

Why Israel Is Nervous

By Elliott Abrams The Wall Street Journal

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Tension is escalating between the U.S. and Israel. The problem: The administration views the Israeli-Palestinian issue as the root of all problems, while Israel is focused on Iran's nuclear threat. The tension in U.S.-Israel relations was manifest this past week as an extraordinary troupe of Obama administration officials visited Jerusalem. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, National Security Advisor James Jones, special Middle East envoy George Mitchell and new White House adviser Dennis Ross all showed up in Israel's capital in an effort to...well, to do something. It was not quite clear what.

Since President Obama came to office on Jan. 20 and then Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on March 31, the main motif in relations between the two governments has been friction. While nearly 80% of American Jews voted for Mr. Obama, that friction has been visible enough to propel him to meet with American Jewish leaders recently to reassure them about his policies. But last month, despite those reassurances, both the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and the Anti-Defamation League issued statements critical of the president's handling of Israel. Given the warm relations during the Bush years and candidate Obama's repeated statements of commitment to the very best relations with Israel, why have we fallen into this rut?

U.S.-Israel relations are often depicted as an extended honeymoon, but that's a false image. Harry Truman, who was a Bible-believing Christian Zionist, defied the secretary of state he so admired, George C. Marshall, and won a place in Israel's history by recognizing the new state 11 minutes after it declared its independence in 1948. Relations weren't particularly warm under Eisenhower—who, after all, demanded that Israel, along with Britain and France, leave Suez in 1956. The real alliance began in 1967, after Israel's smashing victory in the Six Day War, and it was American arms and Nixon's warnings to the Soviet Union to stay out that allowed Israel to survive and prevail in the 1973 war. Israelis are no fans of President Carter and, as his more recent writings have revealed, his own view of Israel is very hostile. During the George H.W. Bush and Clinton years, there were moments of close cooperation, but also of great friction—as when Bush suspended loan guarantees to Israel, or when the Clinton administration butted heads with Mr.

Netanyahu time after time during peace negotiations. Even during the George W. Bush years, when Israel's struggle against the terrorist "intifada" and the U.S. "global war on terror" led to unprecedented closeness and cooperation, there was occasional friction over American pressure for what Israelis viewed as endless concessions to the Palestinians to enable the signing of a peace agreement before the president's term ended. This "special relationship" has been marked by intense and frequent contact and often by extremely close (and often secret) collaboration, but not by the absence of discord.

Yet no other administration, even among those experiencing considerable dissonance with Israel, started off with as many difficulties as Obama's. There are two explanations for this problem, and the simpler one is personal politics. Mr. Netanyahu no doubt remembers very well the last Democratic administration's glee at his downfall in 1999, something Dennis Ross admits clearly in his book "The Missing Peace." The prime minister must wonder if the current bilateral friction is an effort to persuade Israelis that he is not the right man for the job, or at least to persuade them that his policies must be rejected. When Israeli liberals plead for Obama to "talk to Israel," they are hoping that Obama will help them revive the Israeli Left, recently vanquished in national elections. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Mr. Obama and his team wish former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni had won the top job and view Mr. Netanyahu and his Likud Party with some suspicion. The result, of course, is to make personal relations among policy makers more difficult, and to make trust and confidence between the two governments harder as well.

But the Obama administration has managed to win the mistrust of most Israelis, not just conservative politicians. Despite his great popularity in many parts of the world, in Israel Obama is now seen as no ally. A June poll found that just 6% of Israelis called him "pro-Israel," when 88% had seen President George W. Bush that way. So the troubles between the U.S. and Israel are not fundamentally found in the personal relations among policy makers.

The deeper problem—and the more complex explanation of bilateral tensions—is that the Obama administration, while claiming to separate itself from the "ideologues" of the Bush administration in favor of a more balanced and realistic Middle East policy,

is in fact following a highly ideological policy path. Its ability to cope with, indeed even to see clearly, the realities of life in Israel and the West Bank and the challenge of Iran to the region is compromised by the prism through which it analyzes events.

The administration view begins with a critique of Bush foreign policy—as much too reliant on military pressure and isolated in the world. The antidote is a policy of outreach and engagement, especially with places like Syria, Venezuela, North Korea and Iran. Engagement with the Muslim world is a special goal, which leads not only to the president's speech in Cairo on June 4 but also to a distancing from Israel so as to appear more “even-handed” to Arab states. Seen from Jerusalem, all this looks like a flashing red light: trouble ahead.

Iran is the major security issue facing Israel, which sees itself confronting an extremist regime seeking nuclear weapons and stating openly that Israel should be wiped off the map. Israel believes the military option has to be on the table and credible if diplomacy and sanctions are to have any chance, and many Israelis believe a military strike on Iran may in the end be unavoidable. The Obama administration, on the other hand, talks of outstretched hands; on July 15, even after Iran's election, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said “we understand the importance of offering to engage Iran....direct talks provide the best vehicle....We remain ready to engage with Iran.”

