.

That rivalry started back when Yasser Arafat, who ruled Palestinian politics until his 2004 death, made Rajoub top security official in the West Bank, while Dahlan had that portfolio in Gaza.

After Hamas seized power in Gaza, Dahlan moved to Dubai, where he lined up powerful financial supporters. Leading Sunni powers (the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt) now back Dahlan, while Rajoub seeks help from Qatar.

Other top contenders include Abbas' current intelligence chief, Majid Faraj, who is well-connected in Jerusalem and Washington; and former Palestinian UN Ambassador Nasser al Kidwa, who'd be favored by some Western Europeans and who, as Arafat's nephew, is considered Palestinian royalty.

It's also possible that Abbas' three titles — Fatah chief, Palestinian Authority president and PLO chairman — will be divided among three contenders, not held by one person, as they are now.

Or, as Israelis fear most, in lieu of a clear line of succession, a Palestinian bloodbath will determine the winner.

Abbas never named a successor. Yes, he recently crowned a deputy Fatah chairman. But the man, Mahmoud al-Alul, is almost unknown outside Ramallah and so is a weak contender: As in much of the Arab world, would-be

Palestinian leaders must be backed by armed men. Gray apparatchiks are at a distinct disadvantage.

Which brings us to Hamas, the uncontested ruler of Gaza. According to the Palestinian constitution, once the current president can no longer function, the speaker of the legislative council becomes interim leader. That position is held by a Hamas politician, Aziz Duwaik. And, as Abbas's 12 years as president after being elected for four shows, temporary can last forever.

So Hamas, a US-designated terrorist organization, may end up taking over West Bank politics, burying any hope of better Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Washington, as yet, has been mostly mum, but if America wants to remain relevant in the Mideast, it must draw some red lines and clarify our interests: Avoid a bloody succession battle; make sure Hamas stays out of power; ensure the next leader continues security coordination with our allies Jordan, Egypt and, most crucially, Israel.

Throwing America's weight behind a Palestinian candidate isn't without risk, though. Dahlan, for example, now tells everyone who'll listen that America hates him, knowing it increases popular support among Palestinians.

Jonathan Schanzer, the Palestinian watcher at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, says "we need to have our ear to the ground," making sure anyone we back has popular support — but also watch out for our core interests.

Achieving that would be a neat trick, perhaps beyond the capacity of the current, or any, administration. But neglecting to clarify our preferences will be hazardous — for us and our allies.

## Inaction in Syria Hurts U.S. Interests

By Jennifer Cafarella

**And allows the slaughter to continue.**

The latest tragedy unfolding in Syria is all too familiar — and getting worse. The U.S. is watching as Syrian President Bashar Assad and his backers, Iran and Russia, commit war crimes against a long-besieged population that dares to continue to oppose him.

But behind the canvas of suffering, increasingly there is a deeper issue: a policy of U.S. passivity that is eating away at our global posture and interests.

When decorating a shelf, consider your design tastes as well as your storage needs in order to create a look that's beautiful and functional

The target this time is a besieged opposition enclave known as Eastern Ghouta, on the outskirts of the capital, Damascus. Assad once again seeks to maximize civilian suffering to compel a surrender. The U.S. is again portraying helplessness.

The cost in lives is horrifying enough. Nearly 400,000 people live in this enclave, according to U.N. figures, and they are dying by the score under merciless air attacks,

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deprived of aid supplies and medicines as Assad intentionally targets hospitals.

U.S. passivity in the face of Assad's violence not only deepens the humanitarian crisis, it also harms American national security. It strengthens jihadists' claims that we are aligned with Iran and its campaign of sectarian slaughter. It undermines American credibility around the world at a time when multiple adversaries, including North Korea, Iran, and Russia, are probing American will to defend our interests.

The U.S. cannot claim to be containing Iran or standing up to Russian President Vladimir Putin while capitulating to Assad. Assad's gains are Iran's and Russia's gains — and our losses.

America's policy avoids entanglement in a messy conflict in the short term. But it will lead to worse dangers and larger conflicts in the future.

The Trump administration is trying to do better by imposing sanctions to compel a change in Assad's behavior. The Defense and State Departments are undermining even this tenuous approach, however.

Defense Secretary James Mattis said “we are not getting engaged in the Syrian civil war.” His statement signals that the U.S. has no intention of using force in support of diplomacy, thereby encouraging Assad to continue his indiscriminate violence.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s diplomatic approach in Syria conveys the same message. It capitulates to Assad, Iran, and Russia by bypassing all of the confidence-building measures – such as the delivery of humanitarian aid – that would be required to get opposition groups to the negotiating table.