To the Israelis this seems unrealistic, even naïve, while to U.S. officials an Israeli attack on Iran is a nightmare that would upset Obama's outreach to the Muslim world. The remarkable events in Iran have slowed down U.S. engagement, but not the Iranian nuclear program. If the current dissent in Iran leads to regime change, or if new United Nations sanctions force Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons program, this source of U.S.-Israel tension will disappear. But it is more likely that Iran will forge ahead toward building a weapon, and U.S.-Israel tension will grow as Israel watches the clock tick and sees its options narrowed to two: live with an Iranian bomb, or strike Iran soon to delay its program long enough for real political change to come to that country.

Israel believes the only thing worse than bombing Iran is Iran's having the Bomb, but the evidence suggests this is not the Obama view.

If Iran is the most dangerous source of U.S.-Israel tension, the one most often discussed is settlements: The Obama administration has sought a total “freeze” on “Israeli settlement growth.” The Israelis years ago agreed there would be no new settlements and no physical expansion of settlements, just building “up and in” inside already existing communities. Additional construction in settlements does not harm Palestinians, who in fact

get most of the construction jobs. The West Bank economy is growing fast and the Israelis are removing security roadblocks so Palestinians can get around the West Bank better.

A recent International Monetary Fund report stated that “macroeconomic conditions in the West Bank have improved” largely because “Israeli restrictions on internal trade and the passage of people have been relaxed significantly.” What's more, says the IMF, “continuation of the relaxation of restrictions could result in real GDP growth of 7% for 2009 as a whole.” That's a gross domestic product growth rate Americans would leap at, so what's this dispute about?

It is, once again, about the subordination of reality to pre-existing theories. In this case, the theory is that every problem in the Middle East is related to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. The administration takes the view that “merely” improving life for Palestinians and doing the hard work needed to prepare them for eventual independence isn't enough. Nor is it daunted by the minor detail that half of the eventual Palestine is controlled by the terrorist group Hamas.

Instead, in keeping with its “yes we can” approach and its boundless ambitions, it has decided to go not only for a final peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, but also for comprehensive peace in the region. Mr. Mitchell explained that this “includes Israel and Palestine, Israel and Syria, Israel and Lebanon and normal relations with all countries in the region. That is President Obama's personal objective vision and that is what he is asking to achieve. In order to achieve that we have asked all involved to take steps.” The administration (pocketing the economic progress Israel is fostering in the West Bank) decided that Israel's “step” would be to impose a complete settlement freeze, which would be proffered to the Arabs to elicit “steps” from them.

But Israelis notice that already the Saudis have refused to take any “steps” toward Israel, and other Arab states are apparently offering weak tea: a quiet meeting here, overflight rights there, but nothing approaching normal relations. They also notice that Mr. Mitchell was in Syria last week, smiling warmly at its repressive ruler Bashar Assad and explaining that the administration would start waiving the sanctions on Syria to allow export of “products related to information technology and telecommunication equipment and parts and components related to the safety of civil aviation” and will “process all eligible applications for export licenses as quickly as possible.” While sanctions on certain Syrian individuals were renewed last week, the message to the regime is that better days lie ahead. Of this approach the Syrian dissident Ammar Abdulhamid told the Wall Street Journal, “The

regime feels very confident politically now. Damascus feels like it's getting a lot without giving up anything." Indeed, no "steps" from Syria appear to be on the horizon, except Mr. Assad's willingness to come to the negotiating table where he will demand the Golan Heights back but refuse to make the break with Iran and Hezbollah that must be the basis for any serious peace negotiation.

None of this appears to have diminished the administration's zeal, for bilateral relations with everyone take a back seat once the goal of comprehensive peace is put on the table. The only important thing about a nation's policies becomes whether it appears to play ball with the big peace effort. The Syrian dictatorship is viciously repressive, houses terrorist groups and happily assists jihadis through Damascus International Airport on their way to Iraq to fight U.S. and Coalition forces, but any concerns we might have are counterbalanced by the desire to get Mr. Assad to buy in to new negotiations with Israel. (Is the new "information technology" we'll be offering Mr. Assad likely to help dissidents there, or to help him suppress them?)

Future stability in Egypt is uncertain because President Hosni Mubarak is nearing 80, reportedly not in good health, and continues to crush all moderate opposition forces, but this is all ignored as we enlist Mr. Mubarak's cooperation in the comprehensive peace scheme. As we saw in the latter part of the Clinton and Bush administrations, once you commit to a major effort at an international peace conference or a comprehensive Middle East peace, those goals overwhelm all others.

Israelis have learned the hard way that reality cannot be ignored and that ideology offers no protection from danger. Four wars and a constant battle against terrorism sobered them up, and made them far less susceptible than most audiences to the Obama speeches that charmed Americans, Europeans, and many Muslim nations. A policy based in realism would help the Palestinians prepare for an eventual state while we turn our energies toward the real challenge confronting the entire region: what is to be done about Iran as it faces its first internal crisis since the regime came to power in 1979.