The U.S. has repeatedly hoped in vain that diplomacy will stop or contain the slaughter. American and U.N. diplomats have tried to use diplomacy to “freeze” the conflict on local levels when violence has precluded further talks. Their hope has been to transition back to negotiations after providing civilians a temporary respite from the bombing and enabling aid organizations to deliver some supplies.

None of it is working. Assad has hijacked this diplomatic approach, and the U.S. and United Nations have become complicit in the use of starvation as a weapon of war. Aid organizations route their deliveries through the Assad regime, which continues to block deliveries or redirect supplies to regime clients. The effect has been to give Assad’s sieges diplomatic cover.

The U.S. has already watched history repeat itself in Homs, Aleppo, Darayya, and towns that made fewer headlines. But the U.S. hasn’t changed course. Instead, it is merely rebranding the freezes as “de-escalation zones.”

Assad has not de-escalated. He has continued to kill Syrians who oppose him by the thousands and put unknown numbers into prisons even when they do surrender. Eastern Ghouta will be no different.

America’s diplomatic approach undermines other strategic interests. A successful “freeze” of the Syrian

conflict, even if it occurred, would leave in place Iranian forces and Iran’s proxies including Lebanese Hezbollah. It would prevent future military operations against Al Qaeda, which is embedded in opposition-held areas.

These outcomes have already occurred on local levels in southern Syria, where Iran’s proxies and Al Qaeda are entrenched beneath the cover of the U.S.-backed “de-escalation” zone.

The U.S. has lost sight of the relationship between diplomacy and war. American diplomats dealing with the Syrian crisis lack the leverage and credibility necessary to conduct effective diplomacy. The U.S. has used few other tools of national power to support them and has refused to contemplate using military force beyond self-defense or tactical retaliation for the use of chemical weapons.

Assad will continue to pursue all-out military victory as long the U.S. remains thus on the sidelines, and all diplomatic efforts except surrender will fail.

The U.S. is setting a precedent in Syria that will harm our ability to prevent future wars through deterrence and diplomacy. American adversaries are watching.

President Trump is conducting more effective diplomacy in Korea by signaling that he would consider using military force, hoping to incentivize North Korea to choose talks. But North Korea and China watch U.S. policy around the world and will wonder whether the U.S. has the necessary will to risk massive war in Korea.

U.S. behavior in Syria signals that we do not have the will to defend our interests or commit the resources necessary to achieve our stated goals.

The American homeland, American allies and American partners are less safe as a result.

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## The Israel-Egypt Gas Deal Is Highly Advantageous to Both Countries

By Zvi Mazel

jns.org

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But will politics get in the way?

The deal just concluded between Nobel Energy from Texas and Israeli Delek group on the one hand, and Egyptian private company Dolphinus on the other, to provide Egypt with 64 billion cubic meters of gas for a total of \$15 billion over a period of 10 years may well turn out to be the first sign that the Mediterranean is about to become a world hub of gas trade. According to United States Geological Survey estimates, huge reserves of gas can be found in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea: some 325 trillion cubic feet or 9.2 trillion cubic meters—more than all known U.S. reserves.

Exporting Israeli gas to Egypt is beneficial to both. Selling to neighboring countries enables Israel to make the most of short distances and lower transportation costs. Egypt needs Israeli gas to palliate insufficient production until the mammoth Zor offshore field starts supplying enough gas for home consumption and export. Production

started a few weeks ago, but it won’t run at full capacity until the end of 1919, and it will take another three years for Egypt to be self-sufficient. Some of the gas from Israel will be exported to meet Cairo’s contractual obligations to British Gas and Fenosa from Spain that it has been unable to fulfill, the political and economic turmoil following the ousting of Hosni Mubarak having stopped gas development and production. British Gas and Fenosa found themselves unable to fulfill their own obligations to customers and had to pay large fines. Current Egyptian President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi—looking for energy sources for his economic projects—did away with outdated and cumbersome regulation, and liberalized gas research, allowing a number of major companies to join in the search for new gas fields. This new policy was vindicated when Italian energy giant ENI discovered the Zor field and its estimated 822 billion cubic meters’ reserves.

Egyptian officials were at pains to stress that it was a business deal between private companies, while at the same time emphasizing that it was a first step toward making Egypt a regional gas market and a major player in price-fixing for that commodity. Minister of Petroleum Tarek al-Mala nevertheless declared two conditions for the deal to go through: It has to be beneficial to the Egyptian economy, and a solution must be found to the outstanding arbitration award against Egypt for breach of contract following the cessation of Egyptian gas exports to Israel in 2012. President Sisi was more forthcoming; they had nothing to hide, he stated, adding that for the last four years, he had been dreaming of turning Egypt into a regional energy hub. These attempts to preempt accusations of normalization were not wholly successful. Questions were asked in parliament; an attorney petitioned the Supreme Court to void the deal.

The ink hadn't dried yet on the deal when Cyprus revealed that it, too, was engaged in negotiations with Cairo regarding the export of gas from its Aphrodite offshore field not far from the coast of Egypt. This would be yet another step toward furthering Sisi's dream. Aphrodite's reserves are estimated at some 129 billion cubic meters. Nobel energy, Delek drilling and Avner oil exploration hold significant shares in that field.

Several routes exist for optimizing the production of Eastern Mediterranean gas fields. One is to build additional facilities for exporting liquified gas. Israeli groups had suggested building several such plants in Cyprus, supplying them with Israeli gas through a pipeline and shipping it to the rest of the world in liquefied form, together with gas from Cyprus offshore fields. This solution has been discarded in favor of a more ambitious plan better suited to the interests of all parties—exporting natural gas from Israel and Cyprus to Italy through a pipeline to supply the growing needs of Western Europe, helping it to diversify its sources and reducing its dependence on Russian gas. A memorandum was signed in December by Israel, Cyprus, Greece and Italy regarding the construction of a 2,100-kilometers-long pipeline to be laid at the bottom of the sea at a cost of between \$6 billion and \$7 billion. Feasibilities studies are ongoing, and a final decision has yet to be reached. Egypt would likely be interested in being associated with such a project, which would provide a secure and long-term outlet for its own gas and help stabilize its economy.

Yet significant obstacles lie ahead.

Ongoing disputes concern the maritime borders of all parties involved. Cyprus has reached an agreement with

Egypt regarding the delimitation of its maritime borders in 2003, in 2007 with Lebanon and in 2013 with Israel. These documents were registered with the United Nations, and are perfectly legal and binding. However, Turkey, which conquered and occupied Northern Cyprus in 1974, expressed some reservations and threatened to prevent drilling for gas unless that zone took part in the process—from research to production and revenues. It did not stop with those threats, and on Feb. 7, sent a warship to stop a drillship commissioned by ENI to protect what the Turks say are the rights of Turkish Cypriots. Undeterred, ENI tried again, but on Feb. 23, no less than five warships intercepted the drillship and made it turn back to Limassol. Efforts by the European Union to mediate the conflict have been unsuccessful so far.

Lebanon is also unhappy with the agreement between Cyprus and Israel; it has refused attempts to delimitate its own maritime borders with Israel, which then had no choice and did so unilaterally, according to internationally accepted criteria. Israel then drilled for gas and started exploitation in areas that are in its economic waters. Nevertheless, Lebanon—probably egged on by Hezbollah, which is keen to exacerbate tensions with Israel—is laying claims to a 900-square-kilometer zone that includes the Tamar gas field.

Egypt has never delimited its maritime borders with Israel. It's currently not happy with the agreement between Cyprus and Israel, even though its commercial waters are not affected and the coordinates of that agreement conform with internationally accepted criteria here, too.

Yet another unsolved issue is the delimitation of maritime borders between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

That said, the enormous gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean could significantly contribute to the economic development and stability of the countries of the region, provided these governments can set aside their conflicts and differences of opinion to work together for their mutual benefit. As things stand, political and religious interests have the upper hand, and it's hard to see how they could be overcome or avoided. Each country will therefore have to make its own way and find a solution best fitted to its interests, as exemplified by the deal reached between Israel and Egypt. It's expected that this deal would not hinder future cooperation with other countries should it become possible.

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## Looking For Leadership: Trump, Bibi And Moses

By Gary Rosenblatt

[jewishweek.timesofisrael.com](http://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com)

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**Humility, listening to the advice of others, not taking gifts? They're in short supply in D.C. and Jerusalem.**

Reading the dramatic Torah portion this past Shabbat morning of Moses shattering the Ten Commandments on his descent from Mt. Sinai, and reflecting on the

Washington love-in this week between Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump, I kept thinking about what it takes to be a leader — of a rebellious flock in biblical times or of polarized societies today.