Mrs. Clinton recently decried "rigid ideologies and old formulas," but the tension with Israel shows the administration is—up to now—following the old script that attributes every problem in the region to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while all who live there can see that developments in Iran are in fact the linchpin of the region's future. The Obama administration's "old formulas" have produced the current tensions with Israel. They will diminish only if the administration adopts a more realistic view of what progress is possible, and what dangers lurk, in the Middle East.

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Obama Course Correction Needed for Mideast Peace

By Frida Ghitis World Politics Review July 30, 2009

Few countries engage in internal debates with the passion and intensity that one finds in Israel. And no debate has engendered more intensity in Israel than the one over how to achieve peace with the Palestinians. Which makes it all the more striking that, today, Israelis have reached a quiet consensus on one key point: President Barack Obama needs to make some urgent changes to his Mideast push for peace.

Just what exactly Obama should change is, of course, far from agreed. Washington may never satisfy the demands of Israelis on the extreme right who insist on keeping the West Bank, the biblical land of the Jews. But Obama would do well to pay attention to a growing chorus rising from the Israeli left, people who largely agree with the administration's overall goals. Israeli peace activists are all but begging Obama to adjust his course before he destroys the chances for peace.

Their principal worry is that Obama is losing the Israeli public.

The way columnist Bradley Burston put it, "If you continue on the course you have charted thus far, you are headed directly for a cliff." The warning was addressed directly to the president of the United States.

Israelis generally greeted Obama's election as a breath of fresh air, albeit with a nagging worry about what he had in mind for the region, given his vow to work for peace from the start of his administration. On Israel's left, there was great excitement. They believed the new American president saw the situation much as they did, with a sense of urgency and a willingness to push both sides to make concessions.

Initially, Obama's call for a freeze in settlements was not terribly troubling to the left. They, too, had advocated an end to settlement construction. Step by step, however, Israelis of all stripes have come to believe that Obama is deliberately putting all the pressure on Israel and essentially none on the other side.

Obama, as worried commentators have noted, risks permanently losing the support of the Israeli people. And in Israel, unlike many of the neighboring countries, the government cannot make major decisions if the public does not support it. Without Israeli public support, there will be no peace.

That's why a number of prominent commentators are urging Obama to speak directly to the Israeli people. Aluf Benn's New York Times op-ed, "Why Won't Obama Talk to Israel?" came on the heels of Burston's second-person missive, titled, "Mr. Obama, have a talk with these Israelis, and soon." The consensus on the left is that Obama should speak directly to Israelis, not just to their leaders, to explain what he has in mind and why it is in Israel's interest.

Already, polls show that 6 percent of Israelis think Obama is pro-Israel. In a country used to hearing other world leaders threaten its survival, the people will only follow the lead of a U.S. president who understands their fears and knows how to ease them. Obama has failed dismally on this count.

That's why Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who came to power after his party won just 21 percent of the vote, is finding almost no pushback at home. Israelis feel vulnerable to the world. Obama may be hoping that his cold-shoulder, tough-love attitude will prompt Israelis to dump their hardline leader. In fact, his actions are having the opposite effect, weakening opposition to Netanyahu.

In Israel, Obama is viewed as conciliatory towards the entire world -- except Israel. He seems happy to let Iran and North Korea defy the U.S. He has not said anything publicly about the way Arab countries have rejected his calls for improving relations with Israel. He doesn't grab his microphone to pressure any country except Israel. And he seems to give big speeches to everyone, except Israelis. Israelis are growing worried. That is not an emotion conducive to concessions.

If Obama does not regain the trust of Israelis, he will join the long line of American leaders whose efforts produced no results. And the longer Obama waits to try to restore his reputation among Israelis, the more difficult it will be to do so. As Burston put it, "Wait too long, and you'd be well advised to leave the table while you still have chips."

The feeling on the right, like the worry on the left, is that Obama has decided to sacrifice Israel in order to strengthen his standing with Arab countries. Another profound concern is that Obama does not

understand Israel's *raison d'être*, and that is one reason he has failed to make the case for Israel to Arab publics.

In his Cairo speech, Obama explained Israel's existence as a sole and direct consequence of the Holocaust. That is exactly the explanation that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad makes. Israelis want to hear Obama say -- and to Arabs -- that Israel has a right to exist that goes far beyond the Holocaust. That Jews have lived there for thousands of years, and that for thousands of years of exile -- long before the word "Holocaust" came to mean the genocide of the Jewish people -- Jews around the globe yearned to return to the land of their ancestors. This is not a right-wing view. That has been a fact of life for Jews across the ages, from the southern reaches of South America to the dusty plains of Ethiopia.

Israelis would like Obama to use his growing credibility with Arabs to explain this to those who have denied the link between Jews and the land of Israel since before 1948, when modern Israel came into being. Israelis want to see Obama demand that Arabs stop demonizing Jews and start making some concessions for peace.

There are some signs that the administration understands this. The message that the U.S. is now also demanding concessions from Arab governments has started trickling into the Israeli media. But Israelis would like to see demands on Arabs expressed aloud, the way demands on them were.