Let's start with the present.

Images of Netanyahu and Trump reinforcing their bonds of political and personal alliance — mutually beneficial for them — caused some Jews here and in Israel to kvell with pride and others to cringe with embarrassment.

The two men have much in common. They are perceived by fans as possessing strength and, in the face of criticism and adversity, a sense of deep conviction. Others, though, would like to see them convicted. The critics charge that both leaders are weakening their respective democracies through constant attacks on various government agencies and the media (“fake news”) while committing offenses that may well be illegal, resulting in a level of disorder and frustration at the top that permeates their respective societies.

“Our problem is we don't have another leader,” a 60-year-old produce merchant at the Carmel Market in Tel Aviv told our contributing editor Joshua Mitnick the other day. (The quote became the headline of Josh's report on Page 1 last week.) The merchant was explaining why he prefers to see Netanyahu remain in power despite the number of allegations of bribery and corruption piling up against him, threatening his hold on power.

According to polls, a majority of Israelis feel Netanyahu's craftsmanship in foreign affairs — his ability to keep the horrific Syrian war next door at bay and to foster a warm relationship with Trump that has helped produce tangible results (recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, relocating the U.S embassy from Tel Aviv and blaming the Palestinians for the lack of peace progress) — outweigh the prime minister's domestic problems, even though many believe the prime minister is guilty of the charges.

Israelis have grown cynical about their political leaders, with good reason. President Moshe Katsav was jailed for rape in 2011, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert did time for corruption five years later and Aryeh Deri, a Shas leader and cabinet minister jailed in 1999 for bribery and breach of trust, has managed, with minimal outcry, to make his way back as cabinet minister and Shas leader today.

Closer to home, daily evidence of Trump's chaotic tenure in the White House, from his dizzying pace in changing positions on issues from immigration to gun control, to sniping at his most loyal cabinet members, continues to erode confidence among the majority of Americans who believe he is unfit for the job.

Responding to official investigations, both Trump and Netanyahu have lashed out in ways that seek to marginalize, if not demonize, governmental pillars of their democracies. The result is to further divide their already polarized countries by playing almost exclusively to their

base of supporters and limit debate by suggesting that facts are subjective.

What lessons can we learn from Moses, the greatest leader in Jewish history, who took a downtrodden collection of slaves out of Egypt, protected them from surrounding enemies in the desert for 40 years and helped shape them into a nation as he led them to the edge of the Promised Land?

Of course, it helped his credibility to have God as his champion. But the qualities that, presumably, made God choose Moses in the first place as the vehicle for this collective transformation included several traits that Netanyahu and Trump are sorely lacking.

One is a fierce love of his people; all of his people. Even though they drove him crazy at times, Moses was passionate in their defense — to the point of refusing God's offer (in this past week's Torah reading) to make Moses the leader of a new people and wipe out the Israelites for worshipping the Golden Calf.

If You won't forgive the Israelites, Moses says to God, “blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written,” referring to the Torah.

From an early age, Moses had a passion for justice and a willingness to act, slaying an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Jewish slave and protecting seven sisters at the well in Midian from a group of hostile attackers. (He didn't claim he had bone spurs to avoid the struggles.)

In addition, Moses had the ability to listen to the advice of others, as when his father-in-law, Yitro, taught him to delegate, appointing judges to settle the people's disputes. He took great care not to abuse his powers and swore to the rebellious Korach that he took no gifts or favors from others. (No cigars or cases of champagne for Moses.)

And perhaps above all, despite his unique relationship with God and leadership of the Jewish people, he possessed humility. In fact, the Torah describes him as “more humble than anyone on the face of the earth” (Numbers, 12:3). (Are you listening, Bibi and Donald?)

Moses was not an orator; he stuttered. But he had the qualities of authenticity and sincerity that made his words and actions hold up.

“Moses was a visionary leader,” my late friend Michael Hammer wrote in his pioneering best-seller on management, “Re-engineering The Corporation.” “He persuaded the children of Israel that they should go forward toward a land of milk and honey when all they could see around them was sand. One man couldn't force a whole people to set off into the desert; he had to inspire them with his vision. He also set a personal example,” Michael wrote, noting that at the Red Sea, with the Egyptians in hot pursuit, it was Moses who led the Israelites into the waters, which soon parted as they marched to freedom.

We're not asking Netanyahu or Trump to take such dramatic steps, but it would be helpful if they had the

courage to dip their toes into collaborative conversation with those who hold other views.

At a time of troubling questions in America and Israel about the erosion of moral governance, we are reminded that authentic leadership, which goes deeper than merely having the votes and the power, is critical to lasting success. True leaders should be committed to working for

and bringing together all the people, not just those who favor them. Those they serve would do well to demand such commitment rather than make excuses for perceived deep flaws.

In brief, don't settle for less.

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## Why Is the U.S. State Department Backing a Lebanese Land (and Sea) Grab?

By Evelyn Gordon

evelyncgordon.com

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**Demanding that Israel cede land in response to spurious claims.**

State Department officials have spent a lot of time in Lebanon recently. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited the country two weeks ago, and Acting Assistant Secretary of State David Satterfield made an appearance last week. Among other issues, they are trying to mediate two Lebanese-Israeli disputes. The problem is that only one of these is a quasi-legitimate conflict; the other is a patently illegitimate Lebanese land grab. By treating that claim as legitimate, the State Department is not only encouraging aggression but proving, once again, that international guarantees to Israel are worthless.

The quasi-legitimate dispute relates to where the maritime border between Israel and Lebanon runs. As I noted back in 2011, Beirut is currently claiming maritime territory that it didn't consider Lebanese as recently as 2007, when it signed (but ultimately didn't ratify) a deal demarcating its maritime border with Cyprus. That makes the State Department's proposal to award Lebanon 75 percent of this territory outrageous. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Israel and Lebanon have no agreed maritime border, and international law doesn't provide an unequivocal answer as to where it should run. So State's mediation is justifiable, even if its proposal isn't.

The second dispute, however, is over Lebanon's claim that Israel's planned new border wall encroaches on Lebanese territory in 13 places. And on this, there should be no question whatsoever, because a recognized international border, known as the Blue Line, already exists and the UN has twice affirmed that Israel isn't violating it.

The first time the UN affirmed realities on the ground was after Israel unilaterally withdrew from Lebanon in 2000. Then, the UN Security Council unanimously confirmed that all the areas Beirut now claims were, in fact, on Israel's side of the border. The second was earlier this month when the UN Interim Force in Lebanon reaffirmed that all the new construction is on Israel's side of the border.

The latter, incidentally, is particularly noteworthy because UNIFIL usually sides with Beirut in any Lebanese-Israeli dispute, for the simple reason that its peacekeepers are located on Lebanese soil and therefore vulnerable to reprisals if it ruffles Lebanese feathers. Indeed, as reported by the Jerusalem Post just last week,

members of UNIFIL's French contingent recently told a French paper that they routinely refrain from doing the job they're officially there to do—ensuring that Hezbollah conducts no military activity in southern Lebanon, as mandated by Security Council Resolution 1701 of 2006—for fear of clashes with the Lebanese Army.

Given the existence of both a recognized international border and unequivocal UN confirmation that Israel hasn't violated it, the only proper response to Beirut's protest over a new fence would be to politely tell it that it has no case whatsoever. The territory in question is unarguably Israel's, and Israel is free to build whatever it pleases there. Instead, the State Department has treated Lebanon's claim as legitimate. Tillerson demanded that Israel halt construction until it reaches an agreement with Lebanon on the border, while Satterfield proposed land swaps to satisfy Lebanon's claims. In other words, State is asking Israel to cede land which the Security Council unanimously recognized as sovereign Israeli territory just because a thuggish neighbor covets it and has threatened war if its demands aren't satisfied.

Needless to say, this is an excellent way to encourage aggression. If Lebanon can get Washington to pressure Israel to cede internationally recognized Israeli territory merely by claiming land to which it lacks any vestige of right and then threatening war if its demands aren't met, why wouldn't Lebanon—or any other country interested in grabbing Israeli land—keep repeating this tactic?

But it also makes a mockery of the international guarantee contained in that Security Council resolution from 2000. After all, it's hard to imagine a stronger guarantee of the validity of Israel's northern border than a unanimous Security Council resolution affirming it. Yet ever since that resolution was passed, Lebanon has made repeated demands for territory on the Israeli side of the border. Every single time, the State Department and the rest of the international community has treated Beirut's demands as valid and pressed Israel to offer concessions to assuage them.