Ironically, a majority of Israelis have long supported a two-state solution. The creation of a Palestinian state has been accepted by most in Israel since long before Arabs spoke of it openly. And much of what Obama wants to achieve is a wish they share. But Israelis still hear Palestinian and other Arab media routinely reject their right to live anywhere in their country, not just in the West Bank. They hear the Iranian president call for their country's destruction. And they no longer hear from Washington the promise of protection they once perceived.

More than anything, Obama needs to show that his vision of peace would leave Israel safe. Without that, Israelis will remain reluctant to follow his lead all the way to a two-state solution. Without that, there will be no peace.

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Israel vs. the world: Drawing battle lines over Jerusalem

By Herb Keinon The Jerusalem Post August 6, 2009

The phone call Ambassador to the US Michael Oren received from the State Department on Monday protesting the eviction of two Palestinian families from a Jewish-owned building in Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood - as well as the condemnations of the move by Britain, Egypt, the UN and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton - are the birth pangs of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's new policy on Jerusalem.

For the past 40 years, scores of Israeli politicians have been talking about Israel's 3,000-year-old link to Jerusalem and how the city must remain Israel's undivided capital forever.

Former prime minister Ehud Olmert spoke that way for years, especially when he was mayor of the city. But then he became prime minister, changed his tone and - by his own admission - was willing to compromise on Jerusalem.

In a May interview with Newsweek, Olmert said he agreed that the "holy basin" in Jerusalem would not be under Israel's sovereignty, but rather administered by a consortium of Saudis, Jordanians, Israelis, Palestinians and Americans.

In other words, there has long been a dissonance between Israeli slogans on Jerusalem and the country's negotiating position regarding the city.

Talk to foreign diplomats and they will tell you, with absolute sincerity, that the Arabs will never, ever compromise on Jerusalem, not in a million years.

The Jews, they believe, will compromise.

And their expectations are not unfounded: a quick glance at diplomacy over the last 10 years shows that premise to be true. Ehud Barak was willing to make Israeli concessions to the Palestinians regarding Jerusalem at Camp David and Taba, and Olmert was willing to do the same during his conversations with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Netanyahu, who when he was prime minister the first time around dug the Temple Mount tunnels that sparked riots, and also bucked the condemnation of the entire world in building Har Homa, seems to be made of different stuff on Jerusalem. When he says the city will be the undivided capital of Israel, he - apparently - means it.

What is occurring now - both the US protest over the decision to build 20 apartment units for Jews at the site of the old Shepherd Hotel in Sheikh Jarrah, and the protest over the current evictions - is that both Israel and the world are laying down their markers.

The world is saying "hands off east Jerusalem," and Netanyahu is replying, "no, it's ours." And those diametrically opposed positions are bound to lead to friction.

It is also important to keep in mind three other elements when looking at the current tension with Washington over Jerusalem.

The first is that the government did not initiate the eviction of the families in Sheikh Jarrah. One cannot accuse the government of picking a fight with the US over this issue now, at a very sensitive time in the diplomatic process. Rather, the police were implementing a decision on ownership of the house handed down by the Supreme Court.

Another thing to remember is that no prime minister of Israel has ever agreed to curtail building in east Jerusalem.

Even Olmert, who was willing to compromise a great deal on Jerusalem, continued to approve housing in the eastern part of the city, drawing fire as a result from then-US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice.

Olmert kept building in east Jerusalem, while at the same time indicating willingness to make concessions on it in a final-status deal. Netanyahu, like Olmert, continues to build, but has not indicated that he is willing to compromise on the final status of the city.

And, finally, the noise over Jerusalem now must be seen within the context of the negotiations over a possible settlement moratorium. The Israeli government has made clear that any possible limitations on settlement construction will be just that - limitations on settlements beyond the Green Line, but not in the capital.

The protests and howls coming from the world and Washington over everything Israel does in east Jerusalem is a clear sign that they do not accept that position.

Holocaust memorial honors Rabbi Lau's savior

By Aron Heller Associated Press August 4, 2009

After surviving the Holocaust as a child, Israel Meir Lau — a former Israeli chief rabbi — spent decades searching for the man who saved his life.

That journey ended with an Associated Press report about a recently discovered Nazi document confirming the identity of the teenager who shielded

him from German gunfire when his concentration camp was liberated.

In an emotional ceremony on Tuesday, the Holocaust memorial Lau now chairs posthumously granted Feodor Mikhailichenko Israel's highest honor for non-Jews.

"This closes a circle of 64 years. You look for this person, to whom you owe your life, and you don't know whom to thank," said Lau, 72.

"He was my childhood hero. A man with a huge soul and a heart of gold."

Lau had previously identified a fellow inmate, a non-Jewish Russian named Feodor, as his savior in the Buchenwald concentration camp, but he never learned the 18-year-old's full name.

He said Feodor stole and cooked potatoes for him, knitted him wool earmuffs to protect him from the bitter cold and lay on top of him as gunfire erupted when the camp was liberated on Apr. 11, 1945.