This began almost immediately when Lebanon laid claim to the Shaba Farms region in the early 2000s. The Blue Line border actually assigns Shaba to Syria, meaning it isn't Lebanon's to claim; any dispute over it would have to be resolved between Israel and Syria. But instead of telling Beirut to get lost, the Security Council asserted, in

that same Resolution 1701 of 2006, that parts of the Lebanese border it unanimously affirmed just six years earlier were now “disputed or uncertain” and thus required a new UN demarcation. The Bush Administration subsequently pressured Israel (unsuccessfully) to turn Shaba over to Lebanon.

Today’s State Department has gone even further. Instead of demanding that Israel give Lebanon territory which the UN previously deemed Syrian, it’s now demanding that Israel give Lebanon territory which the UN previously affirmed as Israel’s own. In other words, it’s telling Israel that international affirmation of its borders is no protection against future demands by other countries for chunks of its territory; the U.S. government—and also, naturally, the rest of the international community—will support any claim

whatsoever against Israel, even if it lacks any shred of validity.

Admittedly, it’s not news that international guarantees are useless; Israel has learned this lesson many times before. But you still have to wonder what State Department officials are thinking. After all, they’ve been trying for years to mediate peace deals between Israel and its neighbors, and all their proposals are based on Israel ceding strategically important land in exchange for international recognition of its borders and guarantees of their validity. Yet at the same time, they’ve been doing their utmost to prove that international recognition and guarantees are worthless. And then they wonder why Israelis don’t think the international guarantees they’re being offered are a good substitute for the defensible borders they would lose.

## Poland's Holocaust Law Is All Too Familiar to Israelis

By Daniel Gordis

bloomberg.com

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**The class trip to Poland is a high school highlight for many Israelis.** Although not mandated by the government, it has become a widespread rite of passage. Touring Warsaw and Krakow affords students an opportunity to learn about the grandeur of Jewish life in Poland before it was eradicated. Seeing the death camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibor or Treblinka serves as a chilling reminder of the Holocaust and an opportunity to appreciate the drastic change in the Jewish existential condition that Israel has wrought.

Not all Israelis are fans of the trips. Some parents remain opposed to funneling money to the Polish economy. Others assert that if the Israeli educational system needs trips to death camps to inculcate in its students a commitment to Zionism, something is terribly amiss. By and large, though, Israelis acknowledge the power of these tours, and thousands of teenagers participate each year.

So, too, do Israeli soldiers. The IDF regularly sends delegations of officers to Poland. The highlight is often marching into Auschwitz wearing Israeli uniforms, in the very place where almost a million helpless Jewish victims were murdered.

Diplomatically, Israel and Poland have long had cordial relations. With Israel increasingly worried about the erosion of American support in the long run (a recent Pew Center report showed that most Democrats are more sympathetic to Palestinians than they are to Israelis) and given its isolation in Europe, Israel has been anxious to maintain those relations, even in the face of Poland’s move to the nationalist right.

A new Polish law, however, has suddenly battered the relationship: It criminalizes suggestions that Poland was complicit in the Holocaust. Although the Poles are correct that they were not entirely free actors during the war (the country was invaded first by Germany and later by Russia), the claim that there were not some who were intimately,

even enthusiastically, involved in the slaughter of Jews is a horrific distortion of history.

The Israeli response has been vociferously critical. As the law was under debate, Israeli Education Minister Naftali Bennett announced that he would visit Poland, and meet with students and Polish officials, to express Israel’s strong opposition to the bill. “I am determined to clearly say that history has already confirmed that the Polish people had a proven involvement in the murder of Jews during the Holocaust,” he said. “I am going to speak truth, where the truth took place and it is not dependent on any law.”

The Polish government would have none of it, and canceled Bennett’s trip. Escalating the war of words, Bennett then tweeted a photo of himself next to Auschwitz, and insisted that he saw the cancellation as a “badge of honor.” “The blood of Polish Jews cries from the ground, and no law will silence it,” he later said. “The government of Poland canceled my visit because I mentioned the crimes of its people. I am honored.”

Whatever Poland’s affront to history or Jewish sensibilities, Israel would swallow its pride, however, and seek to minimize damage to its diplomatic position. Bennett insisted that the visits of Israeli students would continue; the government announced that it might hold a summit to which the Polish prime minister would be invited.

But Poland was not done. With the tumult over the Holocaust bill far from over, lawmakers began exploring legislation that would criminalize the kosher slaughter of meat. The country also froze progress on a Holocaust survivors’ property restitution bill. Israel’s Hebrew press reported that Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki had visited a memorial for the Holy Cross Brigade, which is known to have collaborated with the Nazis. He also commented this month, in response to a question from an Israeli journalist about the “concentration camp” law, that

“we do not deny the fact that there were Polish perpetrators as well as there were Jewish perpetrators or Ukrainian perpetrators.” For many Jewish observers, the comment was beyond abhorrent. It was clear that Poland was awash with a new wave of government-sanctioned anti-Semitic sentiment.

Noa Landau, a senior journalist for Israel’s left-leaning Haaretz newspaper, tweeted, that it was an “outrageous scene” at the security conference in Germany where Morawiecki made his remarks. After the prime minister

compared “Polish perpetrators’ in the Holocaust to ‘Jewish perpetrators.’ The audience, Europe’s elite, stays politely quiet,” she wrote.

Landau’s point was that it’s not only Poland that hasn’t changed since World War II; Europe’s response remains horrifyingly recognizable. Israelis who feared that Jews might forget Europe’s hate-filled legacy can now rest assured. For the foreseeable future, Poland itself is ensuring that will not happen.

## The Saudi Religious Scholar Who Is Trying to Fix Islam’s Anti-Semitism Problem

By Ben Cohen

algemeiner.com

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### An actual religion of peace?

As the keener readers of Jewish media outlets and social media feeds will doubtless be aware, there is an active bidding war going on right now between the rival Gulf Arab states of Qatar and Saudi Arabia for the hearts and minds of American Jews.

Over the last few months, several American Jewish figures of varying degrees of influence have flown to Doha to hear directly from the ruling al-Thani family about why they have been profoundly misunderstood regarding their embrace of the Palestinian terrorists of Hamas and the ruling regime in Iran. Meanwhile, the Saudis have seemingly upended decades of Salafi Islamist propaganda against the Jews by discreetly warming relations with Israel, explicitly identifying Iran’s rulers as the single greatest threat to the Middle East, and stoking political opposition to the 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran.

In this maelstrom of political consultants, PR flaks and advocacy leaders armed with talking points, the figure of Muhammad al-Issa is something of an incongruity. A former Saudi minister of justice, and presently the secretary-general of the influential, Mecca-based Muslim World League, al-Issa has, in recent weeks, been addressing the twin issues of antisemitism and anti-Judaism among the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims with an unprecedented candor.

Spending two hours with the methodical, scholarly al-Issa — as The Algemeiner did in Washington, DC, earlier this month — it is plain to see why, at this particular juncture, he is an asset to a Saudi government eager to convince the West that, finally, it stands resolute against both Sunni and Shi’a variants of Islamism, and is determined to establish Islam as a religion of peace and coexistence. Still, to reduce Al-Issa’s own message to a strictly political calculation would be a grave mistake, if only because its theological content needs to be heard irrespective of the political machinations in Gulf capitals.

Our interview began, therefore, with a quote — specifically, a hadith, a saying of the Prophet Muhammad, that has been cited widely by Islamist preachers inciting hatred against Jews: “The Muslims will kill the Jews, and the Jews will hide behind the stones and the trees, and the

stones and the trees will say: Oh Muslim, oh servant of Allah, there is a Jew hiding behind me, come and kill him, except for the Gharqad tree, which is one of their trees.”

In al-Issa’s view, to brandish this hadith as a modern-day weapon against the Jews is foremost a crime against Islam itself. He pointed to a verse in the Quran which declares, “Let there be no compulsion in religion, for the truth stands out clearly from falsehood,” alongside another which states unambiguously, “For you is your religion, and for me is my religion.”

“Islam is a humane religion, and a religion of coexistence and tolerance,” al-Issa said. “It is a religion that calls its followers and all mankind to peace. It neither calls for war, nor does it welcome war at all. It only accepts war when it is imposed from outside.”

How, then, to explain a quotation that appears to relish the prospect of a final reckoning with the Jews? Al-Issa’s answer centered not on the text itself, the wording of which he did not dispute, but on a broader explanation of its purpose and significance. The hadith in question, he said, was one among many visions and reflections of Muhammad, some of which explicitly mentioned violent conflict between his own followers. “Is this to be interpreted as the Prophet encouraging his followers to fight?” al-Issa asked.