At the time, Lau was an eight-year-old boy nicknamed Lulek. "Feodor, the Russian, looked after me in the daily life like a father would for a son. His concern and feeling of responsibility gave me a sense of security," Lau wrote in his 2005 autobiography.

Mikhailichenko grew so close to Lau that he wanted to adopt him as a son. But Lau kept his word to his murdered family and emigrated to pre-state Israel on a ship of orphaned refugee children. He lost track of Mikhailichenko and despite many efforts could never trace him again.

The mystery began to unfold in June 2008 when Holocaust researcher Kenneth Waltzer of Michigan State University discovered the man's true identity through a Nazi document he discovered in a recently opened secret archive in the small German town of Bad Arolsen.

The document had been stashed away for more than six decades.

Lau first learned the full name of his rescuer through an AP report about the discovery. Mikhailichenko returned to Russia where he became a prominent geologist. He died of cancer in 1993 at the age of 66. But his daughters, Yulia Selutina and Yelena Belayeva, were quickly tracked down and confirmed that their father often spoke lovingly about a young Jewish boy name Lulek in Buchenwald.

After last year's discovery, Lau invited both daughters to Israel and had them at his home for dinner. There, he introduced them to many of his eight children, 50 grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

"I told them, 'all of this I owe to your father. If it wasn't for your father, none of them would exist,'" he said. "I looked for him for decades and I never forgot him for a single day."

Selutina teared up Tuesday as she accepted a medal and a certificate on her father's behalf. She said her father never forgot Lulek either, and

traveled to Buchenwald a year before his death seeking information about him.

Mikhailichenko was featured in a 1992 Russian documentary detailing how he and other Russian inmates helped Lau survive by doing his chores and protecting him from the wrath of German guards.

Mikhailichenko's daughters met with Israeli President Shimon Peres on Tuesday.

"There are not a lot of daughters in the world who can be as proud of their father as you can. Your father acted with ultimate humanity when he saved one soul and risked his life," Peres told them. "The entire state of Israel is proud of you and your family and will be grateful to you our entire lives."

Nearly all of the Polish-born Lau's family members were exterminated in Nazi concentration camps. Lau's older brother Naftali cared for the young boy until the two were separated upon arrival at Buchenwald in January 1945.

Mikhailichenko was already a veteran inmate of the camp, having been arrested by the Gestapo in 1942 for robbery. He knew the ropes and watched over Lau. When Buchenwald was liberated by American troops, Lau was among its youngest surviving prisoners. He went on to become one of Israel's most prominent spiritual leaders. He served as the country's chief rabbi between 1993-2003 and is currently the chairman of the Yad Vashem Council, an advisory board to Israel's official Holocaust memorial.

Over 22,700 non-Jews have been recognized by Yad Vashem as "Righteous Among the Nations" since the designation was created in 1963. Those include Oskar Schindler, whose efforts to save more than 1,000 Jews were documented in the film "Schindler's List," and Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat who is credited for having saved at least 20,000 Jews.

Mikhailichenko's name is now engraved alongside theirs in a garden at the memorial honoring their roles.

About 6 million European Jews were killed by German Nazis and their collaborators during World War II.

Lau said Mikhailichenko proved the goodness that exists in humans, regardless of nationality, religion or gender.

"You see through him that there is a chance for humanity, there is hope for the world," he said. "Feodor is a lesson of morals, of ethics, of humanity."

"Now we know the lesson that even in a dark tunnel, in the midst of the dark tunnel, there is a light. The light is Feodor."

Dancing with Damascus By The Wall Street Journal editorial August 2, 2009

Courting Syria really does require the audacity of hope.

Since taking power nine years ago, Syrian strongman Bashar Assad has: turned his country into a safe haven and transit corridor for jihadists en route to Iraq; funneled sophisticated munitions to Hezbollah and probably Hamas; sought to build an illicit nuclear reactor with North Korean help; mostly failed to liberalize Syria's economy and resisted liberalizing its politics; publicly declared that Israel would never "become a legitimate state even if the peace process is implemented"; and ruled while Syrians have been implicated by a U.N. investigator in the 2005 assassination of Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri.

So, naturally, President Obama has made Syria a prime target for diplomacy as part of his new Axis of Engagement.

The President has already restored full diplomatic ties with Damascus that were cut off after the Hariri assassination. Last week, State Department envoy George Mitchell visited Mr. Assad to discuss improved military-to-military ties and easing some sanctions, though others remain in place. Now the Administration believes it can entice Mr. Assad into abandoning some of his bad habits, like sponsoring terrorist groups, meddling in his neighbors' internal affairs and maintaining close ties with Iran.

"We received assurances that the relations between the two countries should resume on the basis of mutual interests and most importantly of mutual respect," Syrian deputy foreign minister Fayssal Mekdad told the Journal last week. "We really welcome such a new approach."