The hadith about the Jews, he continued, “speaks of a matter that might occur (in the future) or that might have occurred many times in the past. But that doesn’t mean it is encouraging this fighting ... it’s a prophecy, merely a prophecy.” For al-Issa, context is all, and it is what marks the difference between a moderate interpretation of Islam and an extremist one. “Those who memorize the texts verbatim should not be treated like those who understand them,” he explained. “Extremism and fanaticism is a mental disorder, and not a religious problem.”

Part of this “mental disorder,” al-Issa said, involved the interpretation of Islamic texts, such as this hadith, in a manner designed to reinforce the ideological predispositions of extremists. On one level, he said, the apocalyptic interpretation “puzzled” him, because it clearly contradicted core Muslim teachings about religious

coexistence. On a deeper level, he added, “it hurts me that these incorrect interpretations and understandings exist.”

Throughout our discussion, al-Issa was adamant that Muhammad’s faith was predicated on an appreciation for a divine order in which differences between religions and nations are a cause for peace, rather than conflict — the diametrical opposite of the vengeful teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist organizations. Another widely-cited antisemitic meme among Muslims — that the Jews are descendants of “apes and pigs” — elicited a dismissive chuckle from al-Issa, who excoriated the “stupidity” of those for whom a Quranic verse that Jews profaning the Sabbath “shall be as apes despicable!” is a transcendent condemnation of all Jews, everywhere, for all time.

Moreover, al-Issa stressed that — in contrast to the long-standing Christian depiction of the Jews as eternally responsible for the death of Jesus — Islam did not approach Judaism from the vantage point of “original sin.”

“Islam as a religion has never accused Judaism as a religion of anything,” he stated plainly. “Therefore, there’s no problem which requires a dialogue [similar to that between Judaism and Christianity].” A Muslim, then, faces no challenge to their faith when it comes to “respecting the Jewish religion and the right of the Jews to live in dignity.”

When that “dignity” includes an independent, sovereign state that is yet to exchange ambassadors with Saudi Arabia after seventy years of existence, what then? Again and again, al-Issa emphasized the political neutrality of the Muslim World League, and the need for a strict separation between religious faith and political orientation. At the same time, he gave no succor to historic Arab ambitions for Israel’s elimination.

Peace begins, al-Issa said, by recognizing that all the nations of the region will remain exactly where they are. “Therefore they have to coexist, and to offer concessions,” he said. “Otherwise we won’t just be fighting for the next seventy years, but for thousands of years.”

Just as important, he said, is a revision of fundamental world-views. “The idea that disagreeing with someone over creed or philosophy requires that you hate and fight that person is insanity,” he stated. “And they pay the price of this when it comes to peace.” To view Islam as a religion of “resistance,” al-Issa asserted, “negates the tradition of the Creator Almighty, who created His

universe in such a way that it contains diversity and variety.”

What stands out in al-Issa’s religious message is its plain-speaking transparency. A similar approach was on view in January, when, on the occasion of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, he penned a statement in which, in the words of the Middle East expert and historian Robert Satloff, “Saudi Arabia took a giant step toward joining the world in its recognition of the enormity of the Holocaust.” In that statement, al-Issa spoke of the “evil” of Nazism and condemned the “denial of the Holocaust or minimizing of its effect a crime to distort history, and an insult to the dignity of those innocent souls who have perished.”

Hearing such words led, ironically, to a question that was painful but necessary to ask: Are the world’s Muslims listening to you? Are your words having an impact on the people who need to hear them most? Al-Issa’s response underlined his conviction that the Muslim World League, founded in 1962, still carries decisive weight among the faithful.

“The League is definitely heeded and greatly respected in the Islamic world,” he said. “That includes those who have differed with us regarding some opinions. But at the end of the day, they respect the League. Whenever any opinion or idea is presented on the religious level, and we have not weighed in, they seek our input.” As to the scale of the challenge, al-Issa did not minimize what lies ahead, even joking that a boost in the “birthrate of intelligent people” would not go amiss.

Ultimately, al-Issa believes, that intelligence will spring from education. In that sense, his expression of his end vision carried something of an echo of an American civil rights leader. “We must increase our closeness, our knowledge of one another, and our cooperation,” he said. “And our love of one another.”

These are not sentiments that we have heard from a mainstream, powerful Muslim leader in the past. They are, of course, a comforting antidote to the venal rhetoric of theologians like Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the spiritual head of the Muslim Brotherhood. But because of that, al-Issa’s future work will inevitably encounter skepticism — above all from those who fervently wish him every success. Only he can change this perception, and one leaves his company with the distinct sense that he knows that.

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