Damascus's delight is no surprise, but the chances of success here are somewhat lower than Hugo Chavez becoming a capitalist. Since the current president's father, Hafez Assad, came to power in a coup in 1970, the U.S. has repeatedly imposed sanctions on Syria, withdrawn ambassadors

and even shelled Syrian military positions in Lebanon. But the U.S. has also repeatedly sought to engage Syria as a partner—during the 1991 Gulf War against Saddam Hussein, and later as a mediator in failed peace negotiations with Israel. After the fall of Baghdad in 2003, George W. Bush dispatched Colin Powell to Damascus to try to win Mr. Assad's cooperation. Instead, Syria made itself a safe haven for the terrorists who killed U.S. soldiers.

Likewise in Lebanon, the international community pressured Syria to withdraw its army from the country after the Hariri assassination. But Mr. Assad redoubled his support for Hezbollah, leading to its 2006 war with Israel, and he has since helped to re-arm the group with heavy weapons and missiles despite a U.N. resolution calling for an arms embargo. Meanwhile, numerous Lebanese anti-Syrian politicians have been murdered by car bombs.

As for Syria and Iran, their strategic separation makes sense in geopolitical concept. But in practice their ties won't easily be severed. Mr. Assad's sectarian Allawite regime fears its own Sunni people and massacred them by the thousands in the 1980s. Maintaining close ties to Shiite Hezbollah and Shiite Iran are key elements to Mr. Assad's strategy of political survival. Unlike Egypt's Anwar Sadat in the 1970s, Mr. Assad has given no signs of wanting to engage Israel on equal terms and still shelters the leader of Hamas in Damascus. We wonder what the Obama Administration can offer that would change that fundamental calculus.

The self-styled "realists" who now run U.S. foreign policy say there's no harm in trying, but there could be if this latest American courtship turns into pressure on Israel for concessions. And conferring U.S. prestige on Mr. Assad is no incentive for him to behave less brutally at home. Mr. Obama believes his Presidency represents a fresh start for America in the world, but as nice as it would be to think so, Middle East history didn't begin on January 20.

A Jewish and Non-Legitimate State

By Mordechai Kedar Besa Center (Bar Ilan University, Israel) July 28, 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish nation-state, or as the rightful homeland of the Jewish People, is a necessary condition of any future Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty – according to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Arab and Islamic leaders have rejected this demand. The reason for Arab inability and unwillingness to consider Netanyahu's demand is the fact that the Islamic world is ideologically incapable of according legitimacy to the State of Israel, for

deep-seated religious, nationalistic and historical reasons.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has set out five conditions for the conclusion of an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal involving establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. The first, and the hardest for the Arab world to accept, is Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish nation-state, or as the rightful homeland of the Jewish People. In fact, it is close to impossible, because Islam is intrinsically incapable of according legitimacy to the State of

Israel for the embedded ideological reasons detailed below.

The First Component: Religion According to Islam, the Jewish religion was invalidated by the birth of Christianity, which in turn was invalidated by the arrival of Islam. This concept was set down in the Koran: "Surely the true religion with Allah is Islam" (Chapter 3, Verse 19). Thus Allah does not recognize any other religion besides Islam. Islam – according to its own perception – brought the message of truth to the world, after the Jews and Christians changed and distorted the word of Allah given to them. In light of their conduct, Allah removed their religious role and theological message and passed it to the Muslims, who are the sole "believers." Thus, Islam's basic approach is not that it came to the world to exist alongside other religions as equal among equals, but to replace them.

A conclusion from this is that Judaism as a religion has lost its significance and role in the world. If so, how could one establish a Jewish state? And how could one claim that land can be holy to Judaism after this religion has been declared null and void? And since when do Jews – members of a meaningless religion – have the right to a state in any land, after they betrayed Allah and refused to accept Din al-Haqq "the religion of truth," Islam? In practice, Islam recognized the Jews as "people of the Book" and not as infidels, although on condition that they live under Islamic rule as "dhimmis" – protégés of Islam, and "pay the Jizya (per capita tax) with willing submission." (Koran Chapter 9, Verse 29). However, once they conquered land, and killed and deported Muslims, they lost the privileges granted to them by the "Pact of Omar."

Therefore, Israel's demand that Islam recognize it as a state for the Jewish People contradicts the most basic tenets of Islam, which view Judaism as null and void. Israel's demand actually requires Islam to recognize Judaism as a legitimate religion even though God himself stated in the Koran that "whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, will never be accepted" (Chapter 3, Verse 85).

The Second Component: Nationality Judaism is perceived in the Islamic world as a communal religion, without either an ethnic or national basis. There are other instances of this. The people living in Iraq consist of many religious groups: Muslims, Christians, Sabaiis, Mandaeans, Yazidis, and Jews. They are all members of the Arab nation, all sons of the Iraqi people and they all have a place in Iraqi land. There are Arab Iraqi Muslims, Arab Iraqi Christians and Arab Iraqi Jews, all members of religious communities which are part of the Iraqi people. The same goes for Yemen – which has Arab Yemenite Muslims and Arab Yemenite Jews, and for Morocco and the rest of the Islamic states, which have Jewish, Muslim, and Christian

communities. Furthermore, from an Islamic perspective this is a way to view other countries: the Jew in Poland is Polish from an ethnic perspective and Jewish from a religious perspective. The French Jew is a member of the French nation who practices Judaism. Thus, there are no ethnic Jews in the world, just as there are no ethnic Christians or Muslims.

Suddenly, Jewish communities declare that they are one people, sharing the same ethnic background, as if all the Jews in the world look alike, speak the same language, share customs and cuisine, and dress in similar fashion! This is the "great lie" of the Zionist movement, according to Islamists: creating a Jewish people out of nothing, and trying to convince the world at large that a Jewish People does indeed exist. Even worse, these Jewish communities have decided to migrate to Palestine, to "displace" the original inhabitants and to establish a state, whose name has no connection to the Jewish people but to the mythological Sons of Israel. So, from the Islamic perspective, how can one recognize this state as the "State of the Jewish People" – an ethnic group that does not really exist?

The Third Component: Land Palestine was sanctified as Muslim land by two acts. The first was its conquest during the period of Khalif Omar bin al-Khattab in the third decade of the seventh century. This placed Palestine within the group of countries which were under Islamic rule, like Spain, Sicily and part of the Balkans, and which must be returned to the bosom of Islam. The second act was the Islamic tradition which claims that the Khalif Omar declared Palestine, from the sea to the Jordan, as Waqf (holy endowment) land, consecrated for all Muslim generations forever. So how can the Jews – whose religion is illegitimate and who are not an ethnic people – demand that the Muslims recognize the conquest of the land of Palestine which is holy to Muslims alone?

Ideological Realities Thus, according to Islam, the State of Israel is not legitimate. From a religious point of view, Judaism is void. The Jewish nation is an invention of the Zionist movement. The land called "Israel" is considered Islamic Waqf land, consecrated for Muslims.

Netanyahu's insistence on recognition of the state as a Jewish nation-state contradicts the Islamic faith, and questions the very essence of Islam, whose relevance is based on the invalidity of Judaism (and Christianity as well).

Therefore, there is no escape from the conclusion that Israel's struggle for survival is religiously based, even if externally it assumes the form of a territorial struggle. It does not matter what its size, Israel will never gain recognition by the Arab and Muslim world as a legitimate state. Similarly, international documents which legitimize the "Jewish State," such as United Nations General Assembly

Resolution 181 of 29 November 1947, are viewed by Muslims as illegitimate.

Many say: “You are turning a territorial conflict into a religious one,” when they mean to say that territorial concessions would facilitate the recognition of the Arabs and Muslims in the legitimacy of the State of Israel. Such a statement assumes that the Arab and Muslim world is as secular as our own, and shares our concepts, values and priorities. This is the result of Israeli and Western ignorance of all that is related to Islam and the Arab world, derived from the fact that Westerners do not understand Arabic and Arab and Islamic culture. Israelis and Westerners alike are not exposed to the harsh truths which are expressed in

the local tongues, and are well-concealed by spokesmen of “inter-religious dialogue.”

Recognition of Israel as a legitimate Jewish nation-state has no hope or chance as long as Islam perceives itself – and itself alone – as “the true religion with Allah.”

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Double Standards and Human Rights Watch

By Noah Pollak The Wall Street Journal July 30, 2009

The organization displays a strong bias against Israel. Over the past two weeks, Human Rights Watch has been embroiled in a controversy over a fund raiser it held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. At that gathering, Middle East director Sarah Leah Whitson pledged the group would use donations to “battle . . . pro-Israel pressure groups.”

As criticism of her remark poured in, Ms. Whitson responded by saying that the complaint against her was “fundamentally a racist one.” And Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, declared that “We report on Israel. Its supporters fight back with lies and deception.”

The facts tell a different story. From 2006 to the present, Human Rights Watch’s reports on the Israeli-Arab conflict have been almost entirely devoted to condemning Israel, accusing it of human rights and international law violations, and demanding international investigations into its conduct. It has published some 87 criticisms of Israeli conduct against the Palestinians and Hezbollah, versus eight criticisms of Palestinian groups and four of Hezbollah for attacks on Israel. (It also published a small number of critiques of both Israel and Arab groups, and of intra-Palestinian fighting.)

It was during this period that more than 8,000 rockets and mortars were fired at Israeli civilians by Palestinian terrorist groups in Gaza. Human Rights Watch’s response? In November 2006 it said that the Palestinian Authority “should stop giving a wink and a nod to rocket attacks.” Two years later it urged the Hamas leadership “to speak out forcefully against such [rocket] attacks . . . and bring to justice those who are found to have participated in them.”

In response to the rocket war and Hamas’s violent takeover of Gaza in June 2007, Israel imposed a partial blockade of Gaza. Human Rights Watch then published some 28 statements and reports on the blockade, accusing Israel in highly

charged language of an array of war crimes and human rights violations. One report headline declared that Israel was “choking Gaza.” Human Rights Watch has never recognized the difference between Hamas’s campaign of murder against Israeli civilians and Israel’s attempt to defend those civilians. The unwillingness to distinguish between aggression and self-defense blots out a fundamental moral fact—that Hamas’s refusal to stop its attacks makes it culpable for both Israeli and Palestinian casualties.

Meanwhile, Egypt has also maintained a blockade on Gaza, although it is not even under attack from Hamas. Human Rights Watch has never singled out Egypt for criticism over its participation in the blockade.

The organization regularly calls for arms embargoes against Israel and claims it commits war crimes for using drones, artillery and cluster bombs. Yet on Israel’s northern border sits Hezbollah, which is building an arsenal of rockets to terrorize and kill Israeli civilians, and has placed that arsenal in towns and villages in hopes that Lebanese civilians will be killed if Israel attempts to defend itself. The U.N. Security Council has passed resolutions demanding Hezbollah’s disarmament and the cessation of its arms smuggling. Yet while Human Rights Watch has criticized Israel’s weapons 15 times, it has criticized Hezbollah’s twice.

In the Middle East, Human Rights Watch does not actually function as a human-rights organization. If it did, it would draw attention to the plight of Palestinians in Arab countries. In Lebanon, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians are warehoused in impoverished refugee camps and denied citizenship, civil rights, and even the right to work. This has received zero coverage from the organization.

In 2007, the Lebanese Army laid siege to the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp for over

three months, killing hundreds. Human Rights Watch produced two anemic press releases. At this very moment, Jordan is stripping its Palestinians of citizenship without the slightest protest from the organization. Unfortunately, Human Rights Watch seems only to care about Palestinians when they can

be used to convince the world that the Jewish state is actually a criminal state.

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The Radicalization of Fatah

By Khaled Abu Toameh The Hudson Institute August 4, 2009

Many in Washington and some European capitals are hoping that the Fatah faction, which controls the Western-backed Palestinian Authority, is headed toward moderation and reforms as it holds its sixth general assembly in Bethlehem this week.

But on the eve of the conference, which is being held for the first time in two decades, there are growing indications that Fatah is actually headed in the opposite direction.

Perhaps one of the most disturbing signs of the growing radicalization of Fatah can be seen in calls by top representatives for a "strategic alliance" with Iran's dictatorial and fundamental regime.

In January 2006, Fatah lost the parliamentary election in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to Hamas largely because of its leaders' involvement in financial and moral corruption. Since then, not a single Fatah official has been held responsible for the humiliating defeat. Nor has Fatah drawn the conclusions from its expulsion from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2007.

Hopes that the conference would pave the way for the emergence of a new and younger leadership have faded as old guard officials of Fatah appear determined to hold on to their positions regardless of the price.

Fatah is therefore unlikely to emerge stronger and younger from its sixth general assembly. By adopting a hard-line approach toward the conflict and blocking reforms, Fatah is sending a message both to the Palestinians and the world that it's still not ready for any form of compromise or reforms. As such, Fatah remains part of the problem, and not part of the solution.

During the three-day conference, about 2,200 delegates would be required to vote for new members of Fatah's two most important decision-making bodies: the Central Committee [21 seats] and the Revolutionary Council [120 seats].

The Central Committee has long been dominated by old timers and former cronies of Yasser Arafat who over the past four decades have stubbornly resisted attempts to inject fresh blood into the committee.

The Revolutionary Council, on the other hand, consists of representatives of both the old guard and the new guard. But this council has never been taken seriously and its decisions are regarded by the Fatah leadership as nothing but mere recommendations.

Days before the conference was opened in Bethlehem, Fatah members were surprised to discover that Mahmoud Abbas and his old guard colleagues had selected more than half of the delegates who were invited to the meeting.

In protest, young guard representatives decided to drop their candidacy for the prestigious Central Committee after realizing that their chances of beating the old guard members were slim, if not impossible. This means that the committee will continue to be controlled by former Arafat cronies, some of whom are even publicly opposed to the Oslo Accords with Israel.

To further strengthen the old guard camp, Abbas sought and received permission from Israel to allow Mohammed Ghnaim, a hard-line Fatah leader, to move from Tunisia to the West Bank. Ghnaim is one of a handful of senior Fatah leaders who remain strongly opposed to the Oslo Accords, insisting that the "armed struggle" against Israel is the only way to "liberate Palestine."

Ghnaim is now being touted as Abbas's successor as head of Fatah and the Palestinian Authority as to ensure the continuity of the old guard hegemony over the affairs of the Palestinians in the West Bank.

Many Fatah operatives, including some of Abbas's closest allies in Ramallah, have made it known that they would oppose any move to abandon the "armed struggle" option during the Bethlehem assembly.

Their statements came in response to reports according to which the Fatah conference is set to endorse a more moderate and pragmatic approach toward the conflict with Israel.

Moreover, a majority of Fatah members appear to be vehemently opposed to the idea of recognizing Israel as a Jewish state. A draft plan of Fatah's political platform that was leaked to some Arab media outlets last week clearly states that Fatah will remain strongly opposed to Israel's demand that the Palestinians recognize the state as a homeland for the Jewish people.

In other signs of continued intransigence, the political platform opposes any concessions regarding the "right of return" of Palestinians to their original homes inside Israel